# Piety over Piracy: The Shaolin Monks' Victory against Wokou

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At numerous points throughout human history, religious zeal and warfare have united. The Crusades pitted Christian Knights Templar against Muslim warriors for control of the Holy Land. During the War of 1812, the Shawnee prophet, Tenskwatawa, blessed his braves as they went into battle against white settlers. Less recognized in the West, however, was the might of the Shaolin monks of China, who periodically forsook the scroll to demonstrate their expertise at martial arts. In one instance, Chinese officials, in a desperate last resort, mobilized these warrior monks to take on roving Japanese pirates, or *wokou*, who were pillaging China's coast. Because of crumbling law enforcement, a decadent and enticing society, and a weakened grasp on the coastal territories, Ming Dynasty China was a tempting target. This left Shaolin monks as the last line of defense against pirates.

*Wokou*, which translates as "Japanese pirates" or "dwarf pirates"[1] in Chinese, were a group of pirates who ransacked the coasts of China and Korea. Although they originally hailed from Japan, it was seldom that one would find a pirate of full Japanese descent. They came from a blend of cultures, containing even Portuguese within their ranks. Historian Anthony Reid estimated that twenty percent of the sixteenth century *wokou* were from the Ryukyu Islands, located southwest of Japan, ten percent were of various nationalities, and as many as seventy percent were indigenous Chinese.[2] As they held no definite nation of origin, they also held no nationalistic ties, as the early *wokou* invaded Japan as well as China and Korea.[3] The pirates marauded for silks and metal imports which were sold in Japan for up to ten times their worth in China.[4]

There is a long history of piracy on the Chinese coast that eventually required the assistance of the Shaolin. In the early seventh century, during the Tang dynasty, pirates ransacked the southeast shores of China. Pirate invasions in the Fujian Province endangered stability and opulence in Southern China and the new dynasty wanted help. The Emperor turned for aid to Master Tanzong, head of the Songshan Shaolin Monastery who was also the general of the Court. At the Emperor's wish three of the fabled Shaolin Thirteen Cudgel fighting monks, Dao Guang, Seng Man, and Seng Feng, led roughly five hundred warrior monks south to engage in various skirmishes against the pirates.[5] They assisted the Tang soldiers in turning back the tide and the seaside war was won. The coastline was pacified and as a result Buddhism began to extend in the area.

According to several recent studies, numerous warrior monks fell in the aforementioned battles. To honor their fallen companions, some of the Shaolin monks remained behind in the Southern provinces. They were greeted and trailed by local monks who attempted to convert to Shaolin adherents. The monks were asked to stay by the local inhabitants and received consent from the Emperor to construct a Shaolin Monastery in the Fujian province. Before the construction of Southern Shaolin Monastery, monk Dao Guang went back to Songshan Monastery to meet Master Tanzong. Tanzong wrote a verse for him and requested that he select a place reminiscent of the Song San "Jiu Lian" Mountain and then construct a Southern Shaolin Temple to honor their deceased colleagues. The master intoned: “Years have passed pacifying the coast, a rest place will be found at the foot of mountain with nine lotus. One monastery it is though separated in the south and in the north, Chan sect of Mahayana shall always remain in the heart.”[6]

The Grand Master also asked him to evoke their lineages and to spread the Chan Buddhist values innate to the Song San Temple. A simpler interpretation of the poem reads: "Days and months fighting roving bandits, wishing a temple to stay at the foot of Jiu Lian Mountain; Southern and Northern Shaolin originates from the same temple with Chan Buddhism engraved in the heart forever."[7]

However, this spread of Buddhism yoked with its brand of peace would not last, as pirates would again resurface several centuries later. Mentions of the *wokou* attacking shoreline areas of China can be found during the course of the Ming era (1368-1644). Looking predominantly at the archives of assaults by *wokou*, historians have determined that their main objectives were located across the Korean peninsula to the northern coastline areas of China in the early Ming period. In the second half of the period, from the Jiajing era (1521-1567) on, there are reports of pirates attacking Jiangsu, Zhejiang and southwards to Fujian and Guangdong.[8] These attacks were not haphazard, as the formula to create a piratical breeding ground was apparent within China.

Much of the Chinese coast was without law, and the portions that were under the influence of the empire rarely found solace. The second arrival of Japanese pirates came during the rule of Ashikaga Yoshiteru, the thirteenth shogun of the Muromachi house. The power of the Muromachi had buckled, with the contending territorial lords dividing up the nation. Historically speaking, it is challenging to differentiate amid *wokou* and pirates during this era. The historic jargon "*beilu nanwo*" (Mongols in the north and Japanese pirates in the south) that has been used in the past results from *nanwo* and *wokou* having been considered in footings of Japanese accounts or the history of Sino-Japanese affairs.[9] This attempt to grasp ahold of feudal Japan pushed out the unsavory pirates towards the loosely held Chinese shores and those that headed that direction would become *wokou*.

With the influx of new criminals came the need for more security, and that safekeeping would come at a price. In 1553, Hangzhou's officials (located in Eastern China), reacting to increasing demands for public safety, presented a flat tax of 0.05 *tael* (currency) for each home in place of service as nighttime guards. At the same time, however, the upsurge of *wokou* assaults in the Yangzi delta reached its highest point, an event that encouraged a rigorous conscription of men for shoreline protection and public security. In 1555, municipal officers in Hangzhou began to draft the city's capable men into a local militia that would conduct the night watchmen duties now operated by employed workers. Even after the *wokou* plunders ended, the government maintained that the local militias continue to offer night watchmen for routine responsibility, while the hired hands were redistributed to run errands for the local bureaucrats. The city's taxpayers were exposed to a twofold nuisance as they now paid duty and property taxes instead of labor services, while at the same time the government pushed urban citizens into service as night watchmen.[10]

Soldiers were needed all across the country, and the footing of the bill was through taxation. The grander arc of taxation in Nanjing enflamed the prospective for tax protest. In the late 1550s, the *wokou* incursions required local authorities in Jiangnan to present an assortment of distinct new tariffs and levy surcharges. Initially, widespread objections fell on heedless ears. The city's numerous bureaucrats announced obligatory caveats repeating legal measures for dispensing requisition warrants but took no significant action.[11]

Had the pirate problem existed in a bubble perhaps the empire could have handled it properly, but there were many other issues that plagued China. The Ming

Dynasty confronted unforeseen military expenses mainly because of the deterioration of the *weisuo* garrison system, which the organizers of the dynasty had projected would be self-sustaining. Militia expenditures to counter the invasions of the *wokou* required at least 3 million *taels* yearly in addition to 8 million *taels* for frontier defenses. The mounting menace of the Manchus on the northern frontier, added with increasing peasant revolts in the early decades of the seventeenth century, significantly stressed the unwieldy and uncompromising Ming taxation system. Even with the land tax increases which started in 1618 and continued after, the Ming fiscal problem was less one of an insufferable tax burden than that the tax structure and administration could not raise enough revenue to meet serious expenditures and collected what it did with a good deal of disorganization and disproportion.[12] And with that, the laws put in place to combat the *wokou* seemed only to exacerbate the concern.

The enticing coastline of China was one that the *wokou* exploited during this period, despite the fact that earlier in China's history she was able to defend her shores against such piracy. The Ming dynasty had at least during the initial sixty-five years of its existence hinged on seafaring strength. Under the emperor Zhu Di (1403-1424), the Ming navy comprised of 3,500 ships, which led yearly flotillas well off the coastline, hunted Japanese *wokou* as far as the Ryukyu Islands (southwest of Japan) to the shores of Korea and conquered the Red River delta in 1407 to reoccupy that portion of Annam (now part of contemporary Vietnam) as a Chinese province.[13] But financial support to the navy eventually dwindled and the coastline was left unsecure.

It would not be fair to glance over the political motives of the pirates, as they were not focused solely on ravishing the Chinese countryside for sheer entertainment value and financial gain. One of the reasons for the appearance of Japanese pirates in the Jiajing era (1521-1567) is that pirate captains like Wang Zhi, Mao Haifeng and others led crews of pirates on forays because they were incapable of making profits due to the strictness of the marine embargos placed on Japan by China. Another motive was that food shortages in Japan had forced the cost of rice to rise and people were suffering from hunger, a fact to which the sovereigns of Japan were ignorant. This evidently corresponded with an increase in demand for nautical and foreign trade among the Chinese inhabitants in the coastline areas.[14] Poverty and starvation are generally good instigators for illegal activity.

Chinese embargos only aggravated the situation. In the first year of the

Longqing era (1567-1572) the Governor of Fujian, Tu Zemin wanted to trade with the nations of Southeast Asia (excluding Japan, which was perceived as the gang leader of the *wokou*) and therefore the naval embargo was relaxed and foreign trade thrived. The amount of Chinese ships venturing to Southeast Asia, particularly in the second half of the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth centuries, increased from 50 in about 1567 to 137 in 1597. This consequently grew to forty per year from Fujian alone by 1612. Forty-three ships are chronicled for 1628. Therefore, an abundance of Chinese merchant vessels traveled to Southeast Asia annually.[15] These mouthwatering prizes were worth the minimal risk to the *wokou*.

Protection of the coastal cities of China was less than to be desired. Beginning in the mid-1500s uncultivated and essentially untapped mountains were opened and established in the sequence of a gigantic wave of immigration that continued for over two centuries. This extensive and continuous population movement was only a part of an even more widespread system of exoduses that moved large quantities of Chinese citizens from the southeast coast into the inner provinces. By the time the migrations ended in the late eighteenth century, the Yangzi highlands had been converted from a near wasteland on the outer reaches of civilization into a fruitful and essential part of a developing commercial economy, and had become the home of a lively and distinguished culture that has persisted in the area to the present day.[16] Many of these cities were outside the full protection of the empire, a fact which eventually lead to their demise.

Many *wokou* were left to their own devices, and moved unchecked. The 1540s and 1550s witnessed pirate raids on an unparalleled scale on China's eastern and southeastern coasts. The *wokou* assaults were particularly severe along the Jiangnan coast, where they plundered not only rural areas but even walled cities. In 1554 the city of Songjiang was seized and its magistrate put to death. The government met incredible complications in its efforts to control the situation, partially as the local authorities were themselves involved in trade with the thieves and somewhat because of the weakening of the regular military. It was not before the 1560s when order was reinstated to Jiangnan, to a degree through the exertions of the Chinese generals.[17]

By the end of the Ming Dynasty the coast of Fujian and northern Guangdong was profoundly overpopulated. The growth of a commercialized economy in the region during the latter part of the Ming Dynasty led to a substantial consolidation of land ownership, so that many formerly land-owning country-dwellers became renters. Furthermore, administrative and public discontent were predominantly widespread in southeast China during the late Ming-Qing period (1644-1912), as the despoliations of the *wokou* were shadowed by the early Qing rebellions of Zheng Chenggong. The devastation brought upon the Fujian-Guangdong coast by these numerous engagements was aggravated by intermittent efforts by the government to carry out a scorched earth strategy; this entailed removing the population from the lush and most densely occupied regions along the coast in order to deny pirates and insurgents alluring objects and bases of provisions.[18] This strategy would do more damage to the local community than to the pirates and left the areas in more disorder than when it started. The mixture of a large populace combined with inadequate foodstuffs, absence of laborers from their land, uneasy governmental and social circumstances, and government relocation guidelines all contributed to a colossal population shift in southeast China. Some of those who left the land became fishermen or pirates along the Fujian-Guangdong coast.[19]

Not all Chinese were steadfast in their anti-piracy stance as some actually embraced the lawlessness. Because of the degree of dishonesty in the Ming Dynasty, many Chinese bureaucrats had associations with the pirates and profited from the piracy, making it problematic for the ruling classes to control.[20] When there is money to be made, one can expect there to be those in power ready to swoop in and make a profit, no matter the cost. China was no exception.

With lawlessness infecting the Chinese countryside the Shaolin entered the fray. During the early decades of the sixteenth century and throughout the dynasty's latter years Shaolin monks provided a reliable military alternative to the state. By 1550, the Shaolin Temple had been in existence for roughly 1,000 years. The resident monks were legendary all over Ming China for their specific and extremely effective usage of kung fu.[21] They participated in local operations against Henan criminals and outlaws and battled prowling pirates along China's southeastern shores. Their contribution to national defense made Shaolin monks not only receive endorsement from Chinese officials but state backing as well. The late Ming observed remarkable development at the monastery, as notable officials and adherents of the imperial family contested with each other in backing its distinguished combat monks.[22]

There was also a call for the Shaolin not just to defend their country, but their way of life as well, as their monasteries were easy targets for pillaging. The motivation for reconstruction of the Huangbo Monastery was the devastation triggered by invasions of the *wokou* throughout the Jiajing period. From 1545, the year when pirates first attacked Fuqing, to 1564, when General Qi Jiguang finally suppressed them, pirates visited Fuqing almost every year. During an attack in 1555, the core structures of Huangbo Monastery were demolished. Though pirate invasions made the deteriorating condition of Buddhism in the area worse, a rebuilding of social life in the vicinity took place after their defeat. This comprised the reconstruction of Buddhist priories such as Huangbo.[23] Through the destruction of temples and their subsequent rebuilding, the *wokou* fortuitously aided in the spread of Buddhism and made the Shaolin even stronger.

A number of sixteenth century sources confirm that in 1553, throughout the highpoint of the pirates' attacks, military officers in Jiangnan determined to assemble Shaolin and other monastic soldiers. The most comprehensive interpretation is author and chronicler Zheng Ruoceng's "The Monastic Armies' First Victory," contained within his *The Strategic Defense of the Jiangnan Region*. Even though he never passed the examinations, Zheng received the admiration of his colleagues as a skilled geographer of China's coastline areas. He was designated in 1560 as a consultant by Hu Zongxian, who at the time was the utmost commanding officer of the armed forces in Fujian, Zhejiang, and the Southern Metropolitan Region (modern day Jiangsu). Zheng's term in Hu's head office might have added to his knowledge of the operation against piracy, of which Hu was entrusted.[24] What would ensue next would be decades of bloodshed brought on by the Shaolin hunting down and systematically executing the *wokou*.

Though there were numerous smaller battles, there were really four large-scale assaults. The first took place in the spring of 1553 on Mount Zhe, which watches over the entrance to Hangzhou City via the Qiantang River. Even though particulars are limited, Zheng Ruoceng notes that this was a triumph for the monastic armed forces.[25] The Battle of Wengjiagang was the most significant victory for the monks. On July 21, 1553, one hundred twenty militant monks decimated an entire legion of pirate forces and left no survivors. They even pursued the remaining survivors for ten days on a twenty-mile path that headed south towards Wangjiazhuang. There the very last outlaw was executed in cold blood. As the dust settled more than a hundred pirates perished, while only four fatalities were suffered by the Shaolin. It seems that the monks showed no mercy on the enemy, as one account shows a Shaolin using his iron staff to slay a fleeing pirate's wife. What is odd is that Zheng Ruoceng does not remark on the monks' neglect to honor their Buddhist ban on murder, even in this example when the slain was a defenseless woman.[26] Clearly, the Shaolin were vesting in a total war strategy.

The Chinese military did not just wait on the sidelines as the monks cleaned up the countryside. They were still a vital part of the defense, and the best accounts of what actually transpired come from army records. Two distinguished Chinese military figures involved in the fighting against *wokou* were Qi Jiguang and Yu Dayou. Yu Dayou was a general of the Ming Dynasty who studied martial arts in a Shaolin temple and who was dispatched to protect the shore against the Japanese pirates. Qi Jiguang was born to a military household on January 10, 1528. The family line delivered the traditional rank of a secondary commander of the Dengzhou Guard, which Qi Jiguang reached in 1544 upon the passing of his father. Qi Jiguang served in northern China, in Beijing, and along the Great Wall, where he battled against the Mongol aggressors. The 1550s saw amplified coastal invasions by *wokou*, and in 1555 Qi was assigned to the Zhejiang province. Qi amplified his manpower by teaching local villagers soldierly abilities. Later Qi composed his first military dissertation, the *Jixiao Xinshu*, in which he defined his teaching techniques to organize troops for combat, as well as the strategic concerns of handling the soldiers in battle.[27]

Shaolin were to be rewarded for their efforts. The monks’ backing of the government produced for them not only words of approval but also quantifiable remunerations. In 1581 and again in 1595, Dengfeng County representatives distributed official letters, freeing Shaolin’s properties from taxation. Both letters were etched in stone at the monastery to guarantee its tax-free standing under future officeholders. Remarkably, the two documents explicitly caution low-grade clerks not to remove money from the monastery for their own pouches. Dengfeng County officials allowed Shaolin tax breaks on the foundation of the monastery’s military record. Their letters offer vital data on the monastery’s participation in combat, for they list one by one the operations in which its monks took part:

> During the Jiajing (1522–1566) reign, the Liu bandits, Wang Tang, and the pirates, as well as Shi Shangzhao and others created violent disturbances. This monastery’s fighting monks were repeatedly called upon to suppress them. They courageously killed the bandits, many earning the merit of putting their lives on the line. Thus this monastery’s monks have relied upon culture and warfare alike to protect the state and strengthen its army. They are not like monks in other monasteries

> throughout the land, who merely conduct rituals, read the Sutras, and pray for the emperor's long life.[28]

The Shaolin's influence began to spread all throughout China. Buddhism in the late Ming dynasty had heavy influence on the construction practice of monasteries in this period, which saw serious action in the subdual of *wokou* piracy. Though researchers have examined how the nobility poured out their benefaction upon monastery building ventures, it is still generally unidentified how Buddhist organizations themselves were rejuvenated as the outcome of an inner revolution of Buddhism.[29]

Outside of larger monasteries and prestige, other advancements were made by the Shaolin. Medicine has profound ancestries in Buddhism. It is believed the basis of Shaolin medicine comes from Tamo or Bodhidharma who, when he found the monks were feeble after meditation, began gathering folk medications to help his cohorts. These cures were advanced across consecutive dynasties, cresting in the Ming period. It was during this time that Shaolin monks fought off the *wokou* in Fujian, so the demand for effective medicine arose. It was also when Shaolin Abbot Dao Guang set up a massive apothecary at Shaolin temples for followers, acolytes and the unfortunate laity.[30]

Shaolin activities against the *wokou* have left a mark in contemporary China. The pirates' assaults on Chinese coasts created a countrywide emergency, which was debated on all stages of government, from local consultants in the frequently affected regions to the uppermost stratums of imperial officialdom. Shaolin's involvement in this operation echoed through Ming bureaucracy. The monastery's conquests were chronicled in various official papers stretching from local newspapers and historical accounts to fictional works. If Shaolin's support to Li Shimin was the basis of its Tang period reputation, then the piracy crusade fortified its Ming period notoriety. The Shaolin's war against piracy was to motivate Chinese monks for centuries to come. Confronted with Japanese hostility in the 1930s, Chinese Buddhists evoked the monastery's triumph over the *wokou*. In 1933, the ardently nationalistic monk Zhenhua wrote *A History of Monastic National Defense*, uniting his fellow Buddhists to battle the Japanese interlopers. Arguing that in times of domestic emergency it was acceptable for monks to fight, Zhenhua mentioned Shaolin's gallant efforts to stem the sixteenth century piracy movement. By the twentieth century, the monastery's military heritage delivered a model for Buddhist warfare.[31]

The Ming bureaucracy seemed to do more harm than good, and that is assuming that the local magistrates were not in the pocket book of the *wokou*. The wealth of China was too great a prize to pass up, and the lack of control or security only emboldened would be pirates. That was, until the Shaolin went on a virtuous, albeit ruthless, assault on the *wokou*. It is important to remember that their often-vicious total war tactics superseded the piety of the monks. The brutality was not a product of Buddhism per se, but its allowance towards the enemy seems to have lost to annals of time.

## Notes

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4. Kallie Szczepanski, About.com, accessed August 22, 2013, http://asianhistory.about.com/od/warsinasia/a/shaolinvpirates.htm.

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8. Matsuura Akira, "Chinese Sea Merchants and Pirates," *ICIS Overseas Publication Series* 1 (2011):78.

9. Ibid., 78-79.

10. Richard Von Glahn, "Municipal Reform and Urban Social Conflict in Late Ming Jiangnan," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 2 (May 1991): 291.

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12. Albert Feuerwerker, "The State and the Economy in Late Imperial China," *Theory and Society* 13, no. 3 (May 1984): 306.

13. Frederic Wakeman Jr., "Voyages," *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 1 (February 1993): 8-9.

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15. Ibid., 79.

16. Stephen Averill, "The Shed People and the Opening of the Yangzi Highlands," *Modern China* 9, no. 1 (January 1983): 85.

17. Meir Shahar, *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion and the Chinese Martial Arts* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 68.

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19. Ibid., 87.

20. Kwan-wai So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China, During the 16th Century* (Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1975).

21. Szczepanski.

22. Shahar, 80.

23. Jiang Wu, "Building a Dharma Transmission Monastery in Seventeenth-Century China: The Case of Mount Huangbo," *East Asian History* 1, no. 31 (June 2006): 35-36.

24. Shahar, 68-69.

25. Szczepanski.

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28. Shahar, 72.

29. Wu, 29.

30. Gene Ching, "Shaolin Trinity Shaolin Monk Shi Dejian Discusses the Three Treasures," *Kung Fu Magazine*, January 2002, accessed August 11, 2013, http://www.kungfumagazine.com/magazine/article.php?article=589.

31. Shahar, 70-71.

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