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南中国海上的女性：史料中的身影及推想

安乐博*

摘要：人们对大海的印象是神秘而难以预测，而人们对女性的看法呢？从有关帆船年代的档案资料（1450～1850年）及实地田野考察的发现来看，在此时期，南中国海上留有不少女性活跃的痕迹。这些生活在水面上的女性以船为家，与世界上其他地区的女性相比，这群中国女性可以没有禁忌地在船上工作和生活。她们在船上的身份可以是伴侣、配偶、后代（如女儿等）、母亲、劳动力（水手、厨娘等）、妓女等，甚至于可以是“海盗”。也有许多与海有关的女性神祇，如著名的天后妈祖、龙母、三婆等。女性可以生活在海上的特性，是了解中国海洋史的另一一个重要（另类）方式，它与传统史学的切入点不同。传统史学是以儒家思想及陆地为中心而展开的。海洋文化中的女性，代表了与陆地上主流文化截然不同的分野。她们代表“异端”，并打破已建构的传统女性地位；她们不再是男性的附庸，不再被三从四德及温良顺从等教条所禁锢。海洋世界中所崇奉的女性神祇，她们所代表的女性地位及违背传统以男性为主的思维，更加强了这种异端的概念，成为女性社会地位的正面示范。

关键词：南中国海 屈大均 查氏 郑一嫂 蔡牵妈 赖财山 天后 三婆

Many people regarded the seas as mysterious and dangerous, and in the same way they often regarded women. Yet, at the same time, the seas like women have also been regarded as nurturing and protective. Based on over thirty years of archival research and fieldwork on the South China coast, in this paper I argue that the South China Seas were a highly feminized space. This research covers roughly the two-hundred and forty years from 1700 to 1940. Unlike many other places in the world, among the Chinese (especially southern Chinese) there were no taboos on women working and living aboard ships, and as a result it has been estimated that anywhere from one-third to one-half of the total seaborne population was female. They were wives,

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mothers, daughters, and sisters, as well as sailors, pirates, cooks, seamstresses, and prostitutes. For those people living on land, these sea-going women were not only exotic but also promiscuous. In Guangdong, Dan 疍民 boat women were famous for their lusty “saltwater songs”(咸水歌) and they were stereotyped as sleeping with whomever they pleased. Some women became fearless pirates, and some even commanded ships and fleets of male pirates. In the early nineteenth century, there were tales of super-sexual women pirates who cannibalized male captives to enhance their own carnal prowess. Furthermore, the most important sea deities were female, including the Empress of Heaven 天后, the Dragon Mother 龙母, and the mysterious Third Sister 三婆. Although the sea goddesses were, for the most part, motherly and nurturing, at time they were also fickle and treacherous and believed to be the cause of sudden storms at sea.

I should start with two disclaimers. First, this essay looks solely at Chinese seafaring women, and therefore much of what I have to say here deals with the southern Chinese coastal areas on offshore waters. Second, I could also argue that the South China Seas was a masculine space. There were certainly as many men sailors (and likely many more) as there were female sailors, and certainly many male sea deities, such as Beidi 北帝, Tangong 潭公, and the Dragon King 龙王. But in this paper, I would like to indulge a bit in my historical imagination to discuss the more pronounced feminine features of the South China Seas between the eighteenth and middle twentieth centuries.

I would like to begin this excursion with Qu Dajun 屈大均, the famous eighteenth-century Cantonese scholar who wrote *New Notes on Guangdong* (《广东新语》), first published in 1700, and repeatedly published to today. He included an interesting section entitled “Sea Water” (海水), where among other things, Qu Dajun discussed the differences between fresh or river water and salt or sea water. He does this by using the ancient Chinese philosophical concepts of *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳)- the ideas of complementary opposites so fundamental to the ways of thinking in not only China but all across East Asia. We are all familiar with these paired opposites; they hardly need to be mentioned:

<i>Yang</i>	<i>Yin</i>
bright	dark
hot	cold
sun	moon
man	woman

In one passage, Qu Dajun described river water as being *yang* and sea water as being *yin* (凡江水阳而海水阴).^[1] I take this as a starting point for my discussion about what made the South China Seas feminine. If, as Qu Dajun explains, sea water is *yin*, then it stands to reason that the seas must also be dark and feminine. In this paper I would like to discuss three things: first, the place of women at sea, particularly the South China Seas; second, women at sea who were strong and dangerous, namely female pirates; and third, female sea deities, who could be both dangerous and protective.

Women at Sea

Unlike many other areas of the world, in the South China Seas there were no taboos on women working and living aboard ships. In fact, it is estimated that one-third to as much as one-half of the total seaborne population was female. In China, and elsewhere in eastern Asia, whole families went to sea. Female boat women were wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters; they also were sailors, fisherwomen, cooks, seamstresses, prostitutes and pirates.

This was quite different from the roles that women were supposed to play in the male-dominated Confucian society. On land, women were expected, often even required, to remain at home in the so-called “inner quarters”. They were supposed to be docile, meek, obedient, subservient, and chaste. In general, in traditional China, the mixing together of men and women was taboo. The only other major exception to the rule was that of Hakka women, who also worked alongside their menfolk. But they too were frowned upon by polite society as being indecent and lewd.

On water, Dan boat women were another exception. They seemed to snub their noses at polite society. They were unconventional in their habits and dress. Their language was described as rough and foul. Unlike most other women who followed the fashion of the day and bound their feet, Dan boat women (and Hakka women too) had natural feet. To most people on land the South China boat women represented an exotic “other”. Figure 1 depicts Dan boat people living aboard small vessels in families (see Figure 1).

Because they lived and worked side-by-side with their husbands, fathers, and sons, as well as other non-family males, most people considered them to

[1] 屈大均：《广东新语》，中华书局，1985年，第130～133页。



Fig 1. Dan Boating Families, Early 20th Century

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be not only exotic but outright promiscuous. From the traditional male-dominated perspective, boat women upset the natural boundaries between men and women. In a sense, therefore, they were unnatural and dangerous. They were dangerous because they overturned orthodox Confucian values. For those people on land, and when viewed against the Confucian standards of the day, Dan boat women seemed lewd and licentious. In fact, the sexual mores and standards of boat people, in general, were quite different from those on shore. In many ways, it can be argued, they self-consciously defied the sexual customs and family values of patriarchal Confucian society. In fact, what dominant society (i.e., those people living on land) considered to be illicit sex for females, namely sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage or concubinage, was the norm for boat women. According to anthropologist Eugene Anderson, who conducted extensive research on Dan society and culture in the Hong Kong area in the 1960s and 1970s, he explained that among the Cantonese boat people, premarital sexual experimentation among teenage boys and girls was taken for granted and even encouraged. Also what today we might call infidelity or adultery among married couples was not unusual. Prostitution among boat women and teenage girls was also common. According to Qu Dajun and other observers, in fact, boat women were famous for their lusty, erotic "saltwater songs", which were song by courting couples and prostitutes alike. [1]

But should we only view or judge boat women based solely on the values and standards of landed society, or by Confucian patriarchal standards? I think not. We should also view and judge people by their own standards and

[1] E. N. Anderson, *The Floating World of Castle Peak Bay*, Washington, D. C.: American Anthropological Association, 1970.

values, based on their lifestyles, actions, and beliefs. For boat people, both men and women, it goes without saying that life on the water was quite different than life on land. Seaborne life was indeed a lot tougher and boat people were also a lot poorer and exceedingly discriminated against. Their material conditions required different life styles and standards of behavior than their more affluent counterparts living on shore. They had to devise their own strategies, often at odds with the dominant society, for survival in an extremely competitive and often hostile environment. To survive at sea required cooperation and hard work. The ship was a small community. Men, women, and children all lived and worked together in their wooden world. Shipboard life included family members and hired workers who were not kinfolk. In this rather closed world, the mixing of the sexes was a necessary and unavoidable aspect of seafaring life.

Female Pirates

If boat women, in general, were considered dangerous because they overturned the Confucian standards of the day, even more so did women who became pirates. Because in the South China Sea women made their homes aboard ship and worked alongside the menfolk, it should not be surprising to find women also among the pirates. Although most ordinary gang members remained unmarried, some male pirate captains reportedly had five or six wives, as well as other family members all living with them aboard their vessels. For example, one early nineteenth-century pirate chief named Huang Shengzhang kept his entire family with him at sea—his mother, wife, two sons, four other female relatives, and a servant girl. A number of women pirates had married, either voluntarily or by coercion, into the pirate profession, and they lived and died as outlaws, no different than the male pirates. For example, in 1809, during a battle with the Qing navy in the Pearl River delta near Macao, one female pirate, the wife of a pirate captain, fought to her death with swords in both hands. [1]

Several women pirates actually became chieftains themselves. The most famous examples are Zheng Yi Sao 郑一嫂 and Cai Qian Ma 蔡牵妈 in the nineteenth century, and Lai Choi San 赖财山 in the twentieth century. Zheng Yi Sao was originally a prostitute on a Canton flower boat. She was

[1] 袁永纶：《靖海氛记》。

undoubtedly a Dan boat woman, probably born around 1775 in Xinhui 新会 county, and she was well known for her charm and beauty. Her family name was Stone 石 and we are told that her given name was Fragrant Miss 香姑. But today she is best known as the Wife of Zheng Yi (Zheng Yi Sao). Her husband, Zheng Yi 郑一, in fact, was one of Guangdong's most powerful and notorious pirates at the end of the eighteenth and start of the nineteenth centuries. Like other boat women, Shi Xianggu worked aboard ships, first with her natal family, then as a prostitute, and later as the wife of a pirate. In her later role, she developed a reputation as a fearless warrior and capable leader. When her husband, Zheng Yi, suddenly died in 1807, she did not quietly step aside, but instead she successively maneuvered to take command of her husband's gang, the largest and most powerful Red Banner Fleet 红旗帮. Suddenly she came to command between 15000 and 20000 pirates, mostly men but also a considerable number of women. In taking power she was assisted by the charismatic 21-year old Zhang Baozai 张保仔, her husband's adopted son and her lover. [1]

For the next two or three years, between 1807 and 1809, Zheng Yi Sao and Zhang Baozai had virtual control over the central coastal region of Guangdong, namely the Pearl River estuary. This was, in fact, the most densely populated, most highly commercialized area in China at the time. It was not only the economic but also the political and cultural heart of Guangdong province. Together with five or six other powerful pirates, together they formed a massive confederation of as many as 60000 pirates, who effectively challenged the power and authority of the Qing state along the southern coast of China for nearly a decade. In 1809, at the height of her power and at a time of a severe famine in the Pearl River delta, Zheng Yi Sao launched military expeditions deep into the inland water system, even threatening the provincial capital at Canton at one point.

But by that time too, after so many years of fighting, the pirates were exhausted. There were also squabbles and dissent among the pirate bosses which added to a growing weakness that led to fission by the start of the following year. At the heart of the dissention was Zheng Yi Sao, who became the object of rivalry between Zhang Baozai and another powerful

[1] On Zheng Yi Sao see Dian Murray, "One Woman's Rise to Power: Cheng I's Wife and the Pirates", *Historical Reflections*, 1981, 8(3), pp. 147~162; and Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, Berkeley: University of California, Institute of East Asian Studies, China Research Monograph, 2003, pp. 48~52.

chief named Guo Podaiy 郭婆带, leader of the formidable Black Banner Fleet. In fact, in January 1810, the two male pirate leaders clashed in a brief battle near the mouth of the Pearl River. Although the battle was indecisive, soon afterwards Guo Podai surrendered to the government, and not too long after that, with the confederation disintegrating, Zheng Yi Sao also negotiated with the provincial authorities for the surrender of her fleet. After much haggling the surrender was accomplished in April 1810; she surrendered with 17, 318 men, women, and children who had all been under her command.

After retiring from the pirate trade, Zheng Yi Sao moved on shore to Macao, where she reportedly operated a gambling parlor and opium den in the area known as Shlitou. Later she moved to Canton where she continued to run gambling and opium establishments until her death in 1844. But even after her death, she has lived on in legends. Her life, adventurous exploits, and her sordid love affairs, have been told and retold many time in oral folktales, novels, and in movies. One of the latest was the 1993 Hong Kong movie called *Nuhai xiadao* (《怒海侠盗》) (see Figure 2).

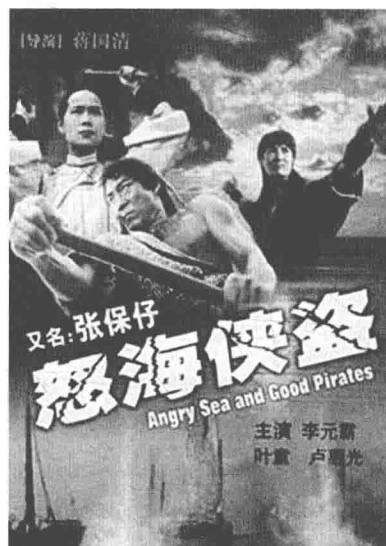


Fig 2. Zheng Yi Sao in a Popular Hong Kong Movie, 1993

Another famous female pirate, and a contemporary of Zheng Yi Sao; we know her only by the name Cai Qian Ma, Matron Cai Qian 蔡牵. Her name is derived from her husband, the pirate chief Cai Qian, who commanded a formidable fleet of several thousand pirates in Fujian province in the early nineteenth century. We know little about his wife, not even her real name, but we do know that she was born in Pingyang 平阳 county in Zhejiang

province probably sometime in the early 1780s. Like Zheng Yi Sao, Cai Qian Ma was also a famous beauty, but had a reputation as a loose woman. Her first husband, we are told, sold her to a waterfront barber in one of the ports in Zhejiang, where one day Cai Qian was having his hair cut when he took notice of the barber's young wife. He at once made an offer the barber could not refuse, and for a third time she was sold in marriage. Yet even after her marriage to Cai Qian, she reportedly continued her promiscuous affairs. According to legends, she kept a harem of young men from among the male captives. Like her husband, she too was addicted to opium and strong drink. Nevertheless, Cai Qian Ma played an important role in her husband's rise to power among the Fujian pirates. Aboard ship she proved to be a skillful and resourceful leader and a cunning and fierce fighter. It was said that she even commanded her own vessels with crews of "amazon warriors" (娘之军). In some accounts, she died in a naval battle in 1804; in other accounts she died with her husband in 1809. Today she is something of a heroin in Fujian, with her stories appearing in cartoons and occasionally in newspaper articles. [1]

The third female pirate was Lai Choi San, who lived in Macao in the early twentieth century. Unlike Zheng Yi Sao and Cai Qian Ma, who had married into the pirate profession, Lai Choi San had been born into it. Her father and brothers were all pirates and smugglers in the Hong Kong and Macao area. They reportedly controlled Macao's lucrative fishing industry through a systematic and extensive protection racket that was protected by close connections with local officials and businessmen. When her father died, Lai Choi San, not her brothers, inherited the family trade. She became so powerful that she became known as the "Queen of Macao pirates." In the 1930s and 1940s, she became immortalized in the West as the quintessential "Dragon Lady" in the highly popular syndicated cartoon *Terry and the Pirates*. [2]

Besides these three famous female pirates, of course, there were many other women among the male pirates. We, unfortunately, know very little about them. What we can surmise is that they were able to survive in a male-dominated society because they proved themselves to be as capable as men in battle and in their duties aboard ship. In many cases they even surpassed their

[1] See Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, pp. 46, 147.

[2] Aleko E. Lilius, *I Sailed with Chinese Pirates*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, (1930) 1991.

male crewmates. Women were not merely tolerated by male shipmates, but, as we have noted above, actually took active leading roles aboard the pirate ship. Their example offered an important alternative image of womanhood in Chinese history, one that challenged and contradicted the ideals of dominant patriarchal Confucian society. Among the pirates, females represented a dangerous “other” and the most radical departure from dominant society on land.

Female Sea Deities

The seas were dangerous and erratic places; they were demanding and often violent spaces marked by confrontations between man and nature. Yet seas were not only cruel but also at times bountiful. Seas were not only life a giving force but also a merciless force. Seafarers all had to pay special attention to the natural environment as essential to their survival. Sea people tried to understand and master their watery world through both natural observations and through omens, magic, and religious rituals. The seafarer’s view of the supernatural was shaped by his or her daily confrontation with the sea and nature. For them religion was above all else pragmatic. For Chinese fishermen and sailors fate and good luck were more important than concerns for virtue and salvation. [1]

Although there were many sea deities who were male, there were equally as many, perhaps even more, who were female. And like the sea itself, goddesses could be nurturing at times and destructive at other times. Representative of this latter type was a female spirit known colloquially as the Pissing Woman. The sailors and fishermen around Amoy have a peculiar story about how sudden storms arise at sea. They believed in a fierce female demon that they called the “Pissing Woman.” This female spirit, according to legend, was a real woman married to a cruel, brutal sailor, who cursed and abused her whenever he could. Preferring death to such a life she committed suicide by throwing herself into the sea, and thereby becoming a hungry ghost. “Since then she rages at sea, a wrathful demon, against every junk she

[1] See Barbara Ward, *Through Other Eyes: Essays in Understanding ‘Conscious Models’ — Mostly in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1985, pp. 12~13; and Robert J. Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China*, pp. 150~152.

sees, in the hope that her husband may be amongst the crew and be sunk into her own watery grave.” She appears on the open sea as a sudden storm in a black cloudy mass that will toss and capsize any boat. “She is so unmannerly as to pass on high a flood of urine, which will fill the ship in a moment up to the deck.” To counteract the wrath of the Pissing Woman, as soon as her dark specter appears the sailors must close all hatches, and immediately begin an exorcism. At once the crew burns paper money on deck so as to propitiate her and appease her anger; they also set off firecrackers and blunderbusses to try to scare her away. Then one of the sailors, stripped naked, climbs up the mast, his hair disheveled, and brandishing a sword, axe, club, or spear. He then sets about abusing and cursing the demon in every way imaginable. Meanwhile on deck another sailor, especially appointed for the task, dressed in a black gown with long spacious sleeves, begins a ritual exorcistic dance to sound of gongs beaten by a comrade. In his hand he brandishes a stick upon which some red cloth is attached to the end. The combined efforts of the naked sailor atop the mast and the exorcist dancing below on deck finally scare away the demon and sea returns to calm. [1]

Undoubtedly the most important and famous sea deity, male or female, is the Empress of Heaven, or better known among the sea-going population as Mazu 妈祖. What began as a minor local cult among fishermen and sailors in Putian 莆田 county in Fujian in the tenth century, had by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries developed into a major cult all along China’s coast. Today Mazu is worshipped not only in China, but also in Southeast Asia, Japan, and even in the West, in fact just about wherever Chinese have settled. In 1683 she was given the title of Empress of Heaven by the Qing emperor in recognition and appreciation for her help in securing Taiwan for the new Manchu rulers. [2]

Female sea deities, such as Mazu, at times were nurturing and protective, but at other times they could be violent and unpredictable. Every year during the third lunar month, right around the time of the goddesses’ birthday, for example, a period of unseasonable weather and storms began, which the sea people called the “Mazu gales” (妈祖颶). [3] A number of goddesses, sometimes including Tianhou, were depicted in temples and

[1] J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China*, Leiden: Brill, 1892~1910, vol. 5, pp. 532~533.

[2] 罗春荣:《天妃何时封天后——还历史本来面目》,载《妈祖文化研究》,天津古籍出版社,2006年,第271~284页。

[3] 民国《连江县志》卷二,第34~35页。