

Coxinga

AND THE FALL OF THE
MING DYNASTY

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'The lives of few men in history are richer in dramatic possibilities than was Coxinga's. It is small wonder, then, that even those who have professed to be writing biographical accounts have been led into colourful tales which have every merit save that of truth.'

Donald Keene

'For a thousand autumns, men will tell of this.'

Zhang Huang-yan

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PROLOGUE

1644: BRIGHTNESS FALLS

On 8 February 1644, the first day of the Chinese New Year, the ministers of the Emperor of Lofty Omens woke before dawn and journeyed through the streets of Beijing. At the break of day, in keeping with tradition that stretched back for centuries, they would greet their 33-year-old ruler, whom the gods had selected to reign over the entire world. Then, the assembled throng would welcome in the new year, the 4341st since China's first, legendary kings, and entreat the gods and ancestors to bring them good fortune.

The city, however, was quiet. Many of its inhabitants had succumbed to a harsh outbreak of disease the previous year, and according to one diarist, 'no babies had been born in the city for the previous six months'.¹ Not all the ministers arrived at the palace on time. Those that did found the gates jammed shut, and were only able to open them with some difficulty. Eventually they found the Emperor of Lofty Omens, in the Hall of the Central Ultimate. He was weeping.²

China was doomed. The Dynasty of Brightness, the Ming, which had ruled the world's largest nation for centuries, had lost its hold on power. A Confucian scholar would have been scandalised at the low attendance that morning; without a full complement of ministers, how could they perform the necessary ceremonies? But not even the Emperor himself bore a grudge against the absentees, or those who arrived late, wheezing breathless apologies. No amount of prayers and ceremony would change the inevitable, and no sacrifice, however elaborate, would attract the ancestors' attention from the afterlife.

Besides, the Emperor could not afford it. Ever since the disastrous reign of his father, the nation's budgets had spiralled wildly out of

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control. Attempts to curtail imperial luxuries were not enough, fundamental cornerstones of civilisation had gone to ruin. The Grand Canal to the south was falling into disrepair, and the postal system had been shut down. Smallpox had wrought havoc among the farming communities, who struggled in vain to tease crops from the earth – though few realised at the time, the middle of the seventeenth century gripped the world in a mini ice age. The same weather conditions that were then freezing over the Thames in London were also bringing deadly cold to the lands north of the Great Wall.

The unit of currency in seventeenth-century China was the *tael*, an ounce of silver. It took 400,000 taels each month to maintain and supply the troops who defended the northern border. The Finance Minister already knew that the money would run out before March. After that point, there would be little incentive for the soldiers who guarded the Great Wall to stay at their posts. The ministers expected the worst.

North of the Great Wall was China's worst nightmare – the barbarian warriors of Manchuria had become increasingly bold in recent years. They had stolen former Ming territory from the Chinese, and even proclaimed that they were now the rightful rulers of China. Though they were nominally led by a child, the true power behind the throne was Prince Dorgon, a 32-year-old warrior who believed he could conquer the Celestial Empire in a matter of months. The Great Wall would hold the Manchus for a while, but once the money ran out, there was not much hope. China's greatest general, Wu Sangui, held the crucial Shanhai pass where the Great Wall met the sea . . . if he could keep his men's hearts on defending the Wall, then China might be able to hold out for a miracle.

The Emperor was fated to fall, but not at the hands of the Manchus. While the Great Wall still held, a new enemy struck from within. Starved of food and decimated by disease, a distant inland province rose up in revolt. An army of disaffected soldiers and peasants began to march on the capital city, led by the rebel Li Zicheng.

Li Zicheng, formerly one of the post-riders who delivered mail along China's once-great roads, had been obsessed with seizing control of the Empire from his youth. Not even losing an eye in battle dimmed his ardour, as one old prophecy had predicted the

Empire would fall to a man with only one eye. His previous dealings with other members of the imperial family had been less than favourable. During his campaigns, he not only killed the Emperor's uncle the Prince of Fu, but drank his blood, mixing it into his venison broth.³ Li Zicheng was the leader of a horde of almost 100,000 soldiers, boiling across the country towards Beijing, gathering still greater numbers as peasants flocked to its banners proclaiming a tax-free future.

On New Year's Day, as the Ming Emperor sat sobbing in his palace, Li Zicheng announced his intention to found a new dynasty. The Dynasty of Brightness, he said, had fallen. Long live the *Da Shun*, the Dynasty of Great Obedience.

With the usurper Li Zicheng advancing ever closer to Beijing, the Emperor of Lofty Omens knew it was time for drastic measures. Drunk and disoriented, he ordered for the Ming Heir Apparent to be smuggled out of the city. He gathered the rest of his family about him and informed them that it was time to die. Some of his wives and concubines had already committed suicide, and were found hanged or poisoned in their chambers. Others had fled. There was no such option for the immediate family of the Emperor, who attacked his own children with a sword. The fifteen-year-old Princess Imperial held out her right arm to stay his attack, and the Emperor hacked it off. The maimed girl fled screaming through the halls, leaving a trail of blood. Her younger sisters were not so lucky, and both died where they stood, stabbed by their own father. The Emperor then went to a nearby hilltop, where he wrote a final message in his own blood, before hanging himself as Li Zicheng's army drew closer. Later writers would claim the Emperor's last words blamed his ministers and his own 'small virtue' for the collapse of the Ming Dynasty, and exhorted the rebels to spare his people from suffering. In fact, the Emperor's bleeding finger simply traced the plaintive, spidery characters 'Son of Heaven'.⁴ His body lay undiscovered for three days.

On the battlements of the capital, guns boomed in the city's defence, although they had no cannonballs and their reports were empty gestures of defiance. Astrological graffiti, scrawled on the wall of the palace itself, announced that the Ming star had fallen, and it was time to follow another. Li Zicheng rode into the capital in triumph, entering through the Gate of Heaven's Grace. On a whim, he stopped beneath it and drew his bow, taking aim at the

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character for 'Heaven' on the gate's lintel. He let an arrow fly, claiming that if he struck the word, it would be a sign that Heaven approved of his acts. It was an easy shot.

He missed.⁵

His men laughed it off and carried on into the town. Beijing belonged to Li Zicheng, and before long he would be enthroned by the ministers who had failed his predecessor, and, according to custom, failed themselves by not taking their own lives.

North of the Great Wall, General Wu Sangui was faced with a difficult choice – should he continue to face off the Manchus to the north, march south to retake the capital, or proclaim his allegiance to the usurper? When news reached him that his favourite concubine had been raped by Li Zicheng, he chose a fourth option. Wu Sangui sent a messenger to the Manchu army and invited them in.

The thousands of miles of the Great Wall, designed to protect China's northern borders, were suddenly worth nothing. A combined army of Manchus and their new-found allies walked through the wide-open gates and marched on Beijing. Wu Sangui had betrayed his people, and north China was now a battleground between two rival rebels. The Ming Emperor lay dead, the self-proclaimed Shun Emperor was on the run at the head of his army, and now the invader Prince Dorgon ordered the enthronement of his nephew as a third contender – the new ruler of the Manchu Qing dynasty, the Dynasty of Clarity. The capital was lost.

Or rather Beijing, the *northern* capital was lost. Nanjing, the southern capital, lay several hundred miles away from the civil strife, home to a shadow government that had been preparing for the disaster for some time. Even as Li Zicheng fled from Beijing, and Dorgon proclaimed his nephew the new child-Emperor of China, the civil servants of Nanjing planned the Ming resistance. One emperor's violent death did not mean that his dynasty was immediately finished, and the people of Nanjing were not about to submit to foreign invaders. They hoped they would be able to hold them off, and that their example would bring others rallying to their cause.

One man was crucial to the establishment of this 'Southern Ming' resistance. His name was Zheng Zhilong, though he was known to most foreign observers by his Christian name, Nicholas Iquan. The 41-year-old Iquan was a successful merchant and soldier,

1644: Brightness Falls

a former smuggler who had become the admiral of the Chinese fleet. He was the leader of a loose confederation of pirates and privateers, a warlord who was the *de facto* ruler of south-east China, and a man of such wealth and importance that some observers mistakenly referred to him as the King of South China. He preferred the term Lord of the Straits, referring to the thin channel that separated his main domains of Amoy and Taiwan.

Iquan was the kingmaker of the Southern Ming. His personal wealth was greater than that of some contemporary nations, and only he could fund the resistance effort that was to come. The newly created southern Emperor promised Iquan his eternal gratitude, and Iquan, sensing the opportunity for even greater power, offered his eternal service.

Within two years, Iquan would betray him and the Emperor would be dead. The Manchus would have a new ally, but the troubled Ming dynasty would gain one last hero – Iquan's son Coxinga. The Zheng family, who began as pirates and privateers, would eventually become the kings of their own island domain. Their most famous son would become a god – twice.

It was the Manchus and the Dutch who called Coxinga a pirate, the English and the Spanish who called him a king. His Chinese countrymen called him both, depending on their mood. But he saw himself as neither; instead, he wanted to be known as a scholar and a patriot, unexpectedly plucked from a privileged upbringing and thrust into the forefront of a terrible war. A child prodigy from a wealthy trading family in seventeenth-century China, Coxinga became a nobleman at twenty-one, a resistance leader at twenty-two, and was a prince at thirty. The last loyal defender of the defeated Ming dynasty, he was the invincible sea lord who raided the coasts for ten years, before leading a massive army to strike at the heart of China itself. Still plotting to restore a pretender he had never seen, he was dead at thirty-nine, only to be canonised by his former enemies as a paragon of loyalty.

In a China that shunned contact with the outside world, Coxinga was a surprisingly cosmopolitan individual. His mother was Japanese, his bodyguards African and Indian, his chief envoy an Italian missionary. Among his 'Chinese' loyalist troops were German and French defectors. His enemies were similarly international, including Chinese relatives and rivals, the Dutch

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against whom he nursed a lifelong hatred, and the Manchus who invaded his country. Betrayed and deserted by many of his own friends and family, Coxinga's stubborn character was most similar to that of his most famous foe – the Swedish commander whom he defeated in his last battle.

Famous for his pathological insistence on justice and correctness, Coxinga was ever troubled by his shadowy origins. His father was an admiral and the richest man in China, but also a crook who had cheated, murdered and bribed his way to the top of south China's largest criminal organisation. Though Coxinga grew up in a palace, his family had clawed their way to their fortune, and had made many enemies in the process.

This, then, is the man that was known to European writers as that 'heathen idolater and devil-worshipper', the mutilator of his enemies and a heartless brute who could execute a Dutch priest and ravish the man's bereaved daughter on the same day. But Coxinga is also the loyalist lauded by the Chinese as the last son of a departed dynasty, who steadfastly refused to surrender to foreign invaders when millions of his countrymen submitted willingly. He was demonised in Europe, deified in China, and remains a contentious figure to this day.

This is his story. It is also the story of his father, Nicholas Iquan, and of his deals and double-crosses with the Europeans he despised. To the superstitious, it is also the story of the goddess of the sea, and how she granted fortune on the waters to one family for forty long years. Though it ends with saints and gods, it begins with smugglers and pirates.

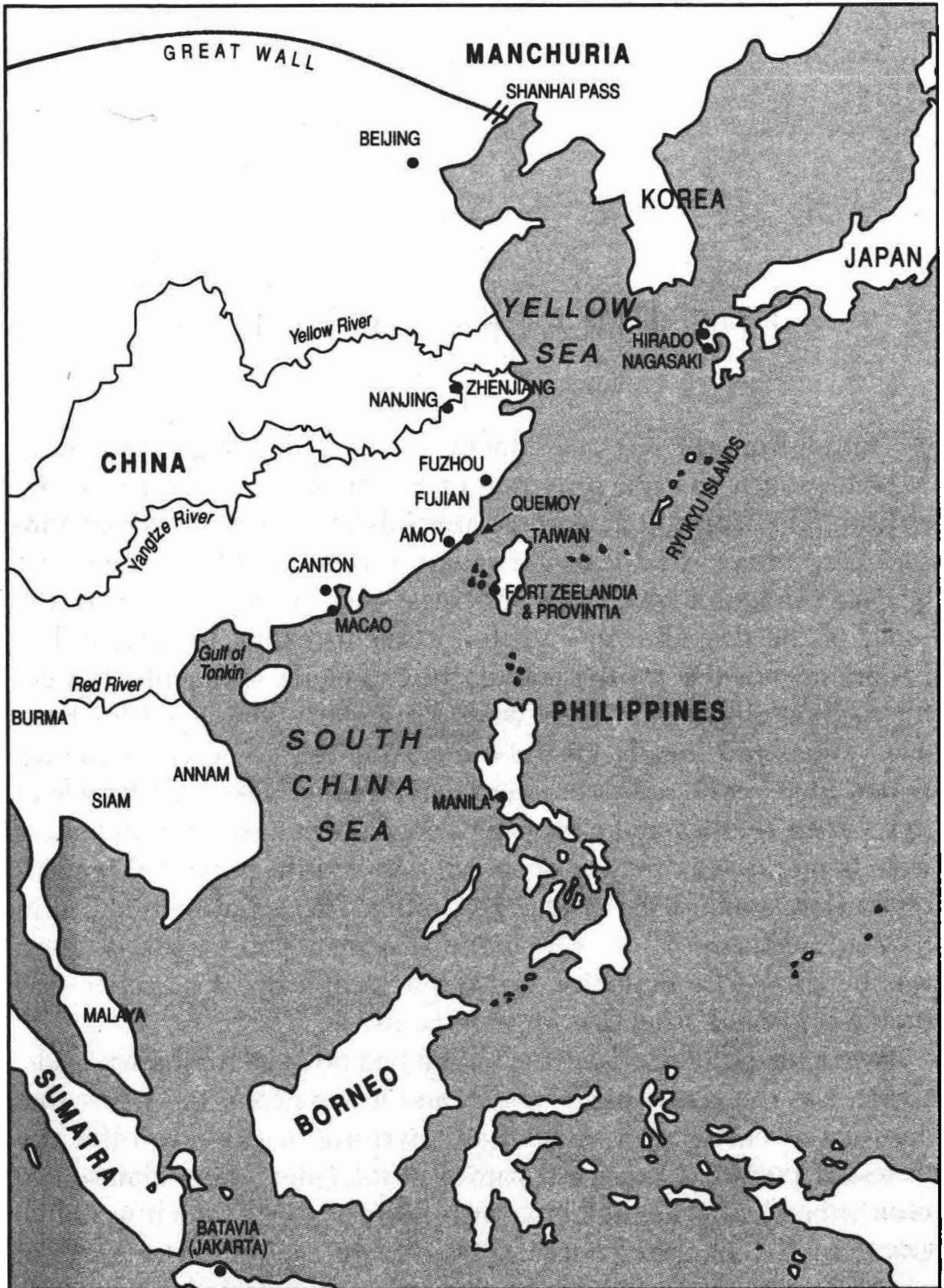
THE PIRATES OF FUJIAN

Cut off from the rest of China by a semicircle of high mountains, the south-eastern province of Fujian was almost a separate nation. The slopes that pointed towards the sea were carved into terraces, where the locals grew native produce like lychees and *longans* ('dragon's eyes'), tea and sugar-cane. Cash crops were the order of the day, and not merely for sale as exotic foodstuffs. The Fujianese grew flax for the manufacture of cloth, and mulberry trees for feeding silkworms. They were particularly renowned for their dyed silks, and locally grown indigo plants formed the basis for Fujian blue, while safflowers were harvested to make a multitude of reds. With textiles and a growing porcelain industry, the Fujianese were bound to seek trading opportunities, and the province's walled-off existence afforded a unique possibility. The populace huddled in bays and estuaries, from which the easiest mode of transportation was by ship. The Fujianese became accomplished fishermen, and inevitably found other uses for their boats.

By command of the Emperor, China had no need for foreign trade. China was the centre of the world, and it was heresy to suggest that any of the barbarian nations had anything of value to offer the Celestial Empire. Occasional parties of foreigners were admitted to bear 'tribute', arriving in China with fleets of goods, which would be graciously exchanged between government agents for treasures of equivalent value, but it was a cumbersome way of doing business, and, by its very nature, excluded private entrepreneurs.

Two hundred years earlier, in the heyday of the Ming dynasty, the mariner Zheng He had sailed across the Indian Ocean in a fleet of massive vessels, returning from distant lands with bizarre beasts and stories. He also bore 'tribute', assuring the Emperor that barbarians

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East Asia in the seventeenth century.

The Pirates of Fujian

as far away as Africa had acknowledged him as the ruler of the world. However, after Zheng's famous voyages, the Ming dynasty retreated into self-absorption once more, confident that there was little in the wider world worth seeing.

Iquan, the future Lord of the Straits, was born in 1603 in the small Fujianese village of Nan-an, near Amoy. The place had only two relatively minor claims to fame. The first was a strange rock formation at a nearby river-mouth, said by the locals to represent five horses – four galloping out to sea, while a fifth shied away, back towards land. Later writers would interpret this as referring to Iquan, his son Coxinga, his grandson Jing and two of his great-grandchildren, Kecang and Keshuang.

The second famous place in Nan-an was a rock, shaped like a crane, which bore an inscription by a philosopher of a bygone age who had been posted to the region as a civil servant. He had announced, to the locals' great surprise, that the area would one day be the birthplace of 'the Master of the Seas'. The same site was visited centuries later by the founder of the Ming dynasty, who was aghast at the powerful *feng shui*. He announced that the region risked becoming the birthplace of an Emperor, and ordered that the stone inscription should be altered. This act, it was later said, is what kept Iquan's family from becoming the true rulers of all China.¹

Iquan shared his surname, Zheng ('Serious'), with the famous mariner of times gone by, but this was merely a coincidence. The historical Admiral Zheng was a eunuch and a Muslim from China's interior, whereas Iquan hailed from a clan that had lived in coastal Fujian for generations. His father was Zheng Shaozu, a minor official in local government, while his mother was a lady of the Huang trading family.² Shaozu seemed determined to bring respectability to his family, and encouraged his children in China's most acceptable way of advancement. He was wealthy enough to afford a good education for his sons, and hoped that they would find success in the civil service examinations: the only way of achieving office in the Chinese government. Shaozu's ambitions for his family were not uncommon, and Fujian province was a hotbed of academic endeavour – it sent more graduates into the civil service than any other province in China. However, Shaozu's sons were to bring him an endless series of disappointments, and he did not live to see the incredible achievements of their later life. In the case of his eldest

son Iquan,³ it was undeniable that the meek, conservative genes of the Zheng strain had lost out to the wild-card heritage of the Lady Huang, whose family, it was later discovered, were a group of reprobates involved in questionable maritime enterprises.

Iquan had many names in the course of his life, but was known at home simply as 'Eldest Son'. As is common with some Chinese families even today, he and his brothers also concocted a series of semi-official nicknames. In the case of the Zheng boys, they named each other after imagined animal attributes. As the eldest, Iquan seized Dragon for himself – the noblest of Chinese beasts and the symbol of imperial authority. The next eldest brothers grabbed the next-best names – Bao the Panther, Feng the Phoenix and Hu the Tiger. An avian theme among the younger brothers implied they were the sons of a different mother, with names including Peng the Roc, Hú the Swan and Guan the Stork.

The chief source for the youth of Iquan is the *Taiwan Waizhi* or *Historical Novel of Taiwan*, a late seventeenth-century account of the pirate kings that mixes verifiable historical facts with fantastically unlikely tales of their deeds and accomplishments. As seems traditional for all Chinese books on figures who would later find fame, it begins by describing Iquan in familiarly glorious terms that would please any Confucian scrutineer. According to the *Historical Novel*, he was able to read and write by age seven, a not inconsiderable feat, and displayed a great aptitude for dancing and other forms of the arts. Before long, however, the *Historical Novel* slips from empty platitudes of child prodigy, and into accounts of events more in keeping with Iquan's later life.

His most distinctive characteristic, evident even in his childhood, was his rakish charm, which often allowed him to get away with mischief. The first story of Iquan's remarkable life takes place somewhere around 1610, when the boy was playing with his younger brother Bao the Panther in the street near the house of the local mayor Cai Shanzhi. Close within the walls of Cai's gardens, the boys could see a lychee tree – the luscious fruits were native to Fujian, and highly prized. They tried to knock some of the ripe lychees down by throwing sticks into the branches, and, when the local supply of sticks was exhausted, tried using stones instead. Unfortunately for Iquan, one of his well-aimed rocks sailed past the tree and into the garden, where the unsuspecting mayor was