

## THE EUROPEANS DISCOVERY OF XINA

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#### CHINA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

##### PIRACY AND CHINESE JUSTICE

From the mid-15th to the mid-16th century, Chinese restrictions on maritime trade caused an upsurge in contraband activities along the Chinese coastline, with the complicity of a large number of people merchants, gentry, and even state officials.

For a whole century, the maritime restrictions, which were particularly harsh for the coastal provinces such as Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang, continued relentlessly in parallel with a systematic failure of compliance.

At the heyday of maritime restrictions, the coastal populations were even forbidden to go fishing or to use foreign products. Whenever restrictions on maritime trade intensified, bands of pirates flogged the Chinese coasts and sacked many of its most prosperous cities.

They were given the generic name of wokou, or Japanese pirates, but only one tenth of all the wokou operating off the China coast in the 1550s and 1560s were genuinely Japanese. And furthermore, the Japanese ships at that moment were much too flimsy to lead the way amidst the turmoil of 16th century piracy.

In fact, the pirate crews were extremely cosmopolitan, and pirate havens were found as much in southern Japan as in the offshore Chinese islands, especially those facing the authorized ports dealing with foreign trade: Ningbo, Quanzhou and Guangzhou.

Let's look closely to the most important pirate gang of the 16th century, the one captained by a Chinese pirate, Wang Zhi. He came from a merchant background and over the years he functioned as a merchant, smuggler and pirate, switching from one position to the other, and controlling the trade routes that linked China, Japan, Borneo, Malacca, and most of maritime South East Asia.

He had more than one hundred large ocean-going ships. Like many other so-called pirates, **Wang Zhi's band** of pirates was in fact more like a merchant smuggling empire than a pirate band.

And yet, even if the Japanese did not produce the majority of the pirates, they certainly joined the smuggling and pirate bands of the China seas.

The Japanese had been coming to China on tributary missions since the early Ming. But when, in 1523, two Japanese missions fought each other at Ningbo, triggering conflict and chaos in the city, China forbade all Japanese missions to come to China.

Unable to enter the port of Ningbo, the Japanese took to smuggling in the offshore islands, and it was there that, in 1542, they met the Portuguese.

For the Portuguese, this encounter meant the discovery of Japan, something that gave them a very consistent opportunity for trade. Japan was by then in a chaotic political condition, with the daimios fighting fiercely among themselves.

But even so, the Sino-Japanese trade was just entering a period of rapid expansion, and, with the Chinese ban on foreign trade, badly needed some brokers to take **care of it. And it's there** that the Portuguese came in.

The Portuguese were well trained traders and they conducted their affairs in a more orderly manner than most of the smuggler bands, trying not to get too involved in Chinese internal affairs.

Within a few years they had established themselves as middlemen in the regular trade of Chinese silk for Japanese silver, and such would they remain for the next century. Meanwhile, in Beijing, the growing combination of smuggling, piracy and illegal trade had become an extremely serious political, economic, military and financial problem.

The court was in dire straits over what was to be done and discussions were heated between those for and against taking drastic measures. In 1547 a notorious advocate of the closed door policy, called Zhu Wan, was appointed high coordinator for coastal defence in the provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian.

He was an honest and intelligent man and he understood clearly that the problem lay not in foreign or Japanese raiders, but in the participation in the illegal trade of the "pirates in gowns and caps", by which he meant the local government officials, often members of the gentry.

And those were decidedly reluctant to let high-ranking officials, like Zhu Wan, look too closely into their activities, and did all in their power to overthrow him.

When Zhu Wan had the Portuguese prisoners brought before him for judgment, the accused faced a bleak future.

All of them had arrived in China in the heyday of piracy and had joined in as traders, smugglers or pirates, depending on the opportunities.

After years of captivity, they expected a harsh penalty or even death.

But by the time the proceedings started, the opponents of Zhu Wan in Beijing had won the upper hand and all charges against the Portuguese were dropped.

To their utter astonishment, they saw how their judge, Zhu Wan, was first dismissed for having wrongly accused the Portuguese, and then forced to commit suicide, while they were acquitted of all charges. This was going to have an enduring influence on the highly positive European vision of Chinese justice, most notably in the Iberian texts, whether Portuguese or Castilian.