

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Human Trafficking and Piracy in Early Modern East Asia: Maritime Challenges to the Ming Dynasty Economy, 1370–1565

Harriet Zurndorfer

Leiden Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, NL
Email: h.zurndorfer@kpnplanet.nl

Abstract

This study asks how human trafficking in Ming China (1368–1644) became enveloped in the emerging global economy of the sixteenth century. Utilizing theoretical insights from the model of “slaving zones,” the essay examines recorded incidents of human trafficking along China’s littoral from 1370 to 1565 and contends that its presence and persistence were intertwined with the Ming court’s economic policies and problems. Here the history of human trafficking in early-to-mid-Ming China is viewed from the perspective of a series of challenges to the country’s economic well-being but also to its power to govern according to its own laws and norms. These challenges include the Ming regime’s efforts: to eradicate piracy and smuggling through their integration into the lawful framework of tribute trade; to support provincial requests for extra revenue to promote military security; to acquire Japanese silver but deny Japan mercantile access to China; to profit from Portugal’s Southeast Asian and Japanese commercial networks. This study argues that the increasing prevalence of human trafficking along China’s coastline was the result of competing forces anxious for power and riches that fused into the thrust of sixteenth-century China’s expanding economy, as well as the adaptability of those in authority to ignore the consequences of allowing safe havens for persons bartering and selling human beings. These factors turned the status of Ming China’s littoral from a “no slaving zone” into an “imperfect no slaving zone.”

Keywords: human trafficking; Ming dynasty; Chinese littoral; slaving zone; silver; Japan; Macao; Portugal; Ming Code

Introduction: Human Trafficking within and from Ming China

Human trafficking—the abduction, coercion, violence, deception, and exploitation to procure persons—is a significant focus of present-day global humanitarian

concern.¹ Its history, however, has deep roots in the past, not only in the colonial regimes that exported millions of persons from their native places and abused them in far-away agricultural and industrial enterprises, but long before, within the slave trading systems integral to the ancient societies of Europe, Africa, and Asia.² In recent research about the history of slavery, a number of scholars have utilized the concept of a “slaving zone” to help explain what specific conditions—geographical, political, and social—create and sustain a location where slavery flourishes, or does not, as in a “no-slaving zone” where religious-ethical taboos may prohibit enslavement.³ Integral to the “slaving zone” concept is the effectiveness of a state’s political organization to control the space where slave raiders are active, as well as the local merchants who facilitate trafficking.⁴ The more stable and effectively a state operates, the less likely that free persons will be exposed to abduction and exploitation.

Since earliest times, both government and private slavery existed in imperial China, and over the ages, successive dynastic regimes, including the Han (206 BCE–CE 220) and the Tang (618–907), issued statutes regulating facets of slavery’s legitimacy and realization in Chinese society. Such legislation, however, did not prevent individual cases of trafficking and slave procurement among high-ranked officials and elite families or the acquisition of vast numbers of slaves in military battles. Documentation dating from the second century BCE to the mid-fifteenth century CE about human trafficking and slavery along the networks of the Silk Road land and sea routes confirms there was an extensive commerce in slaves in markets both within and outside of China.⁵ By the time of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) human trafficking laws carried severe penalties for persons who engaged in *maimai* (buying and selling) or *guaimai* (abducting and selling) people, and explicitly forbade those practices.⁶ The *Da Ming lü* [The Great Ming Code; first promulgated in 1374], clearly prohibited kidnapping, and selling people (including children), under Article 298. Nevertheless, fragmentary references in legal case studies and particular passages in Ming-era encyclopedias indicate that human trafficking was not uncommon.

Utilizing these sources, recent scholarship has directed attention to the trafficking of children for immoral purposes, the sale of wives and daughters into domestic

¹See the United Nations Protocol Document on Human Trafficking, adopted in November 2000, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/protocol.html> (accessed 16 Jan. 2023).

²Jeff Fynn-Paul, “Empire, Monasticism, and Slavery in the Mediterranean Region from Antiquity to the Early Modern Period,” *Past and Present* 205 (2009): 3–40.

³Jeff Fynn-Paul, “Slaving Zones in Global History: The Evolution of a Concept,” in Jeff Fynn-Paul and Damian Pargas, eds., *Slaving Zones: Cultural Identities, Ideologies, and Institutions in the Evolution of Global Slavery* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 1–19.

⁴*Ibid.*, 3. On the problems of conflating human trafficking with slavery, refer to Jean Allain, “Genealogies of Human Trafficking and Slavery,” in Ryszard Piotrowicz, Conny Rijken, and Baerbel Heide Uhl, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Human Trafficking* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3–12.

⁵Susan Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 250–72. Whitfield, on page 251, underscores the commonness of slavery with a quote from the *Macmillan Encyclopedia of World Slavery*: “With the exception of marriage, the family, and religion, slavery is perhaps the most ubiquitous social institution in human history.”

⁶Jiang Yonglin, *The Great Ming Code: Da Ming lü* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 164–65, Article 298, “Kidnapping Persons or Kidnapping and Selling Persons” (*Lüeren lüemairen*), which was classified under Penal Law. Also on the Great Ming Code, see Edward Farmer, *Zhu Yuanzhang and Early Ming Legislation: The Reordering of Chinese Society following the Era of Mongol Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 75–80.

bondage, and the recruitment of women for the imperial household as wet-nurses, nannies, and entertainers.⁷ In his examination of life in Ming China, Wang Ermin has shown how daily-use encyclopedias such as the *Wanbao quanshu* [Encyclopedia of myriad treasures], which targeted the lower classes, contained practical information, including sample contracts, for selling relatives to outsiders, a practice that was entirely illegal.⁸ What emerges from these studies of trafficking in Ming society is insight into its fluidity: stringent legislation against buying and selling human beings manifested the government's aim to control and eradicate such behavior, yet the acceptance of marriage customs and adoption strategies of regional overseers (including local elites) rendered the sale of persons transactional and legitimate.⁹

Understanding the intricacies of human trafficking within Ming China is complicated by the fact that not all trafficked persons became slaves, that is, persons categorized as *jian* (mean) as opposed to *liang* (good, or free). In late imperial China, indentured labor and bondservants, both groups classified as *jian*, were more likely to have inherited that status than having been sold into slavery,¹⁰ while a high proportion of human trafficking victims who possessed “free” status were probably destined for work in the sex-for-sale venues flourishing in Ming China's cities and expanding market enclaves.¹¹ As Xie Zhaozhe (1567–1624), a well-known observer of Ming life, wrote about the ubiquity of prostitutes: “In the big

⁷Hsieh Bao Hua, *Concubinage and Servitude in Late Imperial China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); Wang Xueping, *16–18 shiji binü shengcun zhuangtai yanjiu* [Research on the conditions of maidservants from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries] (Harbin: Heilongjiang daxue chubanshe, 2008); Kishimoto Mio, “Qi ke mai fou? Ming Qing shidai de maiqi dianqi xisu [Wives for sale? On the customs of wife-selling and wife-pawning during the Ming Qing era],” in Chen Qiukun and Hong Liwan, eds., *Qiyue wenshu yu shehui shenghuo* [Contractual behavior and social life, 1600–1900] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Taiwan shi yanjiusuo, 2001), 225–64; and Claude Chevalere, “Human Trafficking in Late Imperial China,” in Richard B. Allen, ed., *Slavery and Bonded Labor in Asia, 1250–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 150–77, which surveys documentation of this subject but offers no narrative linking specific socioeconomic factors with people's vulnerability to human trafficking exploitation.

⁸Wang Ermin, *Ming Qing shidai shumin wenhua shenghuo* [Common people's cultural life during the Ming and Qing eras] (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo, 1999), 199–203. Violations of Article 118 of the Great Ming Code, “Forcibly Selling Wives or Daughters of Honorable Families” [*Qiangzhan liangjia qinmü*], were punishable by strangulation. See Jiang, *Great Ming Code*, 87.

⁹The significance of trafficking in family histories is featured in the famous late-Ming vernacular novel *Jin Ping Mei* [The plum in the golden vase; ca. 1600], which depicts the household of a wealthy merchant, Ximen Qing and his wife, five concubines, and various lovers. In the life history of the female character Song Huilian, one reads how she was multi-trafficked: first, sold by her father to be a domestic slave, then vended to a cook to be his wife, and after his death, sold into Ximen's household. By noting the price of each transaction, the novel's author demonstrated how trade in human beings was common and fungible. See Tina Lu, “Slavery and Genre in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 81 (2021): 85–101.

¹⁰Harriet Zurndorfer, “Economic, Social, and Legal Aspects of Slavery and Indentured Labor in Late Imperial Ming China (1550–1645): What the Huizhou Documents Tell Us,” in Richard B. Allen, ed., *Slavery and Bonded Labor in Asia, 1250–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 131–49. See, too, Wang Xueping, *Mingdai binü qunti yanjiu* [Studies of the female bondservant population during the Ming dynasty] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2019).

¹¹Anders Hansson, *Chinese Outcasts: Discrimination and Emancipation in Late Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), analyzes the working lives of those people classified as *jian* and how they could escape that status. On the development of the Ming urban economy and its relation to the proliferation of rural market locations, see Harriet Zurndorfer, “Chinese Cities and the Urban Economy, 1000–1800,” in Richard Von Glahn and Debin Ma, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 522–59.

cities they run to the tens of thousands, but they can be found in every poor district and remote place as well, leaning by doorways all day long, bestowing their smiles, selling sex for a living.”¹² Given the paucity of records about human trafficking agents and China’s immense size, one can only speculate about the particular circumstances that delivered as many as a million persons into the Ming era’s bordellos and brothels.¹³

On the other hand, documentation about the transactions in human beings along the Chinese littoral, dating from the Ming regime’s early years as well as later, is informative. Although evidence about such trafficking into and out of coastal regions is relatively sparse, the “slaving zone” model can help us expose specific factors that either encouraged or deterred people-smuggling within China and to destinations outside the Ming empire. As a political organization, the early Ming state was a highly centralized political authority with the military resources to prevent human trafficking along its maritime frontier. And so, it was there that the first Ming emperor Hongwu (1324–1398; r.1368–1398), through a series of powerful directives, ended the human trafficking along China’s northern littoral that had beleaguered the first years of his reign. But over the longer term his policies proved ineffective and were even conducive to human trafficking. They eventually connected China to the late sixteenth-century supply lines that carried slaves and indentured labor from North Africa, East Africa, and South Asia, and via the Asian seas, to the Americas, as well as from East Asia and Southeast Asia to Europe via India and Africa.

This essay examines recorded incidents of human trafficking along China’s littoral from 1370 to 1565 and argues that its presence and persistence were intertwined with the Ming court’s economic policies and problems, as well as those of regional authorities seeking financial support to promote military security and stability along the coast. While modern scholars have published extensively on the smuggling gangs and piracy that plagued sixteenth-century China, and the economic impact of imported foreign silver, there has been little to no interest in the role human trafficking played in them. In particular, one wants to know how and why, despite its strenuous laws against kidnapping, rustling, and unregulated international commerce, the Ming government turned a blind eye to this rogue business as its economy surged starting in the mid-sixteenth century. Here I will examine the history of human trafficking in early-to-mid-Ming China as a series of challenges to not only its economic well-being but also its ability to govern according to its own laws and norms.

This essay connects what may appear to be disparate institutions and actors into a complex tableau, which elucidates the competing forces whose pursuit of power and riches propelled the sixteenth-century expansion of China’s market economy. That expansion brought greater prosperity for some, but deepening poverty for others.¹⁴

¹²Xie Zhaozhe, *Wuzazu* [Five assorted offerings] (Beijing: Zhonghua chubanshe, 1959), 196.

¹³Harriet Zurndorfer, “Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Confucian Moral Universe of Late Ming China (1550–1644),” *International Review of Social History* 56 (2011): 197–216, argues that anywhere from a million to a million and a half prostitutes actively worked in late Ming China (and see page 198).

¹⁴Timothy Brook, *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 145–49; Richard von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 142–43.

Such economic and social pressures fostered ever more human trafficking. This raises the questions, first, of how this phenomenon might connect to the envelopment of Ming China into burgeoning Asian slave trading networks linked to the emerging global economy of the later sixteenth century, and second, of what its significance for the slaving zone model is.¹⁵ This study argues that the increase in human trafficking along the coast of Ming China reflects the broadening parameters of illegal maritime commerce and the ability of authorities to ignore the consequences of allowing safe havens for those bartering and selling human beings.

First Challenge: Emperor Hongwu's Actions to Repress Human Trafficking and Piracy along the Northern Littoral

The last years of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) saw increasing levels of piracy along the northern littoral. Both Chinese and Korean coastal officials observed seafaring marauders and plunderers, known as *waegu* (Korean) or *wakō* (Japanese), wreaking havoc along the coasts of northeast Asia. They came from the Japanese archipelago, mainly Kyushu and Tsushima.¹⁶ While their principal goal was to steal grain, they also kidnapped people, mainly coastal residents of Korea and China, who they sold into slavery in Japan.¹⁷ Thus the actions of these brigands went beyond simply raiding and became an economic operation—a form of piracy. What distinguished piracy from other maritime predations were its commercial and political dimensions: pirates sold their plunder, often in collusion with land-based merchants, and undermined the authority and political legitimacy of nation-states.¹⁸

Early in his reign, emperor Hongwu formulated a solution to end the *wakō* menace along the Chinese coast, and issued in 1371 the *haijin* (maritime prohibition), which forbade private sea trade, and Chinese from going to sea for

¹⁵For information on the development of slave trading within Asia, and to other locations, see Richard B. Allen, “Introduction: Slavery, Slave Trading, and Bonded Labor Studies in Asia,” in R. B. Allen, ed., *Slavery and Bonded Labor in Asia, 1250–1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 1–29. See also Jeff Fynn-Paul, “Slavery in Asia and Global Slavery,” in the same volume, 343–59, which discusses the slavery zone model in relation to the history of Asian experiences with trafficking, coerced labor, and dependency.

¹⁶The *wakō* referred to here are not the same active pirates that caused widespread disorder along the Chinese littoral in the sixteenth century.

¹⁷Akamine Mamoru, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia*, Lina Terrell, trans., Robert Huey, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 20; Thomas Nelson, “Slavery in Medieval Japan,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 59, 4 (2004): 463–92; Peter Shapinsky, “Japanese Pirates and the East Asian World, 1200–1600,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (2019), 7–8 <DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/97801902777.27.013.63>; Gregory Smits, *Maritime Ryukyu 1050–1650* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 39–41. See also Harriet Zurndorfer, Review of *Maritime Ryukyu 1050–1650*, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 80, 2 (2020): 561–67.

¹⁸Sebastian Prange, “Asian Piracy,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (2017), 1–2, <DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/97801902777.27.013.32>. See also Damien Peladan, “Le temps de la grande piraterie japonaise: Transformation des circulations maritimes en mer de Chine orientale, 1350–1419” (PhD diss., Université de Paris, 2021), and especially pages 688–93, which discuss the sale of captured slaves in Japan. For an insightful analysis of global patterns of maritime violence in history, and European versus non-European representations of piracy, refer to Lauren Benton, “Pirate Passages in Global History: Afterword,” in Stefan Eklöf Amirell, Bruce Buchan, and Hans Hägerdal, eds., *Piracy in World History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 267–83.

any reason.¹⁹ This policy thereby confined all foreign exchange to formal state-to-state relations and tribute trade missions.²⁰ Tribute trade referred to a foreign court sending envoys and exotic products to the Chinese emperor, who in return gave the envoys gifts and permission to trade with China at designated ports. At these ports a customs tax was collected on goods by the *shibosi* (Office of Maritime Affairs) under the supervision of eunuchs serving the imperial household. The three ports assigned to receive tribute trade were Guangzhou for Southeast Asian countries, Quanzhou in Fujian province for the Ryukyu kingdom, and Ningbo in Zhejiang province for Korea and Japan.²¹

Many China historians concede that tribute trade was not a standard, unchanging facet of late imperial international relations, and that it was one of several “foreign policy instruments” the Ming government used to achieve security.²² However, they also recognize that its basic structure, channeling foreign contacts into a hierarchical framework, with the emperor at the apex, supported by periodic ritual gift-exchanges, was an instrument to promote and sustain Chinese economic and cultural hegemony in Asia. In essence, the tribute system permitted three types of trade: (1) diplomatic tributes of exotic goods that foreign countries presented to China, which were reciprocated with imperial gifts; (2) official trade that accompanied diplomatic missions, which allowed Ming officials to purchase (at prices which they determined) goods from foreign merchants; and (3) private trade that allowed these same foreign merchants to sell goods to Chinese merchants via government-assigned brokers who collected customs duties on them.²³

¹⁹*Ming Taizu shilu* [Veritable records of Ming Emperor Taizu (Hongwu)], 70:3b, repr. (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jiao, 1967), vol. 3, 1300. The *Ming shilu* is a collective name of the reign annals of the sixteen successive emperors of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Each *shilu* comprises an account of one emperor’s reign that was compiled after his death based on daily records of his court engagements as well as reports on his private life. Each also contains a chronological archive of the memorials (documents from officials) submitted to the court and orders issued by the emperor. For an insightful analysis of the historiography of the *haijin* policy in Chinese, Japanese, and English-language scholarship, see Yiu Siu, “Maritime Exclusion Policy in Ming and Chosŏn Korea, 1368–1450: Dynastic Authority, National Security, and Trade” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2022), 17–25.

²⁰Li Kangying, *The Ming Maritime Trade Policy in Transition, 1368 to 1567* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010). A running scholarly debate has emerged about how to treat the concept of the “tribute trade system,” and a corresponding idea, the “Chinese world order,” first enunciated by the Harvard China historian John K. Fairbank. See John Wills, Jr., “How Many Asymmetries? Continuities, Transformations, and Puzzles in the Study of Chinese Foreign Relations,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 16 (2009): 23–39; Wang Yuan-kang, “Managing Regional Hegemony in Historical Asia: The Case of Early Ming China,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5 (2012): 129–53. Refer also to the articles in the special theme issue “The Tributary System,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 77, 1 (2017); and Peter Perdue’s study, “The Tenacious Tributary System,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, 96 (2015): 1002–14, which also questions the usefulness of the tributary system concept. See also Harriet Zurndorfer, “Oceans of History, Seas of Change: Recent Revisionist Writing in Western Languages about China and East Asian Maritime History during the Period 1500–1630,” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 13, 1 (2016): 61–94.

²¹After Quanzhou’s harbor silted in 1472, Fuzhou replaced it as the site of Ryukyu tribute missions.

²²Felix Kuhn, “Much More than Tribute: The Foreign Policy Instruments of the Ming Empire,” *Journal of Chinese History* 5 (2021): 59–82.

²³Richard von Glahn, “The Maritime Trading World of East Asia from the Thirteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries,” in Tamara Bentley, ed., *Picturing Commerce in and from the East Asian Maritime Circuits, 1550–1800* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2019), 55–82, and see p. 61.

The immediate circumstances of the *wakō* situation undoubtedly influenced emperor Hongwu to mandate the *haijin*, but there were other factors, such as his fear of the remnant supporters of his opponents—the two coastal warlords Zhang Shicheng (1321–1367) and Fang Guozhen (1319–1374)—and his own inland background in the western Huai region.²⁴ The *haijin* decree also reflected the emperor's disdain for trade and commerce and, not least, his distrust of foreigners. In general, his economic program was intended to recreate the autarkic village economy envisioned by early Confucian thinkers and thereby curtail, and potentially even eliminate, the market economy. In another directive Hongwu banned the use of gold and silver as money and introduced a system of inconvertible paper currency, and one can presume that another motivation for the *haijin* was to prevent the flight of precious metals and coins to foreign countries at a time when the Ming government was trying to establish a fiduciary monetary system.²⁵ The paper money policy failed, and by the close of the fifteenth century, with state-sponsored silver mining dwindling to insignificant levels, but rising levels of commerce that increased the demand for silver as currency, the economy was operating under severe monetary constraints.²⁶

Emperor Hongwu's strategy to contain *wakō* attacks targeted not only the littoral but also the East Asian sea-lane network connecting Japan, Korea, and southern China. Aware that Japanese officials lacked the means to suppress piracy and human trafficking, Hongwu in 1372 authorized the Ryukyu kingdom (a chain of islands stretching from Taiwan to southern Kyushu) to become a tributary state of China.²⁷ His goal here was twofold: first, to channel into the lawful framework of tribute trade the smuggling activities of the Kyushu-based *wakō* who used Naha, the harbor of what is now Okinawa, as a base of operations; and second, to mitigate the effects of the *haijin* policy on his own military and household needs. Japan was a rich source of sulfur for making gunpowder and horses—both crucial to China's military security. Hongwu reckoned that the *wakō* would find it more practical, or even more profitable, to deliver these items to Naha in exchange for Chinese goods than to plunder the littoral and convey hostages for sale in Japan.²⁸

For a long time the Chinese tribute system worked well for Ryukyu—it sent a relatively high number of missions from 1372 to the 1430s, with only Korea having more embassies.²⁹ The *wakō* raids along the Chinese littoral subsided as did human trafficking, the repatriation of captured Koreans was regularized, and Ryukyu gained permission to send tribute embassies to Korea.³⁰ To achieve these results, the Ming authorities gave financial support to the Ryukyu kingdom to purchase Chinese

²⁴Gang Zhao, "Restructuring the Authority of the Ancestor: Zhu Yuanzhang's Role in the Evolution of Ming Maritime Policy, 1400–1600," in Sarah Schneewind, ed., *Long Live the Emperor! Uses of the Ming Founder across Six Centuries of East Asian History* (Minneapolis: Society for Ming Studies, 2008), 87–106.

²⁵Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune*, 70–73.

²⁶Richard von Glahn, *The Economic History of China: From Antiquity to the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 289.

²⁷Akamine, *Ryukyu Kingdom*, 22–24; Smits, *Maritime Ryukyu*, 60–66.

²⁸Akamine, *Ryukyu Kingdom*, 24–31; Smits, *Maritime Ryukyu*, 64–66, 70–72.

²⁹For reference to the relative peacefulness of the fifteenth century in the East Asian maritime world, see Shapinsky, "Japanese Pirates," 8; and Nakajima Gakushō, "The Structure and Transformation of the Ming Tribute System," in M. Perez Garcia and L. de Sousa, eds., *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 137–61, and on Korea, p. 141.

³⁰Smits, *Maritime Ryukyu*, 49–51.

commodities such as medicinal herbs, minted coins, glazed ceramics, brocades, and silk. Their ships carried these products from Fujian to Southeast Asian ports, including Melaka, Gresik (Java), Kalapa (Sunda), Palembang, Pattani, and Ayutthaya, where the Ryukyu trade mission purchased exotic and precious items to give to China as tribute.³¹ At Quanzhou, the Ryukyu kingdom presented the Office of Maritime Affairs with tribute items from Southeast Asia: fragrant woods, pepper, ambergris, rhino horns, tin, sugar, iron, Indian ivory, and Arabian frankincense, all commodities greatly valued by the Ming Imperial Household. In this way, the Ming government outsourced foreign trade to Ryukyu, allowing that kingdom access to the highly prized riches of Southeast Asia, as well as the rights to convey Japanese goods such as sulfur, horses, and swords from Naha to China. The kingdom also served China as a diplomatic intermediary with Japan.³²

All that said, over the longer term, emperor Hongwu's maritime prohibition, however beneficial to northern coastal residents during his reign, provoked discontent, and eventually large-scale violence. By the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the golden age of Ryukyu "tribute-trade" began to fade. The Ming government found their missions too expensive,³³ and furthermore, as Southeast Asia became more commercialized³⁴ human trafficking again became a problem for China, but this time along the southern littoral.

Second Challenge: Human Trafficking along China's Southern Littoral, Tribute Trade Debates, and the Folangji

Notices of maritime human trafficking during the fifteenth century's second half are sporadic, but by 1480 the problem was significant enough that the court in Beijing had become aware of its existence. According to an entry in the *Ming Shilu* [Ming veritable records; hereafter *MSL*] dated 19 August 1481: "When the envoys from the two countries of Siam and Samudera (Sumatra) were returning home after coming to the court to offer tribute, along the way, 'their' boat-men showed them how to purchase the sons and daughters of impoverished people."³⁵ Both Siam and Samudera in their tribute missions were substantial importers of pepper which was

³¹Akamine, *Ryukyu Kingdom*, 32–34; Hamashita Takeshi, "The *Rekidai hōan* and the Ryukyu Maritime Tributary Trade Network with China and Southeast Asia, the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century," in Wen-Chin Chang and Eric Tagliacozzo, eds., *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 107–29.

³²Akamine, *Ryukyu Kingdom*, 29–31; Okamoto Hiromichi, "Foreign Policy and Maritime Trade in the Early Ming Period: Focusing on the Ryukyu Kingdom," *Acta Asiatica* 95 (2008): 35–55; von Glahn, "Maritime Trading World," 64.

³³See Roderich Ptak, "Ming Maritime Trade to Southeast Asia, 1368–1567: Visions of a System," in Roderich Ptak, ed., *China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang: Oceans and Routes, Regions and Trade (c. 1000–1600)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), I, 157–91.

³⁴Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, vol. 1, *The Lands below the Winds* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

³⁵*Ming shilu*, Xianzong 217.4a, Geoff Wade, trans., *Southeast Asia in the Ming Shi-lu: An Open Access Resource* (Singapore, 2005), <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/cheng-hua/year-17-month-7-day-24> (accessed 22 Jan. 2019). This useful digital database of translated entries from the *MSL* that concern insular and continental Southeast Asia is considered a reliable tool by Roderich Ptak and other China-Southeast Asia specialists. See Ptak's review in *Persée* 70 (2005): 309–12.

greatly desired in China.³⁶ It would seem that as the regular Ryukyu-led tribute missions waned, Southeast Asian polities took the opportunity to increase their commerce in this commodity and engaged in private trade as much as possible during regular embassies. Those brought them into more frequent interaction with *yahang* (Ming government-licensed brokers) who, as the quoted passage implies, could help the emissaries' trafficking business.

The escalating illegal trade from Southeast Asia exacerbated China's growing fiscal instability in the early sixteenth century, during the reign of the Zhengde emperor (1506–1521).³⁷ By then, emperor Hongwu's ideal of self-sufficient rural communities was fading fast as agricultural and commercial production rose and extensive interregional marketing connected China's interior with coastal locations. Nevertheless, despite the wealth these changes generated, the Ming economy was facing setbacks. During this reign era, the central government's income began to decline while its expenses escalated. Emperor Zhengde had inherited his predecessor's revenue problems and the imbalance between the imperial treasury's income and disbursements grew steadily.³⁸ Such fiscal difficulties, however pressing at the time, lead one to ask if they indicated some kind of imminent crisis. In response, one should consider the longevity of the Ming regime, which endured for another 123 years after the Zhengde reign. Given this, we clearly need to understand how the autocracy of the emperor institution interacted with the authority of provincial and local leaders to overcome economic challenges.

Outside the capital, regional finances were also doing poorly, since local administrators needed to find ways to meet provincial and county operating prerequisites.³⁹ Provincial officials at Guangzhou, alert to the increase in smuggling along the littoral, especially in neighboring Fujian province, wanted to regularize more private trade and increase custom duties to raise more funds for military needs. With the support of the *xunfu* (grand coordinator)—a civil official who made decisions in provincial administrative matters, including of taxation, military defense, and disaster management—Guangzhou authorities gained permission in 1509 to lift some restrictions on private trade and charge 20 percent duties on incoming cargo.⁴⁰

By 1514, however, according to *MSL* documentation, some Guangzhou officials questioned the efficacy of the cargoes from Southeast Asia. One memorial dated 27 June from that year notes: "The various trading goods found in Ling-nan originate from the foreigners of Melaka, Siam, and Java. These products are nothing but

³⁶Ts'ao Yung-ho, "Pepper Trade in East Asia," *T'oung Pao* 68, 4–5 (1982): 221–47.

³⁷James Geiss, "The Cheng-te [Zhengde] Reign, 1506–1521," in Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 7, The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 403–39. For a brief biography of emperor Zhengde, see John Dardess, *Ming China 1368–1644: A Concise History of a Resilient Empire* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 45–48. Zhengde, who died heirless, was notorious for his abuse of alcohol and irresponsible free-living style that drew him to Muslim girls and Tibetan monks, and for having hundreds of Chinese women abducted for his Beijing harem.

³⁸Geiss, "Cheng-te Reign," 403–4.

³⁹Thomas Nimick, *Local Administration in Ming China: The Changing Roles of Magistrates, Prefects, and Provincial Officials* (Minneapolis: Society for Ming Studies, 2008), 165–70.

⁴⁰*MSL*, Wuzong 48.1b–2a, Geoff Wade, trans., *Southeast Asia*, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/zhengde/year-4-month-3-day-3> (accessed 22 Jan. 2019); Ray Huang, "The Ming Fiscal Administration," in Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 8, The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 106–71.

pepper, sappan-wood, elephant tusks, tortoiseshell, and such things. They are not things people need every day like cloth, silks, vegetables, and grain.”⁴¹ At this point, the relaxation of tribute trade regulations had attracted ever more commerce to China’s southern littoral—not only were licensed Chinese merchants doing business with foreigners at Guangzhou, but non-certified traders were “wheeling and dealing” at off-shore sites where visiting ships paid no revenues.⁴² This situation exasperated those local officials who had opposed moderating trade rules. To support their case, they expressed to the court their outrage that foreigners were in cahoots with “evil persons of Guangdong/Guangxi ... [and] beguiled people into absconding, [and] kidnapped or purchased boys and girls....”⁴³ This passage from the *MSL* indicates that a number of Guangdong authorities linked inland human traffickers with overseas commerce, and implies these officials had some knowledge of local people involved in the practice.

In the summer of 1517, amid this commercial hustle and bustle and rising discontent among Guangzhou officials accusing locals and strangers of trafficking Chinese persons, the first Portuguese expedition arrived in the Pearl River Estuary. It came from Melaka, a port-polity and a Ming tribute state, which these Europeans had conquered in 1511. Since then, Melaka had become Portugal’s commercial linchpin between the Indian Ocean and the Chinese seas. The Portuguese legation to China was led by Captain Fernão Peres de Andrade (d. 1552), commanding a fleet of four carracks armed with heavy artillery and three junks sailed by hired or forced laborers from Arabia, India, and Melaka. Its purpose was to prepare a tribute embassy to the Beijing court, headed by the apothecary-turned-ambassador Tomé Pires (1465–1524).⁴⁴ For their part, the Chinese authorities at Guangzhou, viewing the motley crew, considered them not as representatives of any particular kingdom-state but as just another mixed merchant group from Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ The Chinese name for the Portuguese was Folangji (Frankish breech-loader), a name derived from a variant of the term “Frank,” from Persian Farangi or Arabic Firanji, also known in South and Southeast Asia as Ferenghi (Frankish intruders).⁴⁶ Such misconceptions about

⁴¹*MSL*, Wuzong 113.2a, Geoff Wade, trans., *Southeast Asia*, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/zheng-de/year-9-month-6-day-6> (accessed 17 Dec. 2020).

⁴²Chao Zhongchen, *Mingdai haiyin yu haiwai maoyi* [The Ming maritime prohibition and overseas trade] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2005), 59.

⁴³*MSL*, Wuzong 149.9a–b, Geoff Wade, trans. *Southeast Asia*, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/zheng-de/year-12-month-5-day-27> (accessed 22 Jan. 2019).

⁴⁴Tomé Pires during his travels from Lisbon to Melaka compiled an extensive study of littoral Asia based on his observations of geography and oceanic seafaring, the *Suma Oriental que trata do Mar Roxo até aos Chins* [Summa of the east, from the Red Sea to the Chinese]. It was the first European description of Asia. His remarks on China, including his discussion of Melaka’s chief trade item to China being pepper and how the tribute and customs systems at Guangzhou functioned, indicate some understanding of Chinese foreign relations. The *Suma Oriental* was never printed and remained unknown until its discovery in Paris at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1937. In 1944 Armando Cortesão published an English translation for the Hakluyt Society, and it has since been cited in thousands of books and articles. Armando Cortesão, trans. and ed., *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1944), 2 vols.

⁴⁵James Fujitani, “The Ming Rejection of the Portuguese Embassy of 1517: A Reassessment,” *Journal of World History* 27, 1 (2016): 87–102.

⁴⁶Zhang Qiong, *Making the New World Their Own: Chinese Encounters with Jesuit Science in the Age of Discovery* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 286–88.

Portugal's geographical origins were long-lasting: the *Mingshi*, the Ming dynastic history published in 1739, records that the land of the Folangji is near Melaka.⁴⁷

The Chinese officials showed good will toward Peres de Andrade and eventually allowed the embassy and even coached Pires in protocol requirements.⁴⁸ Yet they remained suspicious of the Folangji, especially after they asked for permission to build a fort on the island of Tunmen, presumably for commercial purposes. Still, they granted their request. The diplomatic mission did not go well. For one thing, ambassadors from Melaka were also in the capital, asking for assistance to drive the Folangji out of their kingdom.⁴⁹ Peres de Andrade departed China in 1518, but his brother, Simão de Andrade, arrived the next year. He behaved aggressively—expanding the small Tunmen fort to accommodate heavy cannon, refusing to pay taxes on trading goods, and showing contempt for Chinese officialdom—and this further polarized the debate about free trade.⁵⁰

The situation became intolerable for the Chinese authorities in 1520 when Simão de Andrade purchased children from “honorable families” and shipped them to Goa, India, a fact corroborated in Portuguese accounts.⁵¹ While the buying and selling of persons were hardly unknown in China, the idea that a foreigner defied Ming law was infuriating and led to false charges against the Portuguese that endured long after this incident.⁵² Simão de Andrade left China in early 1520 and was followed one year later by a fleet of Portuguese ships sailing, without permission, up the Pearl River to trade in Guangzhou. Chinese officials told them to leave, but they refused, which led to a series of armed confrontations ending in Portuguese defeat in 1522.⁵³ Banned from Chinese waters yet still based in Melaka, the Portuguese decided their best strategy was to continue illicit trading with the complicity of local officials and gentry at various localities along the coasts of Fujian and Zhejiang. They became part of a tremendous upsurge in piracy that terrorized the Chinese littoral for the next forty-five years.

⁴⁷Fujitani, “Ming Rejection,” 93.

⁴⁸Zhang, *Making the New World*, 277–78.

⁴⁹Cheah Boon Kheng, “Ming China’s Support for Sultan Mahmud of Melaka and Its Hostility towards the Portuguese after the Fall of Melaka in 1511,” *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 85, 2 (2012): 55–77.

⁵⁰Zhang, *Making the New World*, 279. On the debates between the court and those Guangzhou-based officials who favored relaxing trade restrictions, see Timothy Brook, “Trade and Conflict in the South China Sea: China and Portugal, 1514–1523,” in Lucia Coppolaro and Francine McKenzie, eds., *A Global History of Trade and Conflict since 1500* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 20–37.

⁵¹As for the Portuguese source of this information concerning the purchase of children, both John Wills Jr, “Maritime Europe and the Ming,” in John E. Wills Jr., ed., *China and Maritime Europe, 1500–1800: Trade, Settlement, Diplomacy, and Missions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24–77; and Fujitani, “Ming Rejection,” 87 cite João de Barros, *Da Asia* (Lisbon: Na Regia Officina Typografica, 1777–1778), III *decada*, VI *livro*, II *capitulo*, esp. pp. 16–17.

⁵²Aside from violating Article 298 of the *Ming Code* on kidnapping, the Portuguese contravened Article 246, “Crossing Frontiers without Authorization or Going to Sea in Violation of the Prohibitions” (*Sichu wajing ji weijin xiahai*), which carried the death sentence by hanging. See Jiang, *Ming Code*, 140–41. Article 246 was classified under Laws of Military Affairs. As Tonio Andrade writes about the Portuguese mission to China, accusations of these Europeans cooking and eating children became rife, and they remained a mainstay in post-Ming writing, including the *Mingshi* [Ming dynastic history] and other eighteenth-century publications. See Andrade’s *The Gunpowder Age: China, Military Innovation, and the Rise of the West in World History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 125–26, and 344–45 n11.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 124–28.

Third Challenge: *Wokou* Piracy, Japanese Silver, Human Trafficking, and the Ming Revenue Deficit

The origins of the wave of piracy that struck the Chinese littoral starting in the 1520s can be traced to several events, including not only the expulsion of the Portuguese in 1522 but also the 1523 “Ningbo incident,” when rival Japanese trade missions vied to present tribute. This resulted in widespread pillaging of the city, a naval battle in which Japanese defeated the Chinese, and a ban of all Japanese from China.⁵⁴ But instead of leaving, the intruders established an international smuggling emporium at Shuangyu island near Ningbo,⁵⁵ which facilitated clandestine commerce along the littoral.⁵⁶ It was at this point during the late 1520s that groups of maritime marauders known as *wokou* (or *wakō*), some originating in southwest Japan and Korea but most from China, banded together. Supported by Portuguese seafarers with sophisticated weaponry, they spawned chaos along China’s coast, pillaged inland, and made a mockery of the official maritime prohibition.⁵⁷

The Ming court was now under the suzerainty of the Jiajing emperor (r. 1522–1566), who came to the throne at age thirteen, had little grasp of maritime issues, and who fell easily under the sway of the court’s anti-trade faction. Its response was simply to call for stricter enforcement of the maritime prohibition. The Jiajing emperor, like his predecessor the Zhengde emperor, gained a reputation for misrule, but unlike the earlier ruler his problem was not wild behavior but self-indulgence and cruelty toward others. He did, however, see the value of a civil bureaucracy having influence over eunuchs and the military, and four powerful grand secretaries, in principle, successively aided him in his rule, which possessed “a modicum of stability and order.”⁵⁸ It can be argued, as does one scholar, that during his long reign, the Jiajing emperor entertained an “incremental approach” toward relaxing trade

⁵⁴Jurgis Elisonas, “The Inseparable Trinity: Japan’s Relations with China and Korea,” in John Hall and James McClain, eds., *The Cambridge History of Japan, vol. 4, Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235–300.

⁵⁵For more information about Shuangyu, there is now a multilingual compendium of documents focused on the entrepôt in the mid-sixteenth century. See Jin Guoping and Bei Wuquan, eds., *Shuangyugang shiliao xuanbian* [Selected historical materials on the Port of Shuangyu], 4 vols. (Beijing: Haiyang chubanshe 2018).

⁵⁶James K. Chin, “Merchants, Smugglers, and Pirates: Multinational Clandestine Trade on the South China Coast, 1520–50,” in Robert J. Antony, ed., *Elusive Pirates, Pervasive Smugglers: Violence and Clandestine Trade in the Greater China Seas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 27–41. An important study that analyses Chinese documentation on Sino-Luso illicit commerce in the early sixteenth century is Ng Chin-keong, “Trade, the Sea Prohibition, and the ‘Folangji,’ 1513–50,” in Ng Chin-keong, ed., *Boundaries and Beyond: China’s Maritime Southeast in Late Imperial Times* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2017), 101–46.

⁵⁷Principal sources for the study of *wokou* piracy include: So Kwan-wai, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the 16th Century* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1975); Robert Antony, *Like Froth Floating on the Sea: The World of Pirates and Seafarers in Late Imperial South China* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, 2003); and Fan Zhongyi and Tong Xigang, *Mingdai wokou shilue* [Brief history of the *wokou* during the Ming dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua chubanshe, 2004). See too Harriet Zurndorfer, “Silver, Piracy, Conspicuous Consumption, and the Transformation of Ming China in the 16th Century,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (2021), DOI: <10.1093/acrefore/97801902777.27.013.620>.

⁵⁸Dardess, *Ming China*, 51; see also John Dardess, *Four Seasons: A Ming Emperor and His Grand Secretaries in Sixteenth-Century China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). A detailed portrayal of the Jiajing era is James Geiss, “The Chia-ching [Jiajing] Reign, 1522–1566,” in Frederick Mote and Denis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China, vol. 7, The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 440–510.

restrictions. According to this view, the easing of strictures may have helped curb the entanglement of prominent families and officials—so-called “pirates in caps and gowns” (*yiguan zhi dao*)—in the web of smuggling, trafficking, and illegal protection rackets along the coasts of Guangdong, Fujian, and Zhejiang provinces.⁵⁹

The discovery of silver in Japan in the 1530s added new dimensions to this scenario.⁶⁰ At Shuangyu, the *wokou* traded silver and weapons from Japan for Chinese silk yarn and fabrics, porcelain, fans, and pearls. Now, with so much Japanese silver at their disposal, the *wokou* expanded their trading networks across East Asia and Southeast Asia, while making alliances with Kyushu *daimyō* (lords) such as the powerful Satsuma prefecture-based Shimazu family. They offered the *wokou* safe harbors and sites to store goods, build and repair ships, and sojourn between voyages. The *wokou* also engaged in human trafficking. In 1556, the Zhejiang coastal commander Yang Yi sent his envoy Zheng Shungong (flourished in the sixteenth century) to Japan to ask Kyushu authorities to suppress piracy along the Chinese littoral. When Zheng arrived, he found in Satsuma some two to three hundred Chinese working as slaves. Originally from southern Fujian prefectures, they were kept by Japanese families who had bought them from the *wokou* some twenty years before.⁶¹

Not all Chinese persons trafficked to Japan as slaves went involuntarily. The notorious *wokou* “pirate king” Wang Zhi (d. 1560), who from his Japanese hideaway in the Goto islands west of Hirado directed a large fleet of ships across East Asia and Southeast Asia carrying textiles, salt, sulfur, and European-made weaponry, was much admired in the 1540s by both Chinese and Japanese people for his exploits.⁶²

⁵⁹Ivy Marie Lim, “From *Haijin* to *Kaihai*: The Jiajing Court’s Search for a *Modus Operandi* along the Southeastern Coast (1522–1566),” *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies* 2 (2013): 1–26.

⁶⁰Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune*, 114–15.

⁶¹Zheng Shungong, *Riben yijian* [Mirror of Japan] (1565) (photostat; Shanghai: n.p., 1939), *juan* 6:10a–11b. On the politics behind Zheng Shungong’s mission, see Peter Shapinsky, “Envoys and Escorts: Representation and Performance among Koxinga’s Japanese Pirate Ancestors,” in Tonio Andrade and Xing Hang, eds., *Sea Rovers, Silver and Samurai: Maritime East Asia in Global History* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2016), 38–64, esp. 51–57. In chapter 1 of his book *The Portuguese Slave Trade in Early Modern Japan: Merchants, Jesuits and Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Slaves* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), Lucio de Sousa claims that there was a “Chinese phase” to Portuguese human trafficking, but he offers no Chinese documentation to support this assertion. Moreover, he gives no precise sources for each of the Chinese persons he lists (pp. 36–47) as enslaved by Portuguese traders. For a critique of de Sousa’s book, and in particular how he handles evidence, see the review by Richard B. Allen, *Renaissance Quarterly* 74, 2 (2021): 611–12; and Harriet Zurndorfer, “Review of *The Portuguese Slave Trade in Early Modern Japan*,” *Journal of Early Modern History* 24 (2020): 187–89. See also Rômulo da Silva Ehalt, “Suspicion and Repression: Ming China, Tokugawa Japan, and the End of the Japanese-European Slave Trade (1614–1635),” in Kate Ekama, Lisa Hellman, and Matthias van Rossum, eds., *Slavery and Bondage in Asia, 1550–1850: Towards a Global History of Coerced Labor* (Bonn: De Gruyter, 2022), 215–30, which questions some of the assertions of de Sousa made in his book concerning slavery in Japan.

⁶²Zhou Qingyuan, *Xihu erji* [Second collection from the West Lake; 1623] (Shanghai: Shanghai zazhi gongsi, 1936), 641, relates Wang Zhi’s history and that of his ally Xu Hai as born rebels, comparable to the bandit heroes in the well-known novel *Water Margin* (also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh*, or *All Men Are Brothers*). Wang Zhi also receives favorable treatment in the modern study by John Wills, Jr., “Maritime China from Wang Chih to Shih Lang,” in Jonathan Spence and John Wills, Jr., eds., *From Ming to Ch’ing: Conquest, Region, and Continuity in Seventeenth Century China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 201–38.

So much so, "...many people offered him their sons and daughters,"⁶³ implying that parents sold their children into Wang Zhi's overseas commercial network to advance their children's prospects. Such behavior should be considered in light of the tensions China's increasing affluence and growing economy had brought to those unable to reap the fruits of commerce and the marketplace in their native locales. They saw Wang Zhi as someone with agency who had successfully defied the restrictions that had barred them from easily accessing wealth. This kind of sentiment penetrated the popular and entertaining Ming vernacular fiction narratives, which imparted the fluidity of the maritime world of rags-to-riches stories, anti-government military heroes, exotic foreign women, and racial differences. But those stories also made evident to the broad reading populace that piracy and human trafficking were more than just fantasy; they were a manifestation of violent undercurrents in Ming life.⁶⁴

By the late 1540s, there were ever-increasing incidents of violence engendered by heightened levels of marauding and raiding along the Chinese littoral and escalating illicit trade inciting more altercations between wealthy families involved in it. The Ming court responded by appointing the official Zhu Wan (1494–1550) as "Grand Coordinator of Coastal Defense" to organize a massive military campaign to eradicate the *wokou*.⁶⁵ Until then, protection of the littoral had been monitored by another of emperor Hongwu's schemes to reduplicate the earlier hereditary military household organization; that is, the coastal garrison system. But the officers who commanded that system had a propensity to engage in the very piracy and smuggling they were supposed to suppress, so there was probably little support for Zhu Wan's mission.⁶⁶ While he did manage to destroy Shuangyu and kill many of its exponents, his program to drive out the sea brigands aroused so much local opposition from scholar-gentry officials who profited from the illegal commerce that ultimately he lost support for his mission and committed suicide.⁶⁷ Piracy continued and even expanded further with Kyushu-based Chinese sea chieftains such as Wang Zhi directing large-scale operations that attacked China's economic heartland, Jiangnan, including the great cities of Hangzhou, Suzhou, and Nanjing.⁶⁸

As maritime defense costs in the 1550s soared, the institutional infrastructure created by emperor Hongwu, in which the land tax amounted to no more than 5–10 percent of yields, could no longer meet the income needs of the Ming state.⁶⁹ The government's inability to gain new revenue from the sixteenth-century thriving

⁶³Fu Weilin, *Mingshu* [Chronicle of the Ming; ca. 1662] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1936), *juan* 162.

⁶⁴See Wang Yuanfei, *Writing Pirates: Vernacular Fiction and Oceans in Late Ming China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), which surveys the many popular narratives that connected fiction to the world of maritime Asia and foreign adventurers. On pages 76–77, Wang reminds readers of earlier encounters with multiethnic communities and the transnational overseas slave trade that brought Kunlun (Black/Africans) to Tang China. Over time, "Kunlun" became a trope associated with the dark-skinned people of Southeast Asia.

⁶⁵On Zhu Wan, see Bodo Wiethoff, "Chu Wan [Zhu Wan]," in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoyang Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 372–75.

⁶⁶Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 83–108.

⁶⁷On the politics of Zhu Wan and his political enemies, see Roland Higgins, "Deserts and Islands: The Politics of Border Control, 1547–49," in Kenneth Swope, ed., *The Ming World* (London: Routledge, 2020), 102–23.

⁶⁸Geiss, "Chia-ching Reign," 496.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 485–89; Von Glahn, *Economic History*, 287.

agricultural economy was aggravated by its commutation of taxes from in-kind to the silver that circulated in the form of irregular ingots varying widely in weight and quality.⁷⁰ As a result, by the mid-Ming it appears that most revenue collected at local and provincial levels was reallocated without being deposited in central government treasuries.⁷¹ In 1552 the Ministry of Revenue reported that the annual disbursement of silver for imperial and border defense expenses was nearly six million ounces of silver but that the annual silver revenue (in commuted terms) was less than half that amount.⁷²

Silver mined in Japan could not enter China legitimately because Japan was not allowed to participate in the tribute trade system and attempts by individual *daimyō* to renew formal contacts were rebuffed. At this point the Guangdong officials stationed along the littoral, along with Portuguese eager to exploit trade with Japan, including human trafficking, made a “deal” that flouted the power and moral authority of the Ming court in Beijing even as it rescued the silver-starved Chinese economy.

Fourth Challenge: Silk-for-Silver, Intra-Asian Human Trafficking, and Macao

The court’s immediate reaction to the fighting and depredations of the 1540s was to strengthen the *haijin* policy in 1550, with revised penal regulations (*wenxing tiaoli*) containing rigorous measures to restrict private trade: the death penalty was prescribed for people who built large junks and sold them to foreigners, and for officials or civilians who shipped prohibited articles, including weapons, coins, and silk products.⁷³ And yet, within four years of this legislation’s enactment, beginning in 1554, Portuguese traders began providing Japan with the Chinese silk, porcelain, and gold they purchased in Guangzhou in exchange for silver bullion and copper. The Portuguese so-called “black ship” (*kurofune*) sailed annually from Macao to Japan (at first to Hirado and later to Nagasaki) and returned with these metals, with the full knowledge of Guangdong officialdom.⁷⁴ From the Japanese point of view, the delivery of high quality Chinese silk by the *kurofune* was of great economic importance, since the sale by particular *daimyō* of silk fabrics and yarn brought them great profits which enabled them to fund their military regimes.⁷⁵

After the Shuangyu debacle Portuguese traders had moved southward. They went first to Zoumaxi, a deepwater inlet near the Guangdong-Fujian border, where in 1549, in a last-ditch effort to rid the southern littoral of these Europeans, Zhu Wan

⁷⁰Christian Lamouroux and Richard von Glahn, “Public Finance,” in Richard Von Glahn and Debin Ma, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of China*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 340–80, and see p. 364.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 367.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 368; Geiss, “Chia-ching Reign,” 487.

⁷³Huai Xiaofeng, *Jiajing zhuanzhi zhengzhi yu fazhi* [Autocracy and legal systems of the Jiajing reign] (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1989), 138.

⁷⁴This voyage between Macao and Japan became known as the “Great Ship from Amacon,” which Charles Boxer made famous in his book with that title, published in 1959. In addition to this one important carrack, under the direction of one authorized person (a Portuguese crown trader) engaging in the silver-silk exchange, there were many private merchants participating in the *Nanban* (Southern barbarian) trade with Japan.

⁷⁵Michael Cooper, “The Mechanics of the Macao-Nagasaki Silk Trade,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 27, 4 (1972): 423–33.

attacked, imprisoned, and in the end routed them.⁷⁶ The Portuguese took refuge on two small islands close to the Pearl River estuary: Shangchuan (also known as St. John's island or Sanchão) and Langbaigang (Lampacau).⁷⁷ From there, beginning in 1550, they conducted clandestine commercial operations between Melaka, southern China, and Kyushu. This was a vulnerable situation, and in late 1552 a Portuguese *fidalgo* merchant, Leonel de Sousa (d. 1571), arrived in the Guangzhou region and began negotiations with Wang Bo (1538 *jinshi*), Guangdong's *haidao fushi* (maritime surveillance officer), to secure permission for the Portuguese to trade at Guangzhou.⁷⁸ The agreement they struck obliged the Portuguese to pay Guangdong customs administrators 20 percent duties on their cargo and hand over 500 silver taels per year to the serving official of the maritime circuit. Given that the Folangji were still banned from China, Wang Bo advised the Portuguese to represent themselves at Guangzhou as envoys of Siam, since that country was a bona-fide tributary state. Such camouflage would prevent interference from the Beijing court.⁷⁹

Wang Bo's pact with de Sousa was likely favored by other Guangdong officials who, after witnessing neighboring Fujian province ignoring the *haijin* restrictions and harboring the profitable foreign trade at Yuegang (Zhangzhou prefecture), realized the advantages of compromising with the Portuguese.⁸⁰ Not only had cargos of untold exotic riches from Southeast Asia for decades entered the inlets and havens of Fujian,⁸¹ but now a steady stream of smuggled silver specie was flowing into its coastal enclaves—opportunities denied Guangdong.⁸² With this arrangement in place, the next few years saw the Portuguese moving their principal trade

⁷⁶MSL, Shizong 363.5b–6b, Geoff Wade, trans. *Southeast Asia*, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/jia-jing/year-29-month-7-day-21> (accessed 22 Jan. 2019), gives much detail about Zhu Wan's attack at Zoumaxi and the repercussions taken thereafter, which led to his suicide.

⁷⁷Wills, "Maritime Europe," 37. From these two islands, and their base in Melaka, Portuguese traders were also sailing to Japan which they first visited in 1543. According to a report the Portuguese sea captain Jorge Álvares authored on his stay in Kyushu three years later, in which he outlines the material and social circumstances there, servitude and slavery were common in Japan. His observations may have laid the basis for Portuguese participation in Japanese slave trading and human trafficking enterprises several years later. See Clive Willis, "Captain Jorge Álvares and Father Luís Frois S.J.: Two Early Portuguese Descriptions of Japan and the Japanese," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, series 3, 22, 2 (2012): 391–438; Willis' report is on pages 393–401.

⁷⁸See Earl Pritchard and L. Carrington Goodrich, "Lionel de Sousa," in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1206–08; Wills, "Maritime Europe," 36–37. A *fidalgo* was by birth a Portuguese nobleman who received a letter of appointment by the king to command Portuguese fleets in trade routes to Asia and oversee settlements there. There were also private merchants who sailed under the Portuguese flag to Asia for commerce. See Renier Hesselink, "The Capitães Mores of the Japan Voyage: A Group Portrait," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 9, 1 (2012): 1–41; A. R. Disney, *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire from Beginnings to 1807*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 173–75.

⁷⁹Ng Chin-keong, "Trade," 145.

⁸⁰Li Qingxin, *Mingdai haiwai maoyi zhidu* [The overseas trade system of the Ming dynasty] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2007).

⁸¹Geoff Wade, "Engaging the South: Ming China and Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 51 (2008): 578–638, casts doubt on whether the *haijin* had ever had any effectiveness on the Hokkien (southern Fujianese) maritime traders who were well-connected with the Chinese diaspora community operating in Southeast Asia.

⁸²Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune*, 117.

operations from Lampacau to Macao, which became their permanent settlement location in 1557. This “gentleman’s agreement” was never processed into an official document, but its terms were outlined in a letter Leonel de Sousa wrote in 1556 to Prince Luis, brother of King John III, posted from Cochin (India), in which he described the difficult negotiations with Wang Bo and confirmed the regular payment of 20 percent duty on all trade items.⁸³

Unfortunately, contemporaneous Chinese local sources are sketchy about the origins of the Portuguese presence on Macao: several local gazetteers mention Wang Bo allowing Portuguese traders caught in a storm to land and dry their goods at Macao, but nothing about the silk-for-silver exchange or their carrying human cargo.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, as early as 1555 Catholic Church authorities complained that Portuguese merchants in Japan had purchased women there for sexual purposes and shipped them via Macao to Lisbon, where they lived with them in sin.⁸⁵ The closest definite documentation of Portuguese-Japanese commerce in Chinese is that recorded by Zheng Shungong in his *Riben yijian*, which noted, “Japanese barbarians came to trade in Guangdong waters in 1555 at the invitation of the Folangji, that they continued to come year after year, that the Folangji had the Japanese dress themselves as Folangji barbarians, and that they traded in Mai-mai street in Guangzhou.”⁸⁶

Zheng’s statement suggests that aside from the “official” *kurofune* expedition to Japan, led by a Portuguese “captain major” (*capitão maior*), private merchants, including Japanese as well as Portuguese skippers, also participated in the silk-for-silver commerce. Further, as the complaints from the Church authorities indicate, the Portuguese traders were also engaging in human trafficking. The Portuguese involvement in slave commerce in Japan was recorded in sixteenth-century Japanese chronicles, and first cited by the Japanese scholar Okamoto Yoshitomo (1900–1972), who published the earliest historical study about slavery in his country.⁸⁷ Okamoto spared no details from his reading of contemporaneous Japanese local sources which recorded “how the Iberians gain influence over the leaders of the Goto islands, Hirado, and Nagasaki, and lure them over to their vile faith. Moreover, they buy several hundred men and women and take them aboard their black ships: They place chains on their hands and feet and throw them into the holds of their ships. Their torments are worse than those in hell.... We hear that the local Japanese have learned their ways by imitating them and sell them their own children, parents, wives, and daughters.”⁸⁸

⁸³ A copy of the letter in Portuguese is in J. M. Braga, *The Western Pioneers and Their Discovery of Macao* (Macao: Imprensa Nacional, 1949), 202–8; and in English, in W. Robert Usellis, *The Origin of Macao* (Macao: Museu Marítimo de Macau, 1995), 149–57.

⁸⁴ Zhang, *Making the New World*, 283.

⁸⁵ Nelson, “Slavery,” 463.

⁸⁶ Zheng Shungong, *Riben yijian*, juan 6:4b.

⁸⁷ Okamoto is best known for his studies of Nanban art, but he was also an expert on Japan’s encounter with the Jesuits and Christianity. He was a good friend of Charles Boxer, who he first met in the early 1930s in Tokyo where the Englishman was stationed as a British intelligence officer learning Japanese. Boxer dedicated his own book, *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), to Okamoto. On Boxer and Okamoto, see Dauril Alden, *Charles Boxer: An Uncommon Life* (Lisbon: Fundação Oriente, 2001), 62, 66.

⁸⁸ This translation of Okamoto’s description is in Nelson, “Slavery,” 465. Okamoto’s original study was first published in the Japanese journal *Shakai keizai shigaku* [Social and economic historical studies] in 1934, and

Evidence of the circumstances within which human trafficking between Kyushu and Macao occurred was recorded by the Jesuit missionary Luís Fróis (1532–1597) in his *História de Japam*. Fróis recalled one incident when a Portuguese ship on route from Japan to Macao in 1560, carrying the Jesuit Balthasar Gago, encountered a storm, prompting the priest to prepare for the possibility of shipwreck and death. As he began to hear confessions among the crew, he realized there were also many women aboard who had been locked into a separate compartment. He later determined they were of Chinese origin, captured by the *wokou* and sold as slaves in Japan.⁸⁹ Fróis also chronicled that two years later another Jesuit, the medical expert Luis Almeida (1525–1583), reported an incident of numerous women held captive on another Portuguese ship departing Japan for Macao.⁹⁰ In both instances it seems local merchants had shifted the Chinese women from the Japanese port of Bungo Funai (located on Kyushu's northeast side, near silver depositories) to Portuguese agents who delivered them to Macao. The isthmus was fast becoming a crucial node in the intra-Asian human trafficking network that brought Chinese captured by *wokou* forces to Japanese markets and eventually to Hirado, from where they were shipped westward toward Macao, and eventually to Melaka, Goa, and finally Lisbon.⁹¹

Macao, until the Portuguese came to settle there, was largely an uninhabited, narrow peninsula where only a few fishermen were based.⁹² The Portuguese lived on the southern half of the isthmus, which was relatively empty terrain and distant from urban Guangzhou, but gave direct access to international shipping routes. There were two dimensions to their residence at Macao. First, from their earliest days there, the Portuguese were not confined in a specific space, like the *fanfang* (foreign quarters) that during earlier eras had customarily restricted the movements of overseas traders.⁹³ Thus, in contrast to those previous visitors, the Portuguese on Macao remained “autonomous,” subject only to their authorities in Goa and Lisbon, and free to live wherever they wanted on Macao and administer themselves. However, the local Chinese authorities who dealt with the Portuguese at Macao were cognizant of their role in registering and taxing ships and incoming cargo. In other words, while the first Macao-based Portuguese may have escaped routine Sino-foreign sojourning

then republished in various collections of Okamoto's essays, including *Jūroku seiki nichijō kōtsūshi no kenkyū* [Studies of Japan's interactions in the sixteenth century] (Tokyo: Rokkō Shobō, 1936; and later revised editions in 1942, 1969, 1974, and 1980). Okamoto also investigated attitudes of Jesuit missionaries in Japan toward Portuguese slave trading practices there and elsewhere. See also Rômulo da Silva Ehalt, “Jesuits and the Problem of Slavery in Early Modern Japan” (PhD diss., Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2017).

⁸⁹Ibid., 225–26, citing Luís Fróis and José Wicki, eds., *História de Japam* (Lisbon: Presidência do Conselho de Ministros, Secretaria de Estado da Cultura, Direção-Geral do Património Cultural, Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, 1976–1984), pt. 1, 184–86, 215.

⁹⁰Elisonas, “Inseparable Trinity,” 260–61.

⁹¹Richard B. Allen estimates that between 1500 and 1599 the Portuguese trafficked at least 12,500 persons, and perhaps as many as 25,000, in the Indian Ocean space. See his “Satisfying the ‘Want for Labouring People’: European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850,” *Journal of World History* 21, 1 (2010): 45–73.

⁹²Tang Kaijian, *Aomen kaibu chuqi shi yanjiu* [Study of the early history of Macao] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999), 259.

⁹³Roderich Ptak, “China's Medieval *Fanfang*—A Model for Macau under the Ming?” in R. Ptak, ed., *China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang: Oceans and Routes, Regions and Trade (c. 1000–1600)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), III, 47–71.

regulations, they remained bound to the local authorities' privity of the purse and had to make both routine and extra payments to them.

Administrators outside the Guangzhou government network did not realize what was happening at Macao until the 1560s. For example, the well-respected official Pang Shangpeng (1524–1581), serving as a censor for Zhejiang province and preoccupied with coastal defense, warned in a 1564 memorial to the throne that regardless of how profitable the collection of customs duties at Macao might be, that these foreigners were residing in China was and would remain worrisome.⁹⁴ The writings of literati observers also express concern over how many local people were selling their children to the Portuguese. Ye Quan (1522–1578) visited Macao in 1565 and noted in his “You Lingnan ji” [Records of trips in the south] that one could find five to six children “kept in foreign households,” as many as “ten slave girls in a house,” and “tens of thousands of children serving as concubines and servants.”⁹⁵ Thus, it seems that by the early 1560s in Guangdong and environs, the laws of the Ming Code with regard to trafficking children and adults had become “an empty piece of paper.”⁹⁶ Profit-making, whether through the silk-for-silver trade or the sale of human beings, counted for more than did enforcing Ming law.

In addition to geography and political organization, another important factor in the model of slaving zones is “customs” (or “level of civilization”), whereby one group depreciates the habits of another and thereby validates its own superiority.⁹⁷ Many sixteenth-century Chinese writings about the Portuguese portray them as guilty of cannibalism, which we can understand as representational retaliation for the Folangji intrusion into China. One specific Chinese accusation has been associated with Simão de Andrade’s trafficking of children in 1520, some of whom, it was said, he “roasted and ate,” and more generally with the first Portuguese traders at Guangzhou acquiring children as slaves and servants.⁹⁸ Yet the allegation of cannibalism surfaced much later than that, long after the earliest Sino-Luso encounters. As the modern scholar Zhang Qiong observes, cannibalism is not mentioned in accounts of the Folangji in the earlier period, including those in the *MSL*, or in the observations of Gu Yingxiang (1483–1565), the Chinese official charged with preparing the Portuguese tribute mission to Beijing.⁹⁹

Zhang Qiong traces the earliest references to Folangji cannibalism to writings published in Guangdong province during the 1540s. The origin of these texts, she

⁹⁴Kwan-wai So, “Pang Shangpeng,” in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 1113–16. A copy of Pang’s memorial “Fuchu Haojing’ao yi shu” [Memorial regarding how to deal with the barbarians of Macao] is in *Ming Qing shiqi Aomen wenti dang’an wenxian huibian* [Collection of archival documents related to Macao during the Ming and Qing dynasties] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1999), vol. 5, 280–81.

⁹⁵Cited in Zhang, *Making the New World*, 289. Ye Quan also mentioned the presence of Black slaves in Macao, but according to Zhang, his attitude toward them was basically apathetic, in contrast to the Chinese retainers he encountered. For more information about the hereditability of Chinese female slavery at Macao and Jesuit legal doctrine, see Stuart McManus, “*Partus Sequitur Ventrem* in Theory and Practice: Slavery and Reproduction in Early Modern Portuguese Asia,” *Gender & History* 32, 3 (2020): 542–61.

⁹⁶Ptak, “China’s Medieval *Fanfang*,” 61.

⁹⁷Fynn-Paul, “Slaving Zones,” 5.

⁹⁸Andrade, *Gunpowder Age*, 125–26; Fujitani, “Ming Rejection,” 99–100.

⁹⁹Zhang, *Making the New World*, 282. On Gu Yingxiang, see Goodrich, “Ku Ying-hsiang,” in L. Carrington Goodrich and Chaoying Fang, eds., *Dictionary of Ming Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 749–50.

demonstrates, relates to myths about Melaka, where Danren guo [the country of cannibals] was supposed to be.¹⁰⁰ In his book *Yueshan congtan* [Conversations on the Moon Mountain], Li Wenfeng (*jinshi* 1532), an official who served three years (1540–1542) at Guangzhou, related widely-circulating accounts that the Melaka-based Folangji followed the practices of Danren guo and ate children.¹⁰¹ This idea was given further attention in a number of publications, including the 1546 edition of the local gazetteer of Xin'an county (in the present-day Hong Kong-Shenzhen area). It perpetuated what we might call “myth-histories,” based on a Malay text that described the original 1511 “Ferenggi” [Ferenghi] attack on Melaka and their eating children there.¹⁰²

The best-known of these myth-histories is Yan Congjian's (15?–75; 1555 *jinshi*) *Shuyu zhouzi lu* [Record of the dispatches concerning various regions], completed in 1574. Yan wrote about the Folangji: “These people are fond of devouring small children ... their method is first to boil large vats of water, and then the children are hung up in iron cages over the vats and steamed so that they sweat. When their sweat is exhausted, they are taken down and their skin is scraped off using iron brushes. The children are still alive. They are killed and split open so that intestines can be removed. Then they are steamed and eaten.”¹⁰³ This account was printed in 1583 and quickly became very popular,¹⁰⁴ but by then the Portuguese had been settled on Macao for decades.

Thus one may suppose that Yan's purpose, in the face of the Ming court's history of indifference toward the Folangji presence on Macao and their illicit practices there, was to discredit the evils of the trade and free market that facilitated human trafficking.¹⁰⁵ In this way, the Chinese-generated myth of Portuguese cannibalism is a kind of reverse hegemony of the civilization concept in a slaving zone. Yan Congjian and these other writers were striking back at the Folangji by telling a wide audience about their brutalizing, “uncivilized” behavior.

Connecting Disconnected Histories: Writing about Human Trafficking and Ming China

By the early 1560s, some eight to nine hundred Portuguese were living at Macao with their Chinese servants and Black slaves (*heinü*). The isthmus was also attracting myriads of overseas transitory visitors from Goa, Melaka, Japan, and later Manila, all of whom made the location seem like a sixteenth-century version of a “multi-culti”

¹⁰⁰Zhang, *Making the New World*, 273.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 281.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 268–82, unravels the “myth-histories” that perpetuated Chinese claims of Portuguese cannibalism.

¹⁰³Yan Congjian, *Shuyu zhouzi lu*, Yu Sili, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 324.

¹⁰⁴Zhang, *Making the New World*, 282–83 n38 lists some of the most important Chinese writings that demonstrate “the widespread circulation and staying power” of Folangji cannibalism. These works include Zhang Xie, *Dongxi yang kao* [Notes on the eastern and western maritime regions], 1617; and Gu Yanwu, *Tianxia junguo libing shu* [Strengths and weaknesses of the various regions of the realm], 1662.

¹⁰⁵In her analysis of *Shuyu zhouzi lu*, Wang Yuanfei speculates that Yan Congjian's vision of the Ming world was deeply rooted in an orthodox Confucian stance that had no room for smugglers, invading foreigners, or corrupt ministers. Wang also observes that Yan stressed in his writings the dichotomy of Confucian moralism and barbarian materialism (*Writing Pirates*, 62). Elke Papelitzky, *Writing World History in Late Ming China and the Perception of Maritime Asia* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020), 154–55, suggests that Yan Congjian in his writings aimed to dehumanize the Portuguese.

enclave, which now also witnessed the ingress of the Jesuit mission.¹⁰⁶ In 1563 the Jesuit order established itself at Macao and built two churches there—Chinese locals described these Catholic missionaries as “monks from India” and considered them “spiritual masters who kept the wild jungle of Macao under control.”¹⁰⁷ The population on Macao grew steadily, to an estimated ten thousand residents before the century’s end, composed largely of *casados* or *vezinhos*, Portuguese married men who were heads of households that included male slaves (strong-armed Black men), female slaves (usually of Asian origin, mainly Chinese), as well as their Chinese wives and children, and Chinese concubines and their offspring.¹⁰⁸

Given that these Portuguese were in close contact with their Chinese hosts in procuring day-to-day necessities (fresh water and food), and that they were restricted from visiting Guangzhou, it is unlikely that Chinese women and children could have been trafficked to their households without the connivance of locals. The Guangdong authorities most probably turned a blind eye to this crime, as the Macao Portuguese community increasingly gained favor with its overseer. In the ten years following the Wang Bo-Leonel de Sousa agreement, the Portuguese supported Chinese military officials combatting skirmishes against pirates and domestic rebels. This best-known of these conflicts was a failed mutiny by Chinese troops in nearby Dongguan county in 1565, in which Portuguese fighters, cannons, and swift-moving centipede boats influenced the outcome.¹⁰⁹ Under the command of the prominent military official Yu Dayou (1503–1579), who was responsible for coastal pacification, some three hundred Portuguese-led fighters, with guns concealed on Chinese junks, surprised the mutineers and helped defeat them.¹¹⁰

At this point, the Portuguese realized that their privileged position—trusted to oversee the lucrative silk-for-silver trade, with its extra-added human cargo bonus—was economically in their favor, but not necessarily politically secure since they, like the Japanese, remained officially barred from China. To amend this situation, the Kingdom of Portugal once again proposed to offer a tribute embassy to China. As recorded in the *MSL* 16 May 1565:

A *yi* chieftain surnamed Ya-nuo-li-gui (or Ya-re-li-gui) came by sea and sought to offer tribute. Initially, he claimed that he was from the country of Melaka, but then he changed his claim and said that he was from Pu-li-du-jia. The grand defender and grand coordinator of Guang-dong/Guang-xi advised of this. The memorial was sent to the Ministry of Rites which stated:

“There is no Southern *fan* country called Pu-li-du-jia. These are perhaps guileful agents of Fo-lang-ji. It is requested that the grand defender and grand coordinator be ordered to carry out a detailed investigation of the matter. If these people are found to be guileful agents, they are to be refused permission to offer tribute. If there are Han people who have had contact with them or enticed them, they should be punished in accordance with the law.”

¹⁰⁶Wills, “Maritime Europe,” 38.

¹⁰⁷Zhang, *Making the New World*, 301.

¹⁰⁸Charles Boxer, “Macao as a Religious and Commercial Entrepôt in the 16th and 17th Centuries,” *Acta Asiatica* 26 (1974): 64–90.

¹⁰⁹Zhang, *Making the New World*, 284.

¹¹⁰Wills, “Maritime Europe,” 38–39. See also Szonyi, *Art of Being Governed*, 91–93, on the blurriness between pirates and legitimate military officials engaged in keeping order along the Chinese littoral.

The memorial was approved.¹¹¹

It would seem from this correspondence that the Ming court maintained its anti-Folangji policy and that Beijing officialdom was unaware that the Portuguese resided at Macao, and not least, did not know, even after some ten years, that local authorities had given them permission to trade at Guangzhou and import Japanese silver. These gaps in government knowledge about happenings in southern China are striking. They reveal just how disconnected the communication lines between center and periphery were, but also how far the Ming economy had shifted away from the ideal of autarkic self-sufficiency. That approach had been replaced by a laissez-faire regime that sustained commercialized agriculture and craft manufacture but disregarded the regional trade networks that ultimately connected China to the world economy. This left the burgeoning Ming economy vulnerable to international human trafficking.

There are three arenas where Ming government economic policies proved inconsistent in theory and practice between 1370 and 1565: the capital (Nanjing/Beijing), the provinces, and the littoral. In each sphere, the lines of disconnection and connection intersected, resulting in a set of paradoxical circumstances. In the first arena, emperor Hongwu issued the *haijin* maritime prohibition from Nanjing but also generated new, legitimate tribute trade regimens between China, Southeast Asia, and Japan, with mixed results. As the Ryukyu kingdom became the conduit of trade and communication between the Ming court and Japan as well as numerous Southeast Asian polities, human trafficking along the northern Chinese littoral dissipated while commercial overseas exchange opportunities along the southern littoral expanded. These circumstances set the stage for illicit trade, and eventually for the piracy and human trafficking of the sixteenth century.

In the second arena, the provinces, there was already at the beginning of the Zhengde reign what one may term “horizontal competition” between Guangdong and Fujian, with officials from the former appealing to the Ming court for more opportunities to collect revenue by taxing private trade. The southern Fujianese Hokkien community had long ignored the *haijin* and profited from extensive smuggling networks that delivered precious exotic goods into Fujian’s many coves and offshore islands,¹¹² and the frictions between the two provinces regarding income-generating opportunities worsened over the decades. Although Guangdong, unlike Fujian, did not suffer destruction from the *wokou* raids of the 1530s and 1540s, it had been subject to official censure for harboring human trafficking enterprises that linked foreign visitors with the practice, even before the Portuguese arrival in Guangzhou waters. Eventually, the “horizontal competition” led the Guangzhou authorities to defy tribute trade protocols altogether and engage with the Ming government’s two most infamous persona non-grata groups, the Japanese and Portuguese whose connection with human trafficking was integral to the “core business” of silk-for-silver trade. Thus, while Guangdong and Fujian

¹¹¹MSL, Shizong 545.5a, Geoff Wade, trans., *Southeast Asia*, <http://epress.nus.edu.sg/msl/reign/jia-jing/year-44-month-4-day-17> (accessed 22 Jan. 2019). *Ya-nuo-li-gui* may have referred to the *fidalgo* Gil de Goes, who had received orders in 1563 from the Viceroy Conde De Redondo to attempt a tribute mission. See Charles Boxer, *Fidalgos in the Far East 1550–1770* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1948), 34–35. See also James Fujitani, “The Viceroy and the Portuguese: The Establishment of Ming Policy Toward Macao,” in Mihoko Oka, ed., *War and Trade in Maritime East Asia* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 87–106, which unravels the connecting events in Guangdong leading to the issue of this memorial.

¹¹²Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune*, 114–15.

provinces were both under the suzerainty of the Ming regime, they pursued different strategies to overcome the economic challenges engendered by tribute trade rules.

It was in the third realm, the littoral, where “pirates in caps and gowns” competed with military institutions and representatives responsible for maintaining order, that the disconnect between the center’s authority and the periphery’s power may have been most profound. This is evident in the case of Zhu Wan. But in this arena, too, there was connection: both the gentry and the military elite profited from piracy “because of their proximity to the state.”¹¹³ Both groups, at any given time, had the option to maximize their own interests within the structure of the institutions meant to minimize trade and smuggling. Such fluidity was indicative of a decline in the state’s power to limit maritime exchange or, as in the case of emperor Hongwu and the Ryukyu kingdom, to exploit it for personal advantage. It was replaced by a dominance of the market, which pushed a sixteenth-century expansion of overseas commerce, especially after 1567, when the *haijin* ended (except for direct trade with Japan).

With the steady influx of silver from Japan, and after 1570 from the New World, the Ming economy grew, especially the porcelain and silk industries. But the state remained bound to the Hongwu era tax quotas and failed to gain revenue from the intensification of agriculture and commerce, and so stayed chronically underfunded.¹¹⁴ The market economy did bring urban splendor and conspicuous consumption for many, but it also engendered economic volatility: stagnated grain and land prices meant that agricultural incomes remained flat and growing poverty led to rising inequality, and discontent among the rural masses.¹¹⁵

Such economic and social pressures fostered human trafficking: in mid-Ming China selling women and children became an option for individuals in need of cash. We lack detailed records of how many persons were trafficked under these circumstances, but studies of servitude in imperial China make it possible to assess how vulnerable Chinese women (and children) were to specific abuses within the three broad categories of legal discrimination, economic exploitation, and physical abuse.¹¹⁶ These three categories form the basis of a “vulnerability index” and may be used to assess how particular factors determine the degree of liability to which persons may be exposed to slavery, or slave-like conditions, for example, within the category “economic exploitation,” “not being paid for their labor,” or within the category “legal discrimination,” “subject to forced labor.” In the vulnerability index, each of the three categories is subdivided into a series of specific infringements, totaling seventeen specific offences; the vulnerability index assigns scores of either 1 or 2 points to each transgression depending on the degree of severity. So, within the category of “physical abuse” almost all sub-categories score 2, in contrast to a score of 1 for not being paid for labor (category “economic rights”). Based on the seventeen subcategories of the three main categories, it is possible for historians to assign scores for each infringement in diverse societies where slavery thrived, such as ancient

¹¹³Szonyi, *Art of Being Governed*, 108.

¹¹⁴Von Glahn, *Economic History*, 309.

¹¹⁵Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune*, 142–43, stresses the expansion of the mid-Ming economy thanks to silver import, but also the stagnation of grain and land prices leading to the decline of agricultural incomes. As capital shifted from land to commerce and craft production, peasants could hardly meet their rental costs at a time of increasing prices of silver.

¹¹⁶See the publications cited in note 7.

Greece and Rome, but also for more modern situations with ostensibly non-slave conditions. One recent study showed that if we compare the plight of modern trafficked sex workers, who totaled a very high score of 25 (comparable to Atlantic slavery scoring 26), then the calculated vulnerability tally for Chinese women in the Ming era, 19, approached that of those groups.¹¹⁷

Our analysis of human trafficking also lacks a map of the networks that connected inland markets, especially in southwest China and along the Central Asian-Chinese frontier, with littoral export points besides Macao. Much is missing in the documentation of trafficking during the Ming, but it seems obvious that government policies and practices were unable to cope with the changing circumstances that economic expansion triggered. To be sure, human trafficking within China and by its littoral was a problem before the sixteenth century, as documented from the second century BCE along the maritime and land routes of the Silk Road. But the Portuguese presence along the Chinese coast intensified the extent to which both provincial officials and local people disobeyed the laws and norms of their country. In essence, Ming China can be categorized as what Fynn-Paul calls an “imperfect no-slavery zone,” where “rulers discouraged the active raiding or kidnapping of their own subjects, but still allowed many paths for their subjects to become slaves, such as poverty, sale by parents, and judicial slavery.”¹¹⁸ Like some other Asian societies, personal ties of hierarchy and dependency dictated the extent to which a “no-slaving zone” became “imperfect.”

After 1570 Portuguese merchants extended their supply lines of human beings from Africa and Asia and began moving forced laborers from various Asian communities, via Manila, into the Americas.¹¹⁹ But even with the demise of the Ming in 1644 and the establishment of the Qing dynasty, which tried to rid Macao of its trafficking business, well-developed networks in inland China continued to meet the demand for adults and children, as they still do today. The tragedy of this history is that Ming China from its inception adopted stringent laws to deter and punish the trafficking of humans both within and away from the country, and yet despite these regulations, and the moral exhortations of a few individuals like Yan Congjian, the lure of profit triumphed.

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to the CSSH reviewers for their helpful and stimulating suggestions which guided me to make a number of important revisions.

¹¹⁷Fynn-Paul, “Slavery in Asia and Global Slavery,” 354–59.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*,” 340–41.

¹¹⁹Cuanhtémoc Villamar, *Portuguese Merchants in the Manila Galleon System, 1565–1600* (London: Routledge, 2020), and see pages 96–105 on how the Portuguese merchants Bartolomeu Vaz Landeiro and Diogo Fernandes Vitória became active in the export of slaves from Southeast Asia, Macao, and Japan to the Philippines in the 1570s and 1580s.

Cite this article: Zurndorfer, Harriet 2023. “Human Trafficking and Piracy in Early Modern East Asia: Maritime Challenges to the Ming Dynasty Economy, 1370–1565.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 65: 908–931, doi:10.1017/S0010417523000270