

## Some Notes on “Japanese Pirates”

By Frank L. Chance

### Images of Pirates

When today's students think of pirates, the first image that likely pops into their minds is of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films from Disney Studios. While I feel certain that my colleagues specializing in maritime history find many inaccuracies in that image—as I'm sure they would find in the swashbuckling seafarer played by Douglas Fairbanks in *The Black Pirate* or the romanticized figures of Black Dog and Billy Bones in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*—for better or worse, it is these images of oddly dressed seafarers raiding harbors and others' ships that pervade the imagination today. This applies not only to American youth, but also to students around the globe—a fact made abundantly clear by the worldwide earnings for the latest *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, which exceeded a billion dollars.<sup>1</sup> Alternately, students might think of the Somali invaders of contemporary merchant vessels portrayed in 2013's *Captain Phillips*.<sup>2</sup> However, neither of these images is very helpful when we read about—or when Asian students learn about—“Japanese pirates,” who were active from the fourth through the sixteenth centuries on the coasts of China, Taiwan, and the Korean peninsula.

The term “Japanese pirates” is a frequently used and rather literal translation of the term 倭寇, read *woukou* in Mandarin, *waegu* in Korean, and *wakō* in Japanese. This word appears in Chinese, Korean, and occasionally Japanese documents about coastal raids from as early as the third century CE, though Japanese sources more often use the term 海賊 *kaizoku*, literally “sea brigands,” which can be simply translated as “pirates.” Unfortunately, twenty-first-century users of 倭寇 sometimes infuse it with nationalistic ardor as part of greater efforts to vilify Japanese atrocities and raise the hackles of their audience members. For example, one college student educated in China through high school recently reported to me that his teachers described *woukou* as “Japanese pirates dressed in samurai armor, wielding katana swords to massacre whole coastal fishing villages.”<sup>3</sup> He indicated there was a clear implication that these raiders were dispatched, like the Japanese soldiers of the twentieth century, by an imperialistic government with evil intent. The English-language scholar is not much better informed, according to Kwan-wai So, author of *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the 16th Century*, who asserts that we “might be led to believe that Japanese pirates were responsible for all the troubles on the Chinese coast throughout the Ming dynasty.”<sup>4</sup> The use of the term in nationalistic ways is not limited to China; at such Korean sites as Seokguram, an eighth-century temple oriented toward the eastern coast, guides and guidebooks speculate that the location was chosen to (spiritually) protect against “Japanese pirates.”

### Wakō in Translation

To begin to understand how the *wakō* have become so closely tied to nationalist agendas, let's look first at the language used to refer to them. Both parts of the term 倭寇 are problematic if translated simplistically as “Japanese pirates.”

First, 倭 is one of a set of four directional terms used in ancient times to describe non-Chinese “barbarian” people outside the borders of China. In particular, the term was used to name the foreigners in the east; its implication is that they were small in stature, and it is a pejorative similar to the English word “dwarf.” Indeed, the residents of the Japanese archipelago

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were relatively short, and they were also culturally different from the Chinese—and in fact they took ownership of the term, sometimes reading it as “Yamato,” one of the aboriginal names for their islands. However, a simple translation of 倭 as “Japanese” is not very useful because there was no “Japan”—the archipelago was not unified into what we can call a single nation until the second half of the sixteenth century. People from the archipelago, and particularly from its more remote parts, were far more likely to identify with their local province than with the central government. Moreover, it is clear that the boats that sailed into those Chinese and Korean (and Japanese) harbors were not manned entirely by people from the islands we today call Japan—the crews included Ainu from Hokkaidō, which was not entirely under Japanese rule until 1868; natives of the Ryūkyū Islands (not under Japanese rule until 1872); Hakka people from Taiwan (not under Japanese rule until 1895); and residents of coastal towns on the Korean peninsula and the Chinese mainland.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, though 寇 does translate as “pirate” or “brigand,” unlike Captain Sparrow, we have little evidence that the raiders called themselves by this name. In fact, their nature was more ambiguous than labeling them “pirates” implies. Imagine, for a moment, the scenario when a boat (or a small fleet) pulls into a port. If the boat has something the villagers want and the villagers have things the crew wants and if all goes well with the exchange, we would call the men on the boats “merchants.” If there were problems with the exchange and violence ensued, we might call them “pirates” or simply “thieves.” However, things get more complicated when the coastal town is ruled by a distant authority—an emperor, king, or warlord—who wants to control “trade” by restricting what can be traded or by taxing the exchange. If some of the items being exchanged are illegal according to those landlocked authorities, we then might call the men in the boats “smugglers”—like many American colonial seafarers who ignored England's restrictions on commerce. Furthermore, if the villagers get caught but the boats get away, the villagers might then claim the exchange was forced and the men in the boats become “pirates,” despite their peaceful intent. And once the visitors have been vilified as *wakō*, further interactions might escalate into violent exchanges.

We can also imagine that the men in the boats might be interested in the women of the village—but remember that the women might be interested in the visitors as well, particularly if some of the *wakō* were as handsome as Douglas Fairbanks. The seafaring life might also have been perceived as a way out of oppression and poverty. Of course, the interactions were not always liaisons of mutual consent—but even if they were, we can also imagine that once the boats leave, the anger of a landlubber father might be displaced by a daughter claiming that a “pirate” had seduced or raped her. These kinds of interactions might easily be obscured in the historical record since the men on the boats had little reason to keep careful accounts, though the residents of the shore would be required by their governments to document their trade, goods, actions, and treasures.

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**Wakō in History**

Having established that there are problems with the translation, let's now look at what the historical records say that the wakō actually did.

Contact between seafarers and the Korean coast is documented as far back as the third century of the common era—for example, in the story of Mimana recorded in the earliest Japanese histories, as well as in Chinese and Korean records. Mimana (written with characters pronounced *imna* in Korean and *renna* in Mandarin Chinese) is described in *The Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihonshoki*, often shortened to *Nihongi*, compiled in 720) as a Japanese settlement on the Korean peninsula, but modern scholars have disputed the nature of the settlement. Mimana may have been a colony, a port of call for wakō ships, or simply shorthand for Japanese activity on Korean shores, but the record indicates at least ongoing maritime contact. Japanese scholars have linked Mimana with Gaya (or parts of Gaya), an autonomous confederation of city-states wedged between the Silla and Paekche kingdoms in present-day Korea, though the exact character of Mimana continues to be disputed.

Wakō interactions on the peninsula were sporadic and mostly peaceful for several centuries, leading some to speculate that the seas were ruled by the “thalassocracy of Wa”—in other words, that the region was organized by the wakō into a loosely controlled sea-based empire.<sup>6</sup> By the thirteenth century, violence was reported, particularly after the failed Mongol attempts to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281. A number of Japanese warlords, such as the Ōuchi family of Sūō (modern Yamaguchi), supported wakō activities, but the raiders attacked ports in Japan as well as Korea and China. In 1405, Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (1358–1408) deported twenty captured wakō to China, where they were rather hideously executed in a boiling cauldron.<sup>7</sup> *Ming shi*, an official history of Ming dynasty China, records that in the early sixteenth century, less than a third of the wakō were Japanese, the others mainly Chinese in origin.<sup>8</sup>

There is no question that “pirate” attacks on the coastlines of medieval China, Korea, and Japan took a toll on the local populations. By the third quarter of the sixteenth century, however, the attacks became less frequent, and then records of wakō attacks disappear altogether. This is likely due to a number of factors, including the building of forts around the port towns of China. Shanghai in particular grew from a small village into a fortified port during this period. Chinese commanders developed better strategies to deal with the attacks, and several notorious groups were captured. Moreover, the unification wars in Japan resulted in greater control of the port cities and islands where the wakō holed up between raids. Hideyoshi's invasion of the Korean peninsula also played a role, moving weapons and soldiers in a more organized fashion and hastening the end of the wakō phenomenon.

From as early as 1592, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598) began to require *shuinjō*, vermilion-sealed maritime passes, for Japan-based ships; in the waters controlled by his successor, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616), the system became universal. Moreover, Ieyasu sent letters to Japan's trading partners, instructing them that only *shuinsen*—ships bearing *shuinjō* documents—should be considered legitimate.<sup>9</sup> Enforcement of the system was

strong and the wakō ceased to be a problem, especially after 1635, when the Tokugawa closed the ports to all returning Japanese nationals.<sup>10</sup>

**Conclusion**

As this article demonstrates, “Japanese pirates” doesn't fully or accurately capture the historical references to the wakō. For one thing, they weren't all Japanese, and the wakō has a much broader geographic implication than just “Japan.” For another thing, they made incursions into Japanese, Chinese, and Korean territories. And finally—perhaps most importantly—although they sometimes engaged in violent activities, many of their interactions were peaceful.

Although the 1,500-year history of the wakō on the East Asian coastline came to an end in the seventeenth century, their legendary—and often inaccurately described—exploits lived on in literary and theatrical form as *bunraku* and *kabuki* plays, including *Battles of Coxinga* and *Kezori*, about Chinese rebels, Nagasaki smugglers, and seafaring brigands in the waters of East Asia.

As for discussing this fascinating history in the classroom, there may not be a convenient way to translate wakō without nationalistic overtones, but perhaps we should try a more neutral term, such as “Eastern seafarers.” Students at any level can (and love to) talk about swashbucklers, so lively classroom discussion might be a way to explore the ambiguity of terms like “pirate” or, for that matter, “Japanese.”

**For Further Reading**

For more information on the wakō, see Peter Shapinsky's 2009 article in *Monumenta Nipponica* (64, no. 2, 273–313) on “Predators, Protectors, and Purveyors: Pirates and Commerce in Late Medieval Japan” or So Kwan-wai's *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the 16th Century*, published in 1975. For a more recent treatment from the Chinese perspective, see *Lineage Society on the Southeastern Coast of China: The Impact of Japanese Piracy in the 16th Century*, published in 2010 by Ivy Maria Lim. ■

**NOTES**

1. *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, directed by Rob Marshall (Los Angeles, Walt Disney Studios, 2011), DVD.
2. *Captain Phillips*, directed by Paul Greengrass (Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2013), DVD.
3. Guyue Li, interview, March 7, 2014.
4. Kwan-wai So, *Japanese Piracy in Ming China during the 16th Century* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1975), 203.
5. Ivy Maria Lim, *Lineage Society on the Southeastern Coast of China: The Impact of Japanese Piracy in the 16th Century* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2010).
6. Gari Ledyard, “Gallop Along with the Horseriders: Looking for the Founders of Japan,” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 1, no. 2 (1975): 217–254.
7. Yosaburō Takekoshi, *The Economic Aspects of the History of the Civilization of Japan* (New York: Routledge, 1967), 344.
8. So, 161–190.
9. Adam Clulow, *The Company and the Shōgun: The Dutch Encounter with Tokugawa Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 143–144.
10. By 1635, Japan was unified, so we can reasonably refer to “Japanese nationals,” though of course it was not yet a modern nation-state.

FRANK L. CHANCE is a scholar of East Asian art. Early in his career, he was the Director of Shofuso, a Japanese house and garden in Fairmount Park, Philadelphia. He has taught at several colleges and universities, and in 2002, he began serving as the Associate Director for Academics of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Though his primary research has been in Japanese art, he has also studied the arts of China and Korea extensively. He has traveled in China and Korea, as well as to every prefecture of Japan.