

Maritime Asia: A Classroom Simulation Exercise for Teaching about Global Piracy

Classes about the global history of piracy are perennially popular, drawing sustained interest from students and generating long waiting lists. While students are eager to learn more about pirates, they often bring with them a set of entrenched assumptions that can be difficult to dislodge. The first of these assumptions is simply that pirates are invariably European and that they look something like the movie versions featured in Disney's 1950 classic *Treasure Island* or the more recent *Pirates of the Caribbean* series of films which earned over \$4 billion at the box office. In the world of ChatGPT, Dall-E, and other generative AI engines, this belief has only strengthened. Plug 'pirates' into an AI image generator and it typically renders a standard European pirate complete with tricorne hat and eye patch or ask a large language model for pirate hotspots and it reverts to a list of areas where European pirates were most active.

The second assumption that students carry with them is that pirates were lawless outsiders who constructed alternative orders that were essentially anti-hierarchical and egalitarian. They did so, according to this view, while waging constant war with states that sought either to suppress or simply to exterminate pirates. This version appears in popular representations of pirates in literature, films, and video games. It is further reinforced by high-profile records of European pirate trials that depict such mariners as locked "in a perpetual war with every individual, and every state, Christian or infidel."¹ And these views find support in the work of influential scholars like Marcus Rediker, who argue that, in the Atlantic context, pirates "were rebels. They challenged, in one way or another, the conventions of class, race, gender, and nation."² Students commonly assume that such descriptions apply to pirates more generally and that these mariners deliberately operated beyond the bounds of law, thereby inviting relentless suppression by state authorities.³

Looking at the history of piracy in East Asia challenges such assumptions. While European pirates active in the Atlantic or the Caribbean have drawn the most attention,

East Asia was a dynamic center for global piracy. Piracy proved strikingly persistent in this region, extending over a long period of several centuries. It was also massive. Whereas the peak of Atlantic piracy involved several thousand mariners, the scope of East Asian piracy was far larger.⁴ Pirate captains routinely assembled vast fleets consisting of hundreds of vessels and thousands of pirates.

Across its long history, East Asian piracy passed through multiple phases. In the sixteenth century, *wakō* pirates launched sustained raids against the Chinese coast. Although they styled themselves as fierce Japanese warriors, the majority of these pirates were in fact Chinese and they were led by Chinese maritime entrepreneurs operating out of Japan.⁵ In the seventeenth century, the Zheng maritime organization built up a formidable fleet that extended its reach across East and Southeast Asia. This period also saw the arrival of European organizations like the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC) which made regular use of maritime violence invariably justified as legal privateering. In the nineteenth century, a remarkable female pirate leader known variously as Zheng Yi Sao, Shi Yang or Ching Shih, rose, some sources suggest, from the Cantonese sex trade to command an organization that encompassed tens of thousands of pirates and which succeeded in paralyzing Qing maritime traffic.⁶

East Asia played host to a diverse array of pirates ranging from maritime parasites with just one vessel to powerful warlords whose influence spread across both land and sea. Some pirates were lawless outlaws who operated within a cycle of violence and state repression. But other pirates co-opted state structures or created new quasi-state enterprises. The most successful pirates were careful to justify their use of maritime violence while seeking connections and legitimacy from land-based states. Some secured titles and authority, giving them a sheltered position on the fringes of powerful states. Others, like the Zheng maritime organization, transitioned from pirate bands to become maritime states in their own right. Governments did hunt down pirates but they also co-operated with pirate enterprises, using them to expand trade, extend influence or as maritime auxiliaries.

Both of us teach courses about the long history of global piracy and have grappled with challenging students' fixed assumptions. We have found that while lectures can be productive, students learn most effectively via interactive classroom exercises that immerse participants in the early modern world by asking them to assume the role of pirate states and their interlocutors. Beginning in 2018, we started to develop a classroom simulation called the Maritime Asia exercise designed to do precisely this. The exercise takes partial inspiration from the superb *Reacting to the Past* series based at Barnard University, but it also draws from Model United Nations simulations that are immediately familiar to students.⁷

Maritime Asia took years to develop, test, and fully implement. It is dense, with historical background and instructions running to over 20,000 words, but we have

found that it has consistently produced some of the most satisfying and productive classes in our teaching careers. Even years after the class in question, we encounter students who completed the exercise and can recite the strengths and weaknesses of individual factions as well as the most convincing arguments for and against legalized privateering. Freely available to any interested teacher via request, the exercise has been deployed in a range of classrooms from high schools to community colleges to universities.⁸ In this article, we detail how the Maritime Asia exercise works and the key lessons about piracy and maritime violence that it aims to impart to students.

The Factions

The Maritime Asia exercise is ideally suited to seminar classes with around 20 students, but we have used it successfully in small lecture classes with up to 40 students. The exercise is designed to simulate the complex, multipolar maritime world of East and Southeast Asia in the second half of the seventeenth century. For teaching purposes, it collapses together a series of events spanning the decade from roughly 1663 to 1673. It places students in different roles as the representatives of armed maritime powers like the Zheng maritime network or the Dutch East India Company, continental agrarian powers like Tokugawa Japan or Qing China, and continental trading powers like Ayutthaya (Siam). Crucially, this is not a roleplaying exercise like *Reacting to the Past*; students are not asked to portray the Qing emperor or the king of Ayutthaya. Instead, they act as diplomats or officials representing one of five states or factions. Their goal is to achieve a set of clearly defined priorities by pursuing the best strategic course for their faction while avoiding being outmaneuvered by competing representatives.

The focus is on two maritime organizations, one East Asian, one European, that made consistent use of maritime violence and which were regularly condemned as pirates by states across the region. The first is the Zheng maritime organization, which was established by Zheng Zhilong (d. 1661) and expanded by his famous son, Zheng Chenggong (Koxinga, 1624-1662), and grandson, Zheng Jing (1642-1681).⁹ This organization had its roots in small-scale piracy. Zheng Zhilong started his career in the Portuguese stronghold of Macao before moving to Hirado. There he befriended Dutch East India Company merchants while marrying a local Japanese woman. By the 1620s, Zhilong had shifted his operations to the seas off Fujian, emerging as one of many pirate captains who thrived in the bustling shipping lanes off China's traditional maritime hub. He became so powerful that the Ming government decided to co-opt him by offering a position as admiral and charging Zhilong, the most formidable pirate in the region, with suppressing piracy. Armed with this support, he soon dispensed with his rivals and emerged at the head of a powerful maritime network.

This network was eventually taken over by Koxinga who used it to challenge the Dutch East India Company's grip on trade flowing through East Asia. Koxinga combined maritime violence and commerce with a sustained campaign against China's new

Manchu overlords who had displaced the Ming state. Robert Antony, one of the most influential scholars of Chinese piracy, calls him a “political pirate,” a figure who combined the pursuit of profit with an ideological struggle against the Qing.¹⁰ The conflict between the Zheng and the VOC escalated in 1662. After a disastrous northern expedition against the Manchus, Qing forces cornered Koxinga on a handful of islands along the Fujian coast. Concerned about impending resource shortages, he invaded Taiwan, ejecting the Dutch from their lucrative colony, and establishing a new base for anti-Qing resistance. After Koxinga’s death, his son Zheng Jing built a maritime oriented state on Taiwan that sent fleets across the region.

Historians who study global piracy describe a piracy cycle, in which pirates transition through different stages as they become more successful.¹¹ In the first stage, small, fragmented pirate groups emerge, usually by drawing support from impoverished coastal populations. They engage in low-level piracy with one or two vessels, attacking vulnerable ships or settlements but with little organization or staying power. In this phase, pirates are little more than parasites, preying on commerce but with limited capacity to do sustained harm. While the majority of pirates never escaped this phase, the most successful pirate leaders transitioned from stage one to stage two, which saw significant organization and growth. Fueled by plunder, pirate leaders amassed small fleets, allowing them to target richer and richer targets. This in turn gave them access to additional resources, enabling further growth. Once they reached stage three, pirate fleets could consist of hundreds of vessels and thousands of pirates. Like any complex organization, such groups required clear rules, structures, and even basic bureaucracies to manage income and resources. Once pirates reached this stage, they faced a crucial test. States recognized that such groups represented a dangerous threat that must be co-opted or defeated. In stage four of the piracy cycle, pirates could seek recognition from or integration into powerful states. If they could navigate this perilous transition successfully, pirate leaders could morph from outlaws into admirals and their fleets from violent marauders into state navies. Or they could form their own states. Strikingly, the Zheng organization did both, first gaining Ming legitimacy via Zheng Zhilong’s appointment as admiral and later morphing into a maritime-oriented state on Taiwan.

The Zheng family engaged in a prolonged conflict with the Dutch East India Company, which was founded in 1602 and quickly became, in Tonio Andrade’s words, “the largest, best-capitalized privateering enterprise in the world.”¹² The Company used an elastic legal justification supplied by scholars like Hugo Grotius to engage in expansive maritime operations directed not only against Portuguese and Spanish shipping but also local competitors such as Chinese merchants and states that denied access to trade or violated monopoly agreements over key goods.¹³ For the Dutch East India Company, maritime violence was not an occasional outcome that was secondary to the key business of trade. Instead, the use of force was, from the beginning, “a necessary

and integrated part of the market strategy of the VOC.”¹⁴ Dutch officials consistently framed the Company’s operations as lawful privateering, although local states often perceived them as acts of piracy. As one example, the Tokugawa military government or *bakufu*, which ruled Japan in this period, consistently referred to VOC actions as piracy (*bahan*). The Japanese-Portuguese dictionary (*Nippo Jisho*), which was published in Nagasaki in 1603, defines *bahan* as the plundering of foreign lands.¹⁵ It was a term used most commonly in Japan to refer to the *wakō* marauders who launched raids against China in the sixteenth century from bases scattered across western Japan. As such, the *bakufu* linked the VOC directly to a wider tradition of lawless maritime violence. Writing to his superiors, one Dutch official complained that the “word pirate is shameful in Japan and is very different from the taking of enemy ships our procedures are announced to them as piracy (*roverij*) and is understood as such.”¹⁶

The VOC and the Zheng organization engaged in a ferocious struggle for commercial and military supremacy across East and Southeast Asia. The Maritime Asia exercise focuses on the decade after the fall of Taiwan in 1662 when this rivalry was most intense. During this period, the VOC dispatched fleets to target all maritime traffic linked to the Zheng, including the lucrative trading junks that sailed between China and Japan. The Zheng organization responded by pushing into Southeast Asia and launching attacks on VOC outposts in places like Cambodia.

The competition between the VOC and the Zheng created a range of challenges for states across the region. The third and fourth factions in the exercise are Tokugawa Japan and Qing China, two agrarian powers capable of wielding massive resources on land. Although very different, these two states shared some key features. Both were wealthy with huge domestic markets and large populations. They constructed elaborate diplomatic orders, one Japanocentric and organized around the Tokugawa shogun in Edo, the second built upon a much older Sinocentric template. They could mobilize vast armies but did not rely on long-distance trade as a key income generator and possessed no fleets capable of challenging maritime powers like the VOC or the Zheng. But this did not mean they lacked influence over the ocean. In fact, the Tokugawa *bakufu* proved highly effective in curbing Dutch maritime violence by threatening to restrict the Company’s access to Japan’s lucrative markets. There were also clear differences between these two states. Whereas Tokugawa Japan had traditionally protected Zheng shipping, the Qing government was bitterly opposed to the new state on Taiwan, which represented an alternative source of legitimacy that directly challenged the Qing emperors.¹⁷

The fifth and final faction is Ayutthaya, which was an important Southeast Asian polity that was heavily invested in long-distance commerce. Unlike Tokugawa Japan or Qing China, the Ayutthayan court participated directly in international trade. This included dispatching crown junks that were crewed by Chinese sailors with just a handful of Ayutthayan officials on board, generating revenue that flowed directly to the

throne. Like Tokugawa Japan and Qing China, Ayutthaya lacked a powerful naval force; yet its greater reliance on long-distance trade rendered it significantly more vulnerable to maritime blockades. At various times, Tokugawa Japan, Qing China, and Ayutthaya all condemned the VOC and the Zheng as lawless pirates, but they also negotiated with representatives of both organizations and, in some cases, allowed them to set up outposts on their soil. The Tokugawa regime and the Ayutthayan court worked to control violence by warning that attacks on ships or the seizure of valuable cargo would trigger retaliation on land.



Figure 1: Trading post of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) at Ayutthaya. SK-A-4477. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Public domain.

The exercise itself runs across three competitive stages or rounds, each occupying a typical class. Each round centers on a set of specific questions that are resolved via votes. The exercise plays out through diplomatic letters, embassies, and intensive negotiations. Prior to each round, students prepare four diplomatic letters intended for rival factions as well as a strategic plan laying out their goals and how they intend to achieve them. The letters are carefully composed to secure a favorable bargaining

position, while the strategic document offers a highly detailed plan outlining primary objectives, fallback options, and contingency strategies in case negotiations falter. At the beginning of each round, the factions deliver their letters, meaning that each group receives four separate missives. They then dispatch embassies to the other groups, seeking to secure allies and votes. At the end of each round, the factions participate in a group voting stage. Following this, each faction casts individual votes on decisions tied to its specific interests.

Round 1

The discussion on day 1 centers on the twin questions of legitimacy and recognition. At the end of the round, the factions vote on two essential questions. First, should the three territorial states (Tokugawa Japan, Qing China, Ayutthaya) condemn the VOC as lawless pirates, or should they recognize the Company's extensive privateering operations in the aftermath of the fall of Taiwan as an act of legal privateering? Second, should they recognize Zheng Taiwan as a legitimate state?

The first question persistently troubled VOC representatives in Asia, as it highlighted the unstable and contested boundary between sanctioned privateering and unlawful piracy. The debate is anchored in events from 1663 when the Company dispatched a fleet to attack Zheng shipping. Dutch representatives claimed an absolute right, under the law of nations, to seize Zheng vessels even when these were encountered within territorial waters. States across the region were, however, skeptical of these arguments, denouncing such actions as outright piracy. In the exercise, the negotiations between the factions hinge on how to define piracy and whether the Dutch East India Company had a legal right to pursue Zheng ships carrying goods intended for the Japanese marketplace into local waters. The discussion is an accurate reflection of the negotiations that played out in places like Edo or Nagasaki where VOC representatives were compelled to defend the actions of Company captains and the organization's claimed rights to use violence.

The second question centers on whether the Zheng organization should be treated as a state. In this period, the Zheng regime on Taiwan struggled to complete the transition from pirate organization to recognized polity. It confronted a series of threats from the VOC, which was determined to avenge the loss of its colony; from the Qing regime, which was willing to raze coastal communities to deprive the Zheng of support; and from the Tokugawa government, which had historically supported the half-Japanese Koxinga but looked less favorably on his successor, Zheng Jing, in Taiwan. Negotiations with the Qing court offered one path forward. Zheng Jing attempted to secure recognition from the Qing as an independent state by suggesting that Taiwan should be treated "according to the rituals of a foreign country," in other words as a

separate but recognized state like Korea.¹⁸ Qing authorities were willing to concede that Taiwan was not part of China but they insisted that the Zheng must shave their heads in the Manchu way and return to the mainland. They rejected the Zheng compromise by arguing that “Korea has always been a foreign country but Zheng Jing is a man of the Middle Kingdom. Since he will reside on Taiwan, on what basis can we discern his sincerity in submitting if he does not shave his hair.”¹⁹ For Tokugawa Japan and Ayutthaya, Zheng Taiwan represented a new challenge that threatened to unsettle an already turbulent international environment and prompt further conflict.

Round 1 is always highly competitive as each faction seeks to secure an initial advantage. Across a series of fast-paced negotiations, the factions attempt to agree on a workable definition of legal privateering and whether the VOC's aggressive campaigns should be viewed as sanctioned violence or simply as piracy. The key swing votes are Ayutthaya and Tokugawa Japan, which hosted Dutch outposts but were historically suspicious of broad assertions concerning the right to use maritime force. While these discussions are ongoing, the Zheng faction maneuvers to carve out a position for themselves in a region surrounded by enemies. Derided as pirates who had robbed the Dutch of their profitable colony or as rebels who should submit to Qing authority, the Zheng representatives must work hard to defend themselves as the representatives of a new kind of Chinese maritime state oriented towards the sea. Round 1 ends conventionally with a mixed verdict. The VOC is seldom condemned across the board as lawless pirates, but the group usually surrenders some support while the Zheng typically secure partial recognition even as their more expansive claims encounter significant resistance.

Round 2

Round 2 centers on two historical acts of maritime violence. The first concerns an Ayutthayan royal junk attacked by the VOC. In this period, trade between Ayutthaya and Japan was dominated by deerskins which were in high demand in Japan. The Company had signed a monopoly agreement with the Ayutthayan monarch giving the organization full rights over the deerskin trade. But the king of Ayutthaya frequently violated these provisions by dispatching royal junks crewed with Chinese sailors to participate in the lucrative deerskin trade. In response, the VOC targeted these vessels, setting up a series of clashes.



Figure 2: Detail from Japanese lacquer screen showing Dutch ship and Chinese junk. Nagasaki, Japan, c. 1759. NG-696. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Public Domain.

Round 2, which is based on violent incidents that took place through the 1660s, begins with such an attack.²⁰ At the beginning of the round, the factions receive news that an Ayutthayan royal junk has disappeared on its way from Ayutthaya to Japan. Some observers claim that the vessel sank in a heavy storm, but credible reports indicate that an ambitious VOC commander attacked this vessel and looted its cargo consisting of tens of thousands of deerskins. It is not clear what happened to the Chinese crewmembers, but they were likely stranded on an island or simply thrown overboard. The loss of this vessel sent shock waves through Ayutthaya, while also angering

merchants in Nagasaki who were awaiting the arrival of these goods. Tokugawa authorities are furious, having explicitly prohibited the VOC from attacking vessels bound for Japan, while the loss of such a valuable cargo represents a direct setback for the Ayutthayan court. If negotiations collapse, the incident could prompt either the Tokugawa shogun or the king of Ayutthaya to expel Company merchants—a drastic measure both regimes had previously been reluctant to take.

The second piece of news – also grounded in specific events that took place in this period – centers on a vessel from the Ryukyu kingdom, a territory under Tokugawa protection, that has been attacked and sunk by a Zheng ship.²¹ In this period, the Ryukyu kingdom had a murky political status. Although it had once been an independent state, the kingdom's defeat by forces from Satsuma domain in Kyushu in 1609 transformed it into a Tokugawa satellite and an integral component of the shogunate's Japanocentric political order. Despite this history of conquest, the king of the Ryukyus paid tribute both to China and Japan. Tokugawa authorities, in turn, carefully preserved the appearance of Ryukyuan independence to maintain its utility as a conduit to China.²² At first, Ryukyuan rulers paid tribute to Ming China, but they switched in 1663 to recognize Qing China. The decision angered Zheng officials, who viewed the Qing as illegal occupants of the Chinese throne. In 1670, Zheng vessels captured a junk from the Ryukyu kingdom, killing most of the crew and seizing its goods. The attack triggered an immediate reaction in Nagasaki. Japanese authorities protested the action because the capture of the vessel had damaged a key diplomatic channel while threatening the shogun's prestige. They also moved to secure compensation from Zheng merchants trading with Taiwan.

These twin episodes throw the negotiations from Round 1 into disorder as the three territorial states are forced to reckon not with abstract questions about piracy and political legitimacy but with concrete incidents. The factions must vote on a series of questions: Should they condemn the VOC as a pirate organization, the Zheng as a pirate organization, or both? Students representing the VOC and the Zheng are eager to justify their actions without alienating the three territorial polities. Their most effective strategy is to exploit and denounce the misconduct of their rivals. Thus, the VOC representatives usually emphasize how the attack on the vessel from the Ryukyu kingdom deliberately challenges Edo's Japanocentric order. By contrast, envoys from the Zheng are eager to cement the Company's reputation as untrustworthy. In this case, the attack was likely not directly authorized by Batavia but was rather the work of an individual captain. However, successful factions weave it into a larger chargesheet against the Company, depicting the organization as a lawless actor that continually relied on maritime violence or threats of force.

At the same time, the factions grapple with questions of compensation, a discussion firmly grounded in historical reality.²³ For both maritime powers, the requirement to provide compensation was potentially disastrous. Covering the cost of

high-value cargoes could quickly erode the financial stability of either the VOC or the Zheng organization. It also established a dangerous precedent whenever a ship was lost at sea – as happened frequently in this period. As a result, the representatives of the two maritime powers maneuver desperately to avoid paying compensation. By the end of round 2, one faction has usually emerged ahead, either the VOC or the Zheng depending on which has been able to secure more allies and deflect demands for compensation.

Round 3

By the third class, the arguments have become familiar and well-worn. The VOC and the Zheng are constantly on the defensive while the territorial states, especially Tokugawa Japan and Ayutthaya, exert considerable influence even in the absence of any naval power of their own. Round 3 upends these patterns and throws the strategic landscape into disarray. It shifts the focus from maritime violence but does so in a manner consistent with how events actually played out in East Asia. In practice, the attack on the Ryukyu junk triggered a standoff between the Zheng maritime organization and the Tokugawa regime. Japanese officials sought to extract compensation by seizing several vessels affiliated with the Zheng organization. Rather than accepting this penalty, Zheng Jing escalated the conflict by imposing an embargo on all Chinese shipping bound for Nagasaki, effectively severing a vital maritime route. For the *bakufu*, which had been highly successful in suppressing VOC violence, the response represented a new and unsettling development. The situation was upended, however, by fast-moving developments in China itself. The catalyst for this sudden change was the outbreak of a revolt by Qing regional strongmen across southern China against the Manchu court. This massive uprising, usually called the Three Feudatories rebellion, created an opportunity that Zheng Jing quickly exploited by moving troops back onto the continent. The rebellion also altered the political landscape in two critical ways. First, Ryukyu could no longer sustain tributary relations with the Qing, as rebel generals now controlled key ports. This effectively removed the core issue that had sparked the original dispute. Second, the eruption of the conflict created an urgent need for Zheng vessels used in the blockade to be deployed elsewhere. Because of this, the blockade was swiftly lifted.

Round 3 of the exercise thrusts the Zheng and the Qing into a new struggle for legitimacy. The remaining three factions face a difficult question: should they continue to recognize the Qing as the rightful rulers of China or should they abandon a seemingly sinking Manchu ship? The question flips the exercise's earlier dynamics. Suddenly the Zheng are emboldened as the representatives of a reconstituted Ming empire and the Qing are placed on the defensive. And the VOC, which has endured relentless criticism for its attacks on shipping, finds the attention shifted elsewhere. The result is a fascinating negotiation in which Qing envoys, even in the wake of a crumbling zone of control on the mainland, assert their sole legitimacy as the government of China.

Learning outcomes

Since its development, we have run the Maritime Asia exercise in our classes over ten times, and in no two instances has it ever played out the same way. Instead, the dynamics shift constantly as new developments roil an already tense political landscape. The most successful student groups adjust their strategy frequently and are careful not to alienate any of the other factions.²⁴ Success in the exercise depends on internal coordination within the group, carefully tailoring their communications with the other factions, and adapting swiftly in response to shifting alliances. Flexibility and persistence are crucial, as late-stage actions can decisively alter outcomes. For teachers, the exercise requires an introductory discussion outlining the factions and the broader historical context. However, once students engage, their competitive energies generally permit the instructor to step back as they conduct independent research and maneuver for advantage. The one key intervention is to ensure that, during intense negotiations, the factions do not make commitments that exceed what would have been historically plausible. For example, the Dutch East India Company cannot promise territorial concessions in Southeast Asia to Tokugawa Japan or Qing China. Because it assumes little prior knowledge and provides detailed instructions and briefings, the exercise has proven effective in both high school and college classrooms.

Like most teaching exercises, Maritime Asia takes some liberties. Most notably, it conflates events that occurred across a longer period while also introducing forums for diplomatic negotiation that did not exist in this period.²⁵ What then do students learn? First, and most obviously, they discover that East Asia was a highly active hub for global piracy, but that these pirates – even if they committed brutal acts of maritime violence – look nothing like the lawless mariners that populate the popular imagination. In the VOC and the Zheng network, students confront two organizations that diverge significantly from standard templates. The Zheng organization started life as a pirate organization but later transitioned to become a state. The Dutch East India Company frequently engaged in aggressive and expansive acts of maritime violence against clearly neutral shipping, but it was always careful to coat everything it did in a thick layer of legitimacy through appeals to law.²⁶ Both organizations fused trade, politics, and violence together into a potent mix. By representing such complex organizations in an extended exercise, students gain new insight into the varied history of global piracy.

Second, students learn how difficult it is to delineate the boundary between state privateering and illegal piracy. VOC administrators drew on a well-stocked legal arsenal provided by writers like Grotius, but such arguments often carried little weight in practice in Asia. The most sophisticated legal arguments faltered in the face of local states determined to protect shipping and suppress violence. Third, and directly connected to this, students discover that influence over the ocean does not always rely on ships or the power of naval cannon. In the case of Atlantic piracy, British warships

were an indispensable tool for extending power. Tokugawa Japan or Ayutthaya possessed no such fleets and yet they were able to push influence out across long sea lanes. In each iteration of the Maritime Asia exercise, students representing the Dutch East India Company and the Zheng network emerge humbled by the divide between the formidable fleets they can assemble which were capable of devastating local shipping and the realities on the ground where these organizations became swiftly entangled within the confining grip of legal structures that stripped away their ability to act.

Although the Maritime Asia exercise occupies only a small portion of a typical semester long class, we have found that it consistently produces exceptional learning outcomes that remain with students long after the course itself has concluded. For this reason, we recommend it for use in a wide range of courses. By channeling students' competitive instincts and immersing them in a scenario where factions must navigate conflicting interests, the exercise fosters a deep and lasting engagement that transforms how students understand the long history of global piracy.

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Notes

¹ Quoted in Hans Turley, *Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash: Piracy, Sexuality and Masculine Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 44.

² Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 176

³ Lauren Benton challenges this perspective by demonstrating that captains and crews involved in violent acts actively sought to legitimize their behavior, often invoking documents that could be construed as authorizing their conduct. In Benton's words, "Mariners had one eye always on return and the possibility, however remote, of being brought to trial. As a consequence, they engaged in frequent legal posturing, the practice of rehearsing stories that might serve to establish actions as legal in prize proceedings or in criminal trials if the mariners ever landed in court to be tried as pirate." Lauren Benton, "Legal Spaces of Empire: Piracy and the Origins of Ocean Regionalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no. 4 (2005): 707.

⁴ Rediker suggests that the "multiethnic freebooters of 1716-26 numbered around four thousand over the decade." Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, 14.

⁵ For a table of *wakō* activity, see Tanaka Takeo, *Wakō: Umi no rekishi* (Tokyo: Kyōikusha, 1982), 203-7. The term *wakō* appears in Chinese and Korean official sources, but it is notably absent from Japanese materials. Despite this fact, historians have generally favored the Japanese reading over the Chinese (*wokou*) or Korean (*waegu*) pronunciation. The term is often literally translated as 'dwarf pirates.' See, for example: Wang Yong, "Realistic and Fantastic Images of 'Dwarf Pirates': The Evolution of Ming Dynasty Perceptions of the Japanese," in *Sagacious Monks and Bloodthirsty Warriors: Chinese Views of Japan in the Ming-Qing Period*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Norwalk, CT: EastBridge, 2002), 17-41.

⁶ For an excellent survey, see Robert Antony, *Golden Age of Piracy in China, 1520-1810* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2022).

⁷ See "Reacting to the Past," Reacting Consortium at Barnard College, accessed 26 June 2024, <https://reacting.barnard.edu/>.

⁸ See, Adam Clulow and Xing Hang, "Pirates, States, and Diplomacy in a Multipolar Maritime Asia," *Maritime Asia*, 2019, accessed 26 June 2024, <https://maritime-asia.org/content/pirates-states-and-diplomacy-multipolar-maritime-asia.html> for a short introduction to the exercise. The complete exercise is available via email request. It is not possible to post the full exercise online as its competitive nature means students seeking an advantage for their faction will invariably access it.

⁹ For the development of the Zheng maritime organization, see Xing Hang, *Conflict and Commerce in Maritime East Asia: The Zheng Family and the Shaping of the Modern World, c. 1620-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Antony, *The Golden Age of Piracy in China, 1520-1810*, 28.

¹¹ For a classic formulation that divides the cycle into three clear phases, see Philip Gosse, *The History of Piracy* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1934), 2-3. Our description here modifies and updates Gosse's formulation.

¹² Tonio Andrade, "The Company's Chinese Pirates: How the Dutch East India Company Tried to Lead a Coalition of Pirates to War against China, 1621–1662." *Journal of World History* 15, no. 4 (2004): 417.

¹³ Hugo Grotius, a young Dutch jurist, emerged as one of the Company's most influential legal champions. In a lengthy manuscript called *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty*—from which one chapter was published separately in 1609 as *Mare Liberum*—Grotius presented a systematic defense of Dutch privateering in Asia. See, Hugo Grotius, *Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty (De Jure Praedae Commentarius)*, trans. Gwladys L. Williams and Walter H. Zeydel, ed. Martine Julia van Ittersum (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006); Hugo Grotius, *Mare Liberum* (Leiden: Lodewijk Elzevier, 1609); English trans. in Hugo Grotius, *The Free Sea*, trans. Richard Hakluyt, ed. David Armitage (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004).

¹⁴ H.W. van Santen, "Trade Between Mughal India and the Middle East, and Mughal Monetary Policy, c. 1600-1660," *Asian Trade Routes*, ed. Karl Haellquist (London: Curzon Press, 1991), 93. Peter Borschberg notes that the "taking of prizes became a cornerstone not only of the economic fortunes of the company, but the establishment of the Dutch colonial empire in Asia." Peter Borschberg, "From Self-Defence to an Instrument of War," *Journal of Early Modern History* 17 (2013): 35.

¹⁵ Doi Tadao, ed. *Nippo jisho. Vocabulario da lingoa de Iapam* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1960), 36.

¹⁶ Copie remonstrantie van Jacques Specx overgegeven op 't comptoir Firando, 20 September 1621, VOC 1075:92v, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag (hereafter NL-HaNA).

¹⁷ Eventually, the Qing were able to win over a critical core of Zheng defectors, who helped them construct a navy from scratch. In 1683, this fleet proved superior to the Zheng, defeating them in an epic battle in the Taiwan Strait that resulted in the island's surrender to the Qing.

¹⁸ Taiwan Research Institute and Number One Archives, *Tongyi Taiwan dang'an*, 69-70

¹⁹ Taiwan Research Institute and Number One Archives, *Tongyi Taiwan dang'an*, 85. The Qing came close to recognizing the Zheng as legitimate rulers of their own vassal state. However, the two sides could not come to an agreement mostly because the Zheng insisted on preserving Ming institutions. In particular, Zheng officials refused the Qing demand to shave their hair and adopt the Manchu queue. Had the two sides found some way to break this impasse, the Zheng might have transitioned to become a Qing tributary in the manner of Korea or the Ryukyu kingdom.

²⁰ A similar incident took place in August 1661, when a VOC vessel, the *Roode Hert*, seized a Siamese court junk. For a description of this episode in its wider context, see Adam Clulow and Xing Hang, “Between the Company and Koxinga: Territorial Waters, Trade and War over Deerskins,” in Lauren Benton and Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, eds. *A World at Sea: Maritime Practices in Global History, 1500-1900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 37-52.

²¹ For more details on this incident, see Adam Clulow and Xing Hang, “Restraining Violence on the Seas: The Tokugawa, the Zheng Maritime Network and the Dutch East India Company,” in Peter H. Wilson, Marie Houlemare and Erica Charters, eds. *A Global History of Early Modern Violence* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), 142-160.

²² See Miki Watanabe, “The Elements of Concealment in Ryukyuan Diplomacy between Japan and China in Early Modern Times,” *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko* 75 (2017): 1–24.

²³ For example, in December 1672, Nagasaki officials seized three of the “wealthiest Koxinga junks” belonging to Zheng-affiliated merchants anchored in Nagasaki harbor. They were to be held until a suitable fine was paid. Caesar Dagregister, 2 Dec. 1672, VOC 1294, NL-HaNA.

²⁴ In their feedback after class, one student provided the following suggestion for future groups: “The main tip is to remember that no plan survives contact with the enemy. You may have spent all weekend coming up with a cunning plan to get allies on your side, but if your rival is willing to give up more than you, you will need to be flexible and adjust. The key is to listen to what the other factions want, and offer them just enough to satisfy them, but not too little that your rival can outspend you. It’s a tough balancing act. Always keep in mind that rivalries and alliances are shifting, and you can always turn an adversary into a partner.”

²⁵ In the buildup to these classes, we are careful to emphasize to students that while the core dynamics of the exercises, the main episodes, and the states themselves are all historically accurate, there was no single forum in the seventeenth century where these states interacted.

²⁶ Sanjay Subrahmanyam describes the “banal use of violence” that was so characteristic of the company’s operations, noting its presence “whether acted out or potential—whenever the VOC appeared on the scene.” Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Forcing the Doors of Heathendom: Ethnography, Violence, and the Dutch East India Company,” in *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity*, Charles Parker and Jerry Bentley, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 135.