

Relaxation and Restoration: Ming China's Management of the Turmoil in the Southern Littoral during the late Sixteenth Century

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Following the accession of the Longqing emperor in 1566, China underwent a decisive transition in its policy on maritime commerce. Before, all private trade with foreigners was condemned as illegal by the authorities, except for official envoys of tribute and enfeoffment. These were the only possible forms of relationships between China and other, assumedly barbarian peoples during the early Ming period. After 1566, however, Chinese ship merchants, if properly registered, were allowed to engage in lucrative foreign trade by sailing outward from Zhangzhou to Southeast Asian seaports overseas.

The actual process of how the authorization came to be accepted and decreed by the emperor still remains obscure. Neither crucial documents nor a casual mentioning regarding the proposal and admission of the relaxation of maritime trade has been found until now in the contemporary chronicles of the local governors and the emperor. However, it is almost certain that the reform took place in a period of great turmoil, and at a time when nobody in authority could establish a clear and definitive demarcation line between pirates and merchants in the jurisdiction.

This paper offers a close examination of a series of conflicts and wars that occurred in Southern Fujian during the sixteenth century, by tracing the activities of some of the prominent pirate leaders in the area. This microscopic inquiry into their rise and fall may show how intricate, and even interchangeable, relationships were between officials, merchants, soldiers and pirates; this volatility led the empire to restore, though always grudgingly, their political influence on the unofficial maritime network, which was eager to expand well beyond its proper territory.