

QING SHIH

QING SHIH WAS A PIRATE QUEEN. AS A GIRL BORN IN POVERTY TO A PEASANT FAMILY IN SOUTHERN CHINA, SHE HAD FEW OPPORTUNITIES BEFORE HER. BUT IN THE MIDST OF A BOOMING CITY, SHE CREATED A PIRATE EMPIRE THAT THREATENED THE MIGHTY QING DYNASTY ITSELF.

QING SHIH (1775-1844)

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GUANGZHOU

MACAO

QING SHIH WAS BORN TO A FAMILY SO POOR THAT THEY HAD TO SELL HER INTO SERVITUDE IN THE MIGHTY TRADING CITY OF GUANGZHOU.

SHE ARRIVED AS A SMALL CHILD IN A RAPIDLY GROWING CITY. GUANGZHOU HAD BECOME A MASSIVE COMMERCIAL PORT UNDER THE QING DYNASTY, WHO HAD LIMITED ALL OVERSEAS TRADE TO THIS ONE PORT. BUT WHILE A FEW GOT RICH, MOST LIVED LIVES OF GREAT POVERTY.

AS A CHILD, QING SHIH WORKED AS A 'FLOWER BOAT GIRL', ENTERTAINING WEALTHY CHINESE MERCHANTS. THIS WAS TERRIBLE WORK IN SOME WAYS, BUT SHE USED THE OPPORTUNITY TO EDUCATE HERSELF IN BUSINESS AND TO MEET POWERFUL MEN. ONE OF THESE WAS THE PIRATE CHENG I, WHOM SHE MARRIED IN 1801.

TOGETHER, CHENG I AND QING SHIH CREATED A GREAT PIRATE CONFEDERACY IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED. IT SOON INCLUDED SIX SQUADRONS OF ABOUT 70,000 PIRATES AND 400 SHIPS. THEY RAIDED EUROPEAN, CHINESE, AND JAPANESE MERCHANTS.

AFTER CHENG I DIED, QING SHIH REFUSED TO FOLLOW TRADITIONAL RULES FOR WIDOWS. INSTEAD, SHE TOOK OVER THE PIRATE CONFEDERACY, WHICH SHE TURNED INTO A VIRTUAL STATE WITH 'TAX OFFICES' THAT COLLECTED FEES FROM PASSING SHIPS, AND A MILITARY SO LARGE THAT THE RULERS OF CHINA THEMSELVES FEARED THEM.

UNABLE TO DEFEAT THE PIRATES, THE QING DYNASTY CHOSE TO NEGOTIATE WITH QING SHIH. SHE EVENTUALLY RETIRED WITH HER SECOND HUSBAND, CHANG PAO, WHO BECAME A MINOR NOBLEMAN. SHE REMAINED POLITICALLY ACTIVE AND RAN A LARGE GAMBLING HALL BEFORE SHE PASSED AWAY IN 1844 AT THE AGE OF 69.