

the
Flower
Boat Girl

A Novel Based on a True Story

Preview Edition



CHAPTER I
& Historical Notes

LARRY FEIGN

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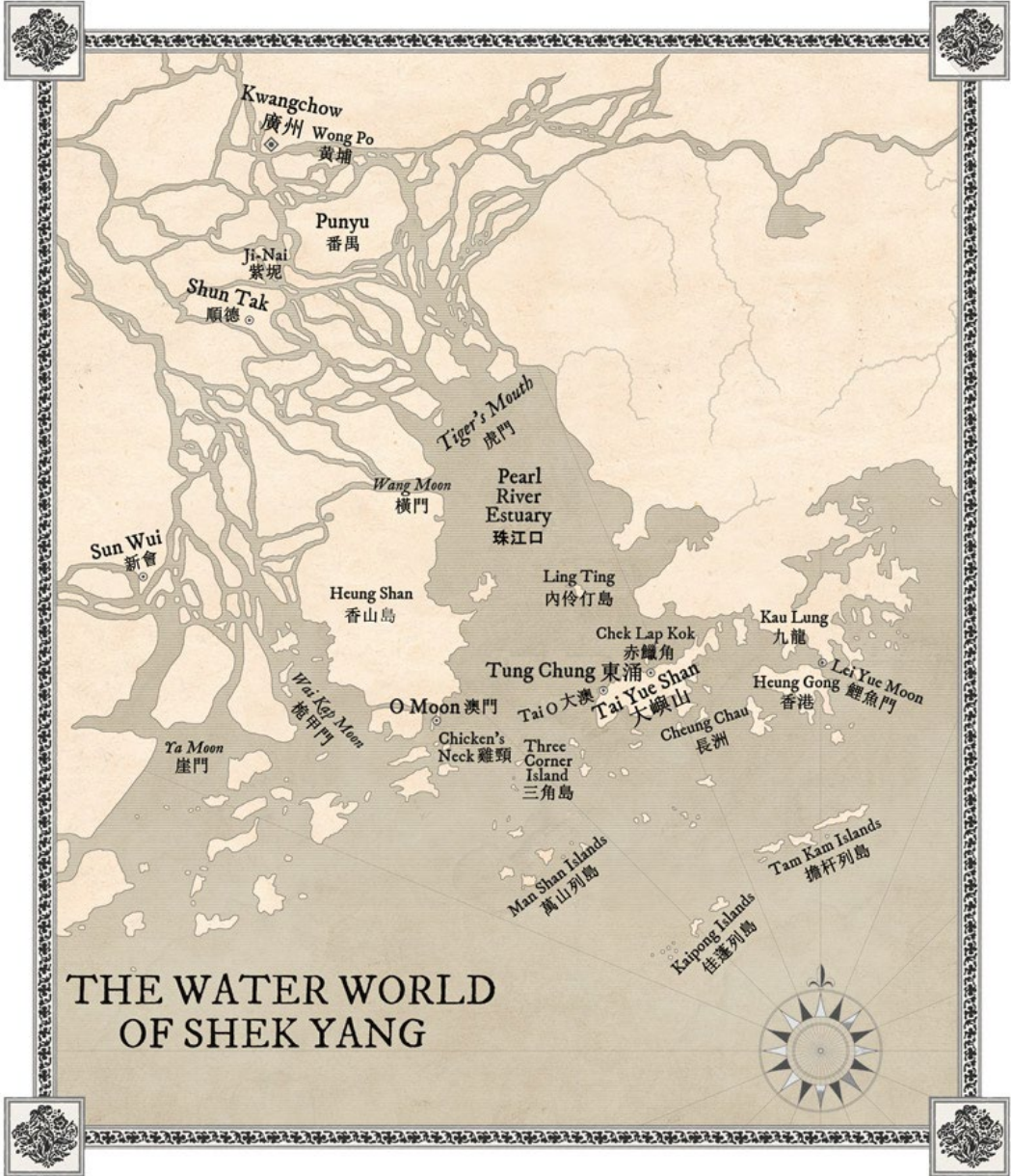
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THE WATER WORLD OF SHEK YANG

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Names follow the Chinese format of surname followed by given name(s). Shek Yang's family name, therefore, is Shek.

Astute readers will recognize many of these characters by names such as Cheng I Sao (or Zheng Yi Sao), Zhang Baozi, and so on. The trouble is, in real life no one called them that. These spellings are transliterations from the Mandarin (Putonghua) readings of their names, used by western scholars and propagated into popular histories and thousands of online articles. The actual people did not speak Mandarin in everyday life—if they even spoke it at all—and would certainly not address themselves or each other in what was essentially a foreign language.

The dominant language of the south China coast was, and remains, Cantonese, which differs from Mandarin as extensively as Portuguese diverges from French. For this simple reason, names of people and places in this book are transliterated as they would have been spoken: using Cantonese. Since there is no standard romanization for Cantonese, I primarily use a variation of Yale transcription, which I consider easiest on the eyes and tongue for English speakers.

A glossary is found at the end of the book.

嘉慶六年亥酉

PART I

—

Sixth Year

of the

Reign of Emperor

Ka-hing

—

1801

I

Magpies



I'll never believe in birds.

Especially magpies. Listen to them, squawking and clattering on the deck overhead, like armies battling on scratchy twig feet. The same thing every day before sunset—but today, they were more grating than usual.

I rose from the sleeping mat and pounded the ceiling. The customer in my bed snorted and rolled onto his side, offering a view of his scar-crossed coolie's back. I dared not hit the ceiling again, for fear of disturbing him and the anticipated tip. Let the birds wake him.

How did magpies become harbingers of good fortune? Was it because of that story, the one my mother loved to cry over? Every year at the height of summer, the magpies linked wings, forming a footbridge across heaven to unite a lonely weaving girl with her shepherd boy lover, just for one day.

"Why didn't she stay with him?" I always asked. "Why didn't she make the birds weave a bridge down to earth and let them both escape?"

Every year, my mother smiled at such questions. "Oh, Yang, my big-eyed girl, it's because a single day of pleasure so pure can last an entire year. Besides, we want to tell the story again next summer."

It was that time of year right now, the twenty-sixth summer of my life. Where was my bride away from this place? Where was my shepherd? The magpies cackled back: *Ha! Not for boat girls! Not for whores! Certainly not for you, Shek Yang!*

Faraway drumbeats scattered my thoughts. They sounded like fishermen beating pig skins to herd fish into nets, but this was neither the right time of day for it nor their usual slow, steady pulse. This tempo was hurried and uneven, a palpitating heart.

I draped a shawl over my shoulders and stepped to the porthole, rested my chin on folded arms, and stared out at my world.

Eight wooden huts hovered on stilts over the hard mud, same as they always had. The beached junk at the end hadn't been there when I was sold away as a child. Now it looked as parched and worm-ridden as this old boat, the one my young body paid for, now my hollow haven. Beyond, the mudflats stretched out forever, empty except for an old woman on a skid gathering mudskippers and the girl with her clam bucket who I'd found squatting in the cabin when I returned after thirteen years away.

A fluttering sea breeze chilled my sweat. The air tasted of iron and salt: a storm was coming. The fish would be swimming deep. Then why had the fishermen's drumming grown louder, more erratic?

In a paddy field somewhere, buffaloes moaned. Pigs whined. Dogs barked back. The magpies chattered. I'd forgotten how noisy this place could be.

I'd forgotten many things about Sun-wui. As a little girl, this narrow inlet had seemed like a wide-open gulf, big enough to swallow the world. I'd forgotten the stench of fish on everything, every plank, every stone, the salt-sour taste in the air from shrimp drying on racks.

And the mud, the mud, always the mud. Black and squishy at water's edge but scouring young fingers when they dug down for clams. Spreading inland, the mud turned coarse, pockmarked with stones and crab holes, but never dry enough to earn the name dirt, never letting go of whatever it sucked in: boulders, driftwood, my father's stranded fishing junk.

Nobody knew where he was, where he'd gone or whether he was still alive. Nothing was left of him, my mother, or the family we'd once been, in this rotting carcass of a vessel: not a strand of rope, not even a familiar stain on the deck. This hollow hulk that he'd traded my young life for had been abandoned by its spirits.

The clam girl splashed through a pool in the mud, swinging her bucket, stooping to examine something that caught her eye. I turned my head away, but too late; the memory flooded in.

Years and years ago, another little girl had set down a clam bucket in nearly the same spot and picked up a dazzling red scallop. *I'll give this to my new baby brother or sister, due any day now*, I'd thought. I remembered shrieking with laughter when a hermit crab popped out a claw and tickled my hand before I set it down and it scurried away. I'd clung to this memory through the years on the flower boats, always recalling that

last perfect moment of my life, before...but I always stopped there, humming, shouting, anything to block out what came next, the blood across this very cabin's floor—no, I couldn't bear the thought, not even now.

Everything suddenly went quiet, like the world holding its breath. No drumming, no birds, no breeze. The air weighed on my head.

The shawl whipped off my shoulders; a rough hand seized my breast.

His breath filled my ear. "Again."

My revulsion was tempered by the thought of his purse. Another copper cash toward the cost of a proper boat, something for once that was mine.

"Need to pay two times," I said.

"First one too quick."

"Not my fault, dear." Composing my best working smile, I half turned to him as something caught my eye.

A ship crept past the headland, a stout three-masted creature of nearly black wood, sails tinted red by the setting sun. I would have taken it for an eat-water coastal trader if it hadn't been for an unusually tall deckhouse at the rear. It swung into the inlet. I was stricken by its bulging painted eyes.

It didn't belong here. Local Kwangchow vessels rarely had eyes carved onto the bow, and Fukienese ones were round. But these were high and elongated, squinting like a tiger preparing to pounce.

The coolie tugged my arm. "You hear me, you bitch? Said fine. Pay twice."

Two ships, now three, all with tiger eyes. Other than that, they really were nothing more than tattered old junks. Whatever they'd come for didn't concern me, unless they sought the kind of refreshment I offered for cash. Meanwhile, I had an impatient customer to appease.

This time he took more pleasure in making me earn my money than in the act itself. Skillful hand work was required to prime him into shape. Then he climbed on from behind and grunted and growled like a bull, in rhythm with the fishermen's drumming, his queue swinging past his shoulder into my face with every thrust. I made the necessary noises while picturing a treat for afterward—slices of fresh roast pork, or a bowl of sweet bean curd, or maybe his tip would cover both.

A sharp knock at the cabin door so startled me that I nearly bucked him off. He squealed in pain.

“Ah-Yang!” It was the little clam girl. She pounded louder.

What did she think she was doing? The stupid girl knew she was never, ever to disturb me when I was working. Hadn’t I been kind to her? Given her the forward hold? Always sharing rice in exchange for a handful of clams? How dare she interrupt?

The latch jumped from the slot and the door creaked open.

I screamed, “Get out!”

The coolie threw himself off, smacked his head on a low beam, and danced into his trousers.

“Not you.” I lunged for his leg, but he slipped away.

“Wait—you pay money!”

He nearly trampled the girl on his way out.

“My money, you turtle egg! Pay me!”

I almost crushed the girl myself as I stumbled through the doorway, pulling on my crumpled clothes. By the time my tunic was half buttoned, he was already bounding behind the fishing huts toward the paddy fields.

“See what you did?” I grabbed the clam girl’s muddy shirt and dragged her out to the deck. Tears and sweat mixed on her face.

“Ah-Yang, I—”

The unmistakable crack of a musket shot singed the air. Magpies surged from the poop deck, forming a shrieking black cyclone overhead. With a high-pitched burst, they scattered toward the darkening hills.

The girl grabbed my arm and pointed across the seaward rail.

“I said pirates!”

I counted five junks. Men clambered over the rails into sampans; others jumped straight into the water. With the sun low behind them, they looked like cutout figures in a shadow play. No one had ever told me what to do in the event of a raid. Were they here to plunder? To murder? What would they do to women and girls?

“Run!” I yelled.

Back in the cabin, I flung open my storage chest, pulled out my best silk tunic, and grabbed a padded vest. What else to keep out of their hands? I sifted through a small pile of trinkets—hairpins, copper bracelets, a dented mirror—the pathetic vestiges of my former life. Let the bandits have them. All except an ivory comb which I tucked snugly into my hair.

I dragged the sleeping mat aside, reached under a loose floorboard,

and removed my money purse with its reassuring metallic rattle.

The girl screamed from the doorway, “Ah-Yang! They’re coming!”
“Don’t wait for me. Go! Run!”

I stretched my hand deeper into the gap until it found the slippers. The embroidery caught on a splinter until I freed them with a gentle tug. Only a few threads damaged. I pressed the soft silk to my cheeks, as if they might still hold some residual warmth from my mother’s feet.

I threw on the tunic and vest, stuffed everything else into pockets, ran onto the deck, and, without stopping, made a flying leap onto the hard mud below.

The first wave of pirates was just knee-deep in water. More surged from sampans and junks. Dodging mounds of fish bones and discarded nets behind the fishing huts, I met the clam girl crouched at the paddy’s edge. Stupid girl! Why hadn’t she run ahead?

Clouds of mosquitoes chased us along the muddy causeway and through a taro field before finally giving up on us as we ran through a fan palm grove. What lay up ahead was worse than stinging bugs. At the village gate, landsmen holding bamboo poles blocked fishing families from seeking shelter inside. One villager spotted us and waved a menacing pike. I tugged the girl’s hand to move faster.

“Ah-Yang, I can’t run that fast.”

“You have to if we’re going to get around those ox prick Puntis!”

Fishermen from neighboring huts tried to wrestle past the barricade, but they were no match for swinging pikes. Among the mob of defenders, I recognized men who’d visited my bed, though that would earn me no advantage. Those peasants and petty traders who called themselves Puntis, so-called *natives of the land*—to them I, the girl, my neighbors, were all nothing but lowly Tankas—boat people, creatures of the water—little different than the pirates now swarming up the flats.

“How many of those bastards cheated you for your clams?” I said.

The girl struggled to run and speak at the same time. “I don’t... know. A lot.”

“Time to cheat them back.”

I pulled her off the footpath into a patch of tall weeds. Men shout-ed at us, but we had the advantage of a relatively clear field. To intercept us, they’d have to wade through a swamp of broadleaves that would leave them itching for the rest of the day.

A gap between a house and a walled pigsty gave us a place to catch

our breaths. It opened into an alley which hooked around a corner, leading us straight into a crowd surging up the market lane. Men carried elderly parents on their backs, older children dragged younger ones, while too many wives hobbled behind on tiny lotus feet. They might be daintier than us Tanka women, who never adhered to that tradition, but at least we could run to save ourselves. That was, if we could reach the Kwun Yam temple that everyone else was rushing to before its gates slammed shut.

I steered the two of us along the edge of the throng, past the bean curd shop, past the ironsmith, wedging ourselves through the herbalist's family who were carrying armfuls of precious roots and fungus somewhere out of reach of the pirates.

At last the temple structure appeared at the bend in the lane, surrounded by a sea of people.

"Our only chance is to squeeze through," I said.

A wild-eyed woman stepped between us and yanked the girl's head back by the hair, maybe searching for a missing child. Before I could reach her, I was struck in the face by a duck cage on a shoulder pole. The crazed woman vanished into the crowd. I spat out a feather and we plunged onward.

The temple's worship hall and lofts overflowed with squirming bodies, and the small courtyard teemed with people. Monks tried to lever the heavy timber gates closed as whole families pushed through, ignoring shouts of, "Women and children only!"

That was us: a child and a twenty-six-year-old woman. I picked up the girl and dashed for the narrowing entrance at the same time as ten or twelve others. I had my fingers on the gate's edge when something hard knocked the wind from me.

"No Tanka! No whores!"

A neckless pear of a man herded us back with a pike. He was no monk, rather some local vigilante. I put down the girl and attempted to step around him. In return, he mirrored my movements. We continued our crab-like dance while people bayed at us like dogs.

"Tanka whore! Tanka whore!"

The clam girl kicked the fat man's legs. "Get in the temple," I ordered. Instead, she dug her fingernails into his flesh.

The taunts grew louder. "Tanka whore! Water chicken whore!"

The fat man posed to skewer the girl with his pike. I grabbed the pole, attempting to twist him off balance, but he had the size and

temperament of an enraged buffalo.

“Tanka whore! Filthy—”

The temple gate was closing. Just three or four steps to the left and I could slip inside. I would be safe; I would be free. But what about the girl? By the time I pried her from his leg, the gate would have shut, leaving both of us at the mercy of the Puntis and the approaching pirates. It wasn't my fault that the girl had made such a stupid move. Yet she had done it to save me.

Screams pierced my ears, shooting strength into my bones. I ducked under the swinging pike, peeled the girl from his leg and threw her through the narrowing gap between gate and wall. I lunged for safety, but too late. The gate slammed shut behind the girl, catching my sleeve in its great wooden jaws. I hammered and kicked, barely hearing my own voice.

“Open up! I'll pay you!”

My answer was the thump of the bolt sliding into its socket.

I was a pinned target for whatever punishment the fat Punti wanted to wreak. I turned my head to face my tormentor, but he was lost in the fleeing crowd.

At the far end of the lane, in the last evening light, pirates poured into the village.

I struggled to free my sleeve, but the silk was stubborn. With one foot against the gate, I finally yanked my sleeve free, tearing a gash in the material.

The first black turban appeared just steps away. An old man swung his walking cane at the pirate. A swish of a blade, then the cane and the fist holding it disappeared in a spray of blood. A woman was dragged past by the hair. Which way to flee? The lane was a simmering mass of bodies colliding on all sides, offering no sense of direction.

Spying a boy squeezing into a narrow gap between houses, I took my chances and bolted through the crowd. The alley was coal black and smelled like the cesspit of hell, but it might make a passable hideout until the raid was over. I slipped on something greasy, breaking my fall on what felt like a mound of garbage, as torchlight bloomed on the walls.

I crouched into a low curl, narrowed my eyes, and tried not to breathe. A scraggly-bearded figure raised his torch and peered into the passageway, baring his teeth as though he'd spotted me. I considered my defense: fingernails in the eyes or a sharp blow with my money

purse? A balled-up wad of rubbish in the face was likely best.

A second pirate clapped the bearded one's shoulder. In a blink they were gone.

I stumbled out the other end of the passage into a smoke-filled lane drenched in red glow. Two female figures ran from a burning house pursued by bandits. A paper window steps away burst into flame. Somewhere inside, a woman pleaded.

It all became clear. The pirates were uninterested in men. Half the girls on the flower boats had been taken in village raids and sold into whoredom. I was never going back there. Death first.

Voices filled the alley behind me; there was no chance of retreat. I hugged the walls, creeping through shadows away from the fires. I nearly fell through an open doorway into a dark room, deserted except for a lingering odor of cooked chicken. A rear exit led to a private courtyard.

I tried a door on the other side but found it firmly bolted.

"I'm a villager! Let me in!" My pounding was answered by a lone dog's hysterical bark.

A dilapidated stone border wall functioned as a crude stairway to within reach of the roof. A misty light rain slickened the tiles. After hooking my fingers through a broken gap, I managed to hoist myself, crawl over the peak, and lay flat. The tiles thumped against my chest; no, it was my heartbeat. *Slow down, heart. You're safe here.*

From here I could see the entire market street and the hellish opera unfolding below. Pirates hurried from shops with sacks over their heads; others herded women through the muddy lane. Dogs, alarmed by popping flames, ran every which way.

My hands gripped the tiles so hard that one came loose. I was afraid—not about the fires or the people I recognized down there. Even as a child this village felt foreign to me. The taunts I'd endured—*Dirty Tanka! Motherless one! Drunkard's daughter! Leave your fish. No, I won't pay more!*—those had changed to *Tanka whore!* But the meaning was the same: forever contemptible, forever the outsider. Watching the place burn moved nothing in my heart. The fear in me was for myself.

A woman screamed somewhere below. I knew I shouldn't, but I crept toward the roof's edge to peek.

A heavysset man pinned a teenage girl to the mud while two other bandits tugged at her trousers. I felt more disgust toward the men than pity for the girl. She was Punti who, in normal circumstances,

would fling a cutting look my way. Regardless, I had no power to change things. The roof tile snapped free in my hand. How tempting to slide it to the edge in just the right spot and watch it drop straight onto a bandit's skull. If I pulled my head back in time...if the stocky one shifted just a bit closer—

A fist folded around my ankle and nearly twisted it off.

“Get off!” said a hog-gravelly voice. “You’ll bring them here!”

I tried to jerk away, but he wrenched my foot until I thought it would break. Tiny piggish eyes peered through the weak light. Did he mean to push or pull?

“Let me inside then,” I whispered.

“If it isn’t the Tanka whore!” He sounded like I’d interrupted some hard drinking. He twisted harder.

“Let me in. I’ll do you free.”

“Not your choice. You do me anyway.”

He tugged my leg, nearly losing his grip. I slipped down the rain-slick roof. “Let go, so I can climb up,” I said.

“Lying slut. Try to cheat me.” He leaned over the crest, his other arm reaching for my free leg. Then a surprised, swinish grunt.

A mound of dark flesh skidded downward, one arm flailing, the other firmly attached to my ankle. I grasped for a nail, a crack, a hole to cling, to break my slide, to pull myself out of the way. I realized too late—I still held the broken tile.

His full mass barreled over me into the dark, dragging my foot with him.

“Let go!”

Then I had nothing left to cling to. My legs kicked free, striking air. Flames, blurred and spinning. I knew I was falling; I knew it would never stop. If I stretched out both arms, could I fly away like a bird?

My head struck something neither hard nor soft. Life drained into darkness and silence.

So, this was death.

Death was black. Death was numb.

Something poked my back. Laughter dribbled into my ears. My cheeks burned. Vision returned, my eyes filled with fire, which focused into a single flame. It was only a torch held to my face.

“A goddess fallen from heaven.” Someone yanked me up by the armpits. Another pirate leaned close and leered.

Men surrounded me, all clad in black, except for a boy who stood

out in his violet turban. He picked up something from the ground and waved it in front of me: my ivory comb! I tried to grab it, but my arms were held fast from behind. The boy laughed and stuck the comb in a fold of his turban.

“Lucky you landed on him, not him on you,” a pirate said.

I didn’t understand until whoever held my arms turned me to look. My rooftop assailant lay twisted on the ground, a broken roof tile lodged firmly behind his ear.

“Lucky us,” the tree-trunk shaped pirate said. He nodded to another, who bound my wrists behind my back and nudged me forward. The village burned around me, undeterred by the rain.

Death was fire.

My captor pressed me toward a line of shuffling women. *No! Not a slave again. Give me real death instead!*

I kicked backward, wishing for a groin, but met only air, answered with a knee in my spine and stinging slaps across my face. Every shred of strength ebbed out of me like icy rivers.

Death was ice.

Death was stones and debris stabbing my feet. Death was fists and pikes prodding me forward behind marching bodies. It was throbbing shoulders, dripping matted hair in my face that I couldn’t flip away. It was sprawled figures illuminated by an oily golden glow—some moving, others stiff as logs. It was the hiss of snakes, or laughing ghosts, or rain-drops striking hot embers.

Death mocked me as I passed the last houses, where, overhead, the magpies, fooled by fires into a second sunset, squawked merrily in the trees.

II
Historical &
Cultural Notes



Happy Magpies

Let's begin, like the story, with birds.

In Western cultures, magpies are among the most despised of birds; the only creature to refuse sanctuary aboard Noah's Ark, the only bird who declined to sing while Christ suffered on the cross. Ever since, magpies are regarded in the West as evil, harbingers of doom, as thieves of shiny objects.

Magpies are received quite differently in China. Among the favorite birds in Chinese folklore, their name in Chinese — *hei jue* (*xi que*) — translates as “happy magpie”. When a magpie appears, especially one engaged in singing, it's an omen of happiness and opportunity, overcoming of obstacles, and positive change.

I reminded myself of that every day as I sat down to write this book. Every morning began with a cacophony of magpies gathering right over my head on the roof of my village house. They screeched the day's greetings to each other while their nail-like talons hopped and skittered on the thin aluminum panels. Some mornings, it sounded like the entire magpie population of the island had arrived for an avian rave bash, rattling the roof with their scratchy dancing to the blare of heavy metal shrieking choruses, until, like Yang in the story, I



The Flower Boat Girl

would slap the ceiling with hard objects to break up the party.

How did such noisy birds become auspicious symbols of happiness and fortune? This might be traced back to the ancient legend of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl, passed down for thousands of years and considered one of the four great love stories in Chinese culture.

The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl

Once there was a young man named Ngau Long (Niu Lang), who went to live with his brother and sister-in-law after their parents died. The brother's wife put him to work doing all the house chores and herding the cattle. One day she sent him out with their nine cows and ordered him not to come home until he returned with ten. Afraid of his sister-in-law but too honest to steal, Ngau Long didn't know what to do. An old man passing by asked him why he looked so upset. When Ngau Long explained, the old man said he'd seen a cow lying sick up on Fook Ngau (Fu Niu) Mountain.

The young cowherd ventured up the mountain and found the suffering cow. For three days he fed and nursed the animal until, on the fourth day, it stood up and revealed that it was a fairy from heaven who had been banished to earth in the form of a cow. Ngau Long cared for the poor creature for a whole month until it was strong enough to walk home with him. But his sister-in-law was so furious at his long absence that she kicked him out of her house. Ngau Long was once again homeless, wandering the countryside with his magic cow.

One day he spotted a beautiful girl working at a loom beside a river. Little did he realize that this was Jik Lui (Zhi Nu), the daughter of the Jade Emperor of Heaven. Before long, the two fell in love and married, setting up home beside the river, where Jik Lui did her weaving while Ngau Long attended their farm. They had two children and made a happy life together.

Then one day the Empress of Heaven discovered that her daughter had married a mere mortal. She ordered the girl to return to Heaven,

alone. Forced to choose between leaving her beloved husband and children, or doom for all three, Jik Lui surrendered to her mother's command. The cowherd was devastated. He preferred death to life without his true love.

The magic cow took pity on Ngau Long. She told the young man that she wanted to pay back the good deed that he had done in saving her life. The cow told Ngau Long to kill her and put on her hide, which would enable him to fly up to Heaven and rejoin his beloved Weaver Girl. Weeping bitterly, Ngau Long accepted the cow's selfless sacrifice. He wrapped himself in the cow's hide and carried his children up to Heaven.

The Empress of Heaven was furious when she found out. She pulled a golden hairpin from her hair and scratched a wide river across the sky, dividing the lovers forever across the starry gulf which the Chinese call the River of Heaven, known in the West as the Milky Way. Juk Lui sits on one bank sadly weaving while Ngau Long is far across Heaven, caring for their two children. If you look up at the night sky, you can see them, the stars Altair and Vega, known in Chinese as the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl.

But once a year, the magpies take pity on the separated lovers. On the seventh night of the seventh lunar month, all the magpies in the world fly up to Heaven to form a bridge across the sky, so that the Shepherd Boy and the Weaving Girl can come together for one whole night.

Since then, all romantics, and especially those pining for a faraway lover, celebrate Double-Seven Day as Chinese Valentine's Day, also known as the Magpie Festival.

The Early Life of Shek Yang

While it's almost certain that Yang would have learned the story of the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl from her mother or father, very little is known about her life before joining the pirates, other than her place of birth.

Shek Yang was born in 1775 in Sun-wui (Xinhui) District in Kwangtung Province.

Lying in the southwestern region of the Pearl River Delta, Sun-wui was at that time an area of flatlands and low hills threaded with countless tributaries and water channels and, like everywhere in the delta, peppered with farming villages and boat people communities, often situated beside each other in a strained symbiosis. Though land people—who called themselves Punti (“original inhabitants”)—and people of the water lived in proximity for centuries, each considered the other an entirely different race and culture.

The water folk, called by the derogatory term Tanka, may in fact not be descended from Han Chinese, though there is divided opinion on this. Many terms in Cantonese and particularly in boat people dialect are similar to Vietnamese, as are some aspects of their physical appearance, indicating a link to the geographically closer southeast Asians than to pure Han Chinese from the north. For whatever reasons, the boat people were the lowest caste in imperial China, derided by land-dwelling Chinese as being descended from water snakes. They were the only community barred by law from receiving education or serving in government posts. As a result, most boat people were illiterate. They lived permanently either on their boats or in little wooden houses mounted on stilts beside the water. Legends abounded even through the 20th century of boat people whose feet never touched land

from cradle to grave. Segregated as they were, limited to eking out subsistence livings as seasonal fishermen and women or transporting cargo, barred from education, and despised by neighboring communities, it was no wonder that many turned to piracy, while others in desperation sold their daughters into servitude or prostitution.

Selling of daughters was common practice (and still is, unofficially) across China among the lower classes, who viewed girls as financial burdens who would end up marrying and therefore helping to support someone else's family. This isn't to say that poor Chinese peasants and boat people were, or are, heartless toward their daughters. But in a financial pinch, a girl could be a source of ready cash. Many girls were sold as babies in arranged marriages with toddler boys, passing the costs to the families they were marrying into and would later contribute to. They were the lucky ones. Quite a few were sold or indentured as servants to wealthier households. How many were condemned to sale as entertainers and prostitutes? Pirates were responsible for much of the prostitute trade, selling off captured young girls they were unable to ransom back to their families. But there were a good many agents trawling the coasts and countryside, enticing desperate families with fistfuls of silver. The circumstances of parents selling or indenturing daughters into prostitution, described in a later chapter of the novel, are based on genuine testimonies from two and three hundred years ago.

We have no proof that Yang's family sold her, but it's difficult to imagine that a young girl would have travelled on her own 200 li (around 62 miles) upriver to engage in the sex trade. There, according to several accounts, Yang spent her miserable youth aboard the notorious 'flower boats'.

Flower Boats

Flower boats were floating brothels, found in ports large and small along the China coast, but none more more legendary than the flower boats of Kwangchow (Guangzhou).

The center of Kwangchow's nightlife was Shamin, a sandy island beside the city which years later was ceded to French and British concessions after the Opium Wars. But up until that time, it was the place to board an "egg boat"—a small water taxi with an egg-shaped hull and canopy—to seek entertainment aboard one of the many flower boats lined up offshore, each competing to lure in customers with girls dressed like Chinese opera figures beckoning, to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals.

Elaborately decorated on the outside with paint, carvings, and lanterns, these large ships included a reception room furnished with ornate furniture, mirrors, inlays, and marble, where patrons were served tea



and feasts, before making their way into a maze of cubicles, separated by colorful embroidered curtains, where heavily made-up and gaudily attired young ladies indulged them in a variety of pleasures. Because chastity was one of the loftiest feminine virtues, there was normally at least one scroll extolling high moral precepts greeting arriving customers.

The flower boats were divided into two classes: ones which served wealthy customers, in which the girls were mainly Han Chinese with bound "lotus feet", and those which served the lower classes, in which girls' feet were unbound. Considering that boat people did not bind women's feet, since they were expected to work aboard ships, and taking into account Yang's later career among the pirates, it's certain that her feet had never been subjected to binding. So we know which class of flower boat she served.

A colorful account of the flower boats is preserved for posterity in *Six Records of a Floating Life*, a memoir by Shen Fu, a young civil servant who generously shares his experiences while visiting Kwangchow in 1793. His mention of the flower boat girls' feet gives us some idea of his budget. Following is a brief excerpt:

We went out together from Chinghai Gate, took a small boat that looked like half an egg shell with a tent over it, and went first to Shamien (Shameen). The girls' boats are called 'flower boats'; they were all arranged in two ranks facing one another with a water lane left between them so that small boats could get through. Each group of some ten or twenty boats was tied to a horizontal timber to protect it from the sea wind. Between each two boats was a wooden stake with a rattan ring around it, and the boats were tied to the ring so that they could float up and down with the tide.

The madam of the first boat we called at was called the Lady With the Combed Hair. On her head was a hollow framework of silver wire about four inches high around which she wound her hair, and with a long hairpin she had fixed a flower behind one ear. She wore a short jacket and trousers of black, the trousers reaching to her ankles. A towel of red and green was tied around

her waist, and she had taken off her shoes. Her costume made her look like the actors of women's parts in a play.

She bowed and welcomed us to the boat with a smile and pulled aside the curtain so that we could enter the cabin. Chairs and stools were arranged along each side and in the middle was a large couch. A door led to the stern of the boat.

The woman shouted that guests had arrived, and we immediately heard the sound of shoes pattering out. Some of the girls wore their hair in a bun, some in braids coiled on top of their heads. They had used so much powder they looked whitewashed, and then had used rouge as red as a pomegranate. Some had red jackets and green trousers, others green jackets and red trousers. Still others wore short stockings and embroidered butterfly shoes or were barefoot and wearing silver anklets. They knelt on the couch or leant against the doorway. Their eyes sparkled, but they said not a word.

Next, we went to the Arsenal, where the girls were dressed in the same fashion. The only difference was that all of them, young and old, could play the mandolin. When I spoke to them, they would only reply, 'Mi?' ("What?" in Cantonese).¹



Typically, the girls' fees were collected by the boat's proprietor, with most going to pay off their indenture, and some distributed as tips

¹ Leonard Pratt and Chiang Su-hui, trans. and eds. Shen Fu. *Six Records of a Floating Life*. London: Penguin Books, 1983.

to the young boys who also lived aboard, performing cleaning duties and sometimes escorting troublesome customers away. Many working girls mired themselves in a cycle of perpetual servitude by squandering their meager earnings on exotic birth control remedies, including mercury, while escaping the bleakness of their lives by succumbing to opium addiction. The more ambitious ones salted away their income and bought their freedom, Many went freelance as sing-song girls, a somewhat higher rank of female entertainer, who each operated their own one-woman pleasure sampans. Others were encouraged to invest in or buy their own flower boat. A lucky few were taken away by customers to become concubines.

Based on the evidence that Yang was abducted by pirates, and that this could not have happened in the center of crowded, busy Kwangchow, it's fair to assume that she had the discipline save up to buy her freedom from the flower boats and leave the city.

Eyewitness to a Village Raid

While most accounts claim that Yang was kidnapped, none say where or offer any details. Although it's a total guess on my part, it's plausible that after leaving the flower boats, she returned to her home village in Sun-wui. We do know that she joined the pirates in 1801, at age 25 or 26.

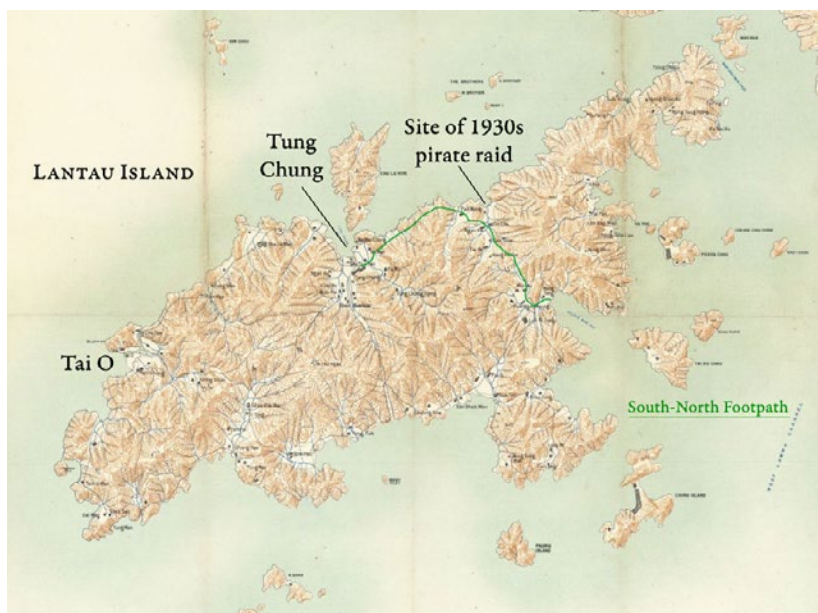
Pirates didn't raid poverty-stricken farming and fishing villages in search of gold and valuables. For that, their main targets were smaller ports and cargo ships. They raided villages to grab food, women, and young boys. Hostages were then held offshore for a few days while ransoms were negotiated with their families. If no release fees were forthcoming, women captives were auctioned off to crewmen as wives, while boys had no choice but to join the crew. The most attractive unransomed women were typically claimed by the captain. As were the most fit and handsome boys, who were often adopted as catamites (male concubines), a position that offered many privileges. Some of the most powerful pirates on the south China coast began their careers as a captain's "blossom boy".

The account of the raid which opens this book is based on scattered descriptions of pirate incursions around that time. But those don't come close to the harrowing first-hand experiences of an old woman I met while lost in the woods.

My wife Cathy and I were on one of our regular weekend hikes from our home on the southeast shore of Lantau Island to Tung Chung, on the island's north side. Since the late 1990s, Tung Chung has been

a futuristic Tomorrowland of glass and steel residential skyscrapers and gateway to the international airport. But over two hundred years ago, Tung Chung's sheltered bay was home to an infamous pirate dynasty named Cheng.

For centuries, the main footpath linking south and north Lantau ran right past where our house now stands. The path is still there, many of its ancient cobblestones still visible. That was the route we were walking that day, over hills and through forests that had once supplied trees for buildings and charcoal, the tallest and straightest prized for ships' masts.



Somewhere along the way we took a side trail for a change and ended up descending a densely wooded hillside, where the trail abruptly ended. We doubled back up the steep, slippery slope but the path seemed to have magically vanished. Completely disoriented now, we decided to continue downhill until we reached the bottom, hoping to find a coastal footpath.

A short while later we were hopelessly lost, no trail or coastline in sight, all alone in the forest. Except for the thugs and thieves.

Twigs crackled a short distance away, too heavy to be a barking deer, a protected native species of dwarf deer. We didn't think there were any wild boars left on the island. The last tiger sighting here had

been in 1911. Sparsely populated Lantau Island was still a hideout for illegal immigrants from mainland China, often hungry and desperate after sneaking across the sea border in small boats. Or it might have been criminals digging up rare Buddhist pine trees which could be sold for big profits across the border. Anyone caught in the act was sure to be unfriendly.

We made terrible ninjas, creeping from tree to tree toward the source of the noise. An ancient-looking woman stared at us with the same suspicion that had just been frothing over in our imaginations. Cathy explained that we were lost, on our way to Tung Chung. Visibly relaxed, the woman asked if I'd carry one of her baskets.

They were filled with leaves, branches, and roots that she gathered every week to brew into medicine for her husband. Her village, she said, was about a twenty minute walk. From there we could pick up the path to Tung Chung.

After grilling her about the medicinal properties of the various plants, Cathy asked if she was native to Lantau.

"Born here, sure. My husband and I worked in Kowloon for a number of years, then we came back."

Cathy asked her age.

The woman laughed. "Eight-five."

Born in 1925. Fireworks burst in my head.

"Did you ever see pirates?" I asked.

She seemed so taken aback that Cathy repeated my question in properly accented Cantonese.

"You know about them?" the woman said.

I knew. The Pearl River Delta had been wracked by a fierce wave of piracy in the early 1930s. Heavily armed sailing fleets hijacked trading ships and even passenger ferries all across the delta from Macau to the waters off Lantau Island. Many lives were lost until they were violently suppressed by the British Hong Kong authorities.

Cathy explained that I was researching a book.

"I don't know what to tell you. They came in and wrecked our village. I hid most of the time. I was only seven or eight."

"In this village we're going to?" I said.

"No, they were spared. Too far inland. I lived down there." She indicated farther downhill and named the village. "They sailed right up to the beach, broke into shops, stealing things. They went from house

to house, grabbing girls. Some houses they set on fire. My mother hid me under the kitchen stove, covered me with, I don't remember, canvas sheets, I think. Even through that I smelled so much smoke."

"Did they kill anyone?" Cathy asked for me.

The woman seemed disturbed by the blunt question. We—I mostly—were coming across a bit too enthusiastic. But how could I not be? Here was someone who'd seen Chinese pirates face-to-face!

Yes, some villagers had died, she said. Others might have run off, but never came back. No, she didn't remember if anyone was ransomed. She was so young at the time, how would she have known? They stole chickens and pigs, though. No, that was the only raid she remembered.

Cathy gave me a look. We'd obviously stirred up some burning embers of memory.

We reached her house and set down her baskets. Then she pointed at a room across the lane and asked if we knew anyone who wanted to rent it. We offered to let her know and took down her phone number.

A couple years later when I finally sat down to write the first chapter, some of the haunting incidents she described made their way into the story. I had a few questions about the layout of her childhood village and other things, so I gathered up the nerve to call the only living person I'd ever met who had seen Chinese pirates on sailing junks.

The old woman's number was no longer in service.

Ships' Eyes

Yang senses danger in the eyes bulging from the hull of the lead ship. She can guess the ship's origin by the shape of its sails: rectangular sails would indicate a ship from the north, but these are scallop-shaped, typical of junks from Fukien, Kwangtung, and farther west. Yet she is thrown off by its eyes.

Oculi, as they're officially called, come in various shapes and orientations. Junks from the central coast of China, from Fukien (Fujian) north to Chekiang (Zhejiang) have round oculi. They are typically made of two painted wooden circles sandwiched on top of each other and mounted on both sides of the bow. Fishing vessel oculi focus downward to help fishermen search for fish and scare away competitors such as whales, while trading vessels gaze forward, helping to navigate clear passage ahead.

Kwangtung (Guangdong) and Kwangshi (Guangxi) junks rarely have eyes, which is why she knows the ships aren't from her region. Round-eyed Fukienese ships would have been fairly common in the



Pearl River Delta, but the long, slanted oculi staring at Yang alert her that the approaching ships are from somewhere alien.

Perhaps she realizes that elongated eyes are typical of junks from the China-Vietnam border area and farther south, borrowed from the Arab style.



China may have invented a great many things, but oculi are an exception. The practice of placing eyes on ships originated in ancient Egypt and made its way eastward over the centuries. Naval scholars believe that Chinese mariners adapted the idea from Arab vessels they traded with off the coasts of Burma and southeast Asia. The original Egyptian oculi were elongated, painted directly on the hull with colorful borders. Later dhows and other Indian Ocean ships followed a similar pattern, indicating that round wooden Fukienese ships' eyes were a Chinese stylistic innovation.

Pirate Fashion

In the first chapter, the pirates are identifiable by their turbans. The boat people of southern China dressed pragmatically. Men wore black or dark blue knee-length tunics over wide-legged trousers, both made of nankeen, a sturdy cotton material. Women wore the same thing, though their tunics had hoods sewn on at the collar, like modern hoodies.



Whole families, including women and children, lived together on board and were expected to work, which is why foot binding was unheard of. Shoes weren't worn on deck, except on formal occasions such as weddings, where men and women who could afford them might also don full-length robes made of cotton or even silk, embroidered with various designs.

An edict in 1645 required every man in the Qing Dynasty to shave the crown of his head, while the hair in the back was braided into a queue and coiled into a topknot, all in strict imitation of the Manchu rulers in Peking. Pirates were not exempt from this strictly-enforced law, nor was there any evidence of widespread resistance. Sea bandits, after all, were motivated by poverty and greed rather than by politics. They had enough reasons to worry about prosecution; no need to add a fashion offense to the list.

The Flower Boat Girl

In any case, shaved foreheads and queues weren't always visible on pirate scalps. Whereas most fishing folk wore wide, bell-shaped woven straw hats, pirate men wrapped their heads in turbans made of black or grey silk crepe. Some well-known pirates expressed their individuality by using purple and other colored silk. One could reliably assume that a fully-turbaned male crew was not to be trusted out at sea or when swarming through a village gate.

The Story Behind the Story



I first heard the name Cheng Yat Sou (a.k.a. Cheng I Sao or Zheng Yi Sao) from an old Chinese sailor in the canal-lined fishing village of Tai O at the western tip of Lantau Island, where his family has lived for generations. He mentioned a song his grandmother used to sing about a lady pirate who fought the full might of the government and won. He didn't remember the words but recalled that Cheng Yat Sou was revered as an outlaw hero.

I found no mention of the song in any library or online source. Instead, I discovered hair-raising references to a fierce lady pirate. Portrayed as a wildcat of a woman and connected to Hong Kong's most famous outlaw, Cheung Po Tsai, her story seemed straight out of a swash-buckling high seas adventure. Yet my skeptical eye noticed that every account, from old books to modern magazine articles, was nearly identical, tending toward the overdramatic, suggesting a scarcity of sources combined with lazy journalism. The experienced historical researcher in me smelled a rat. I cross-checked and followed a spider web of references. In the end I confirmed my suspicions: there was a single ur-document, *History of the Chinese Pirates Who Infested the China Sea*, a short book written by Yung Lun-yuen, a Chinese amateur historian, based on second-hand sources two decades after the events and translated into English by a German missionary in 1831. It's an engaging narrative, and it gets its facts and dates right, but contains plenty of filler dialogue which no one alive at the time would have been privy to. The author, a low-ranking civil servant, makes his agenda clear throughout: to celebrate the leadership and courage of local Chinese officials and military in battling piracy, something that seems less and less certain the harder he waves the flag.

The Flower Boat Girl

One hundred years later, in 1928, a popular American author, Joseph Gollomb, published *Pirates Old and New*, including a chapter called 'Mrs. Ching Goes A-Pirating'. Citing his neighborhood Chinese laundryman as his source, he picks a few names and dates out of Yung Lun-yuen's narrative, then simply makes up the rest, plying on thick layers of implausible deeds and racist depictions, which he passes off as history. It was the first-ever account of the south China pirates published for a wide western audience, and it caused a sensation, as was its intent. What often happens with titillating stories like this will be familiar to anyone who nowadays gets their news from blogs and social media: a magazine writer cites Gollomb as the authority, a history student cites the magazine, a book about powerful women in history cites the student's essay, and so on, as the story itself takes on newer and more far-fetched trappings. Ultimately, most modern accounts of Cheng Yat Sou and the 19th Century Chinese pirates can be traced back to Gollomb's laundryman.



The most commonly found online image of Cheng Yat Sou (Cheng I Sao).

She would never have dressed like this, nor posed with a European-style sword.

The other story responsible for Cheng Yat Sou's popularity at least made no pretense of being true. 'The Widow Ching – Pirate' was a short story by the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges, published in 1944. This story became the source for a truly awful 2003 Italian feature film, 'Cantando Dietro i Paraventi' (Singing Behind Screens) which placed Italian advisors aboard the Chinese pirate junks, while Cheng Yat Sou, played by a Japanese actress cast for her ability to speak Italian rather than any thespian skills, did little other than disrobe at every opportunity, against the dramatic backdrop of the Dalmatian coast. Fortunately, the actress playing Mistress Ching in 'Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End' did not remove any clothing during her cameo appearance. By then Cheng Yat Sou and her sidekick Cheung Po Tsai had been transformed into comic book villains.

I was eager to read a good book about this fascinating historical figure, something better than these silly articles and movies. No matter how deeply I dug, consulted librarians, rare book dealers, and historians, no such book turned up. Other than half-baked fictions and scattered scholarly articles, nothing came close to portraying the incredible story of Shek Yang/Cheng Yat Sou and her cohorts; no biography or novel, not even, to my surprise, in Chinese. My wife Cathy got tired of hearing me moan about this. One night she interrupted me and pointed out the obvious: I had to write the book myself.

For five years I made it my mission to uncover every source about Cheng Yat Sou and company. My diligence paid off in the form of mountains of Chinese magistrates' records, personal diaries of foreign sailors' encounters with the pirates, and often hilariously contradictory accounts of high seas encounters from Chinese, British, and Portuguese perspectives, each arguing for the heroism of their side and the perfidy of the others.

I consulted traditional boat builders and my Tai O sailor friends, and visited islands, caves, and old walls and foundations where 'my' pirates had tread. I regularly conversed with their spirits in an ancient Tin Hau temple where they most certainly had prayed.

Several academics have tackled the subject of Chinese pirates, notably Professors Dian Murray and Robert Antony, whose scholarly books and articles formed the backbone of my research. Both generously advised me and shared stacks of rare documents in Chinese, English, and Portuguese. As true scholars should, each expressed delight (or so they

claimed) when I discovered inconsistencies in their findings and pieced together entire sections of her biography which neither was aware of.

The more I learned about Shek Yang, the more I wondered what kind of person she was deep inside. What did she want? What did she dream about? She must have been extraordinarily clever, considering what she accomplished within a world dominated by strongmen. She had to be utterly charismatic, whether by nature or cultivated, able to read men's souls. The picture of her as a swashbuckling fighter couldn't come close to explaining this complex and mystifying woman.

Nobody kept a log of her moods or dialogue. There are few first-hand descriptions of her appearance, her mannerisms, her speech, not to mention gaps in the historical records. But by stringing together events and pondering the psychology behind each move, I felt her and the rest of these seafaring bandits come to life in front of me. I understood that I had to do more than write a straightforward biography. In order to tell the real tale I had to bring the reader along to meet their colorful, violent, and often vulnerable selves. They were thieves and outlaws, nothing to be glorified. But they were also people. Shek Yang herself made the best of appalling circumstances, and that makes her human and admirable.

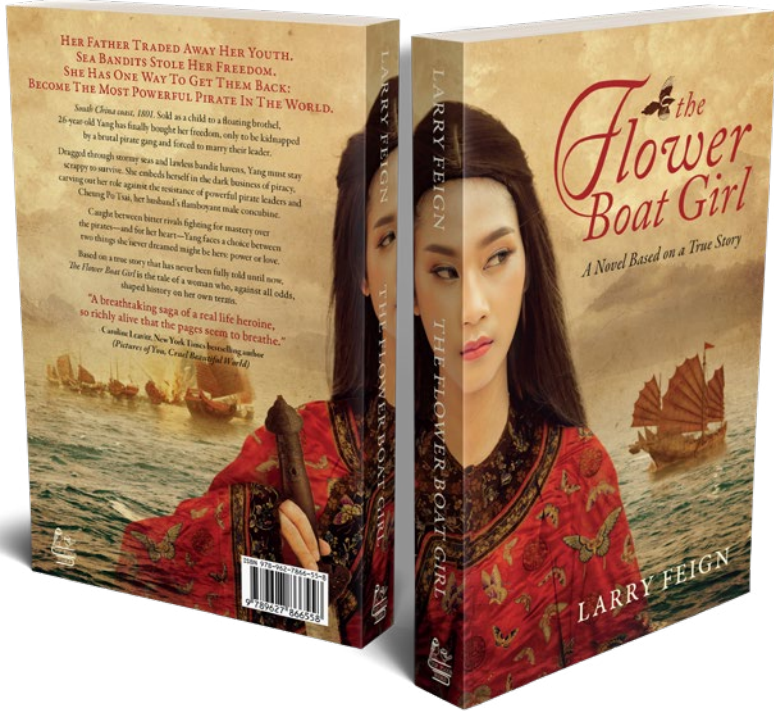
Have I done the same thing as those I accuse of fabricating her story for entertainment? I don't see it that way. I don't play loose with the facts for the sake of swashbuckling spectacle, though the real story has plenty of that. Nothing has been rearranged, left out, or exaggerated to fit a pre-planned narrative. Of course I make up some things to fill in the historical gaps, using my best educated guesses and extrapolations based on other sources.

This biographical novel has been my mission, a daunting one, to enable a long-departed and misunderstood woman to speak for herself, allowing me—and you, dear reader—to peer into a pirate woman's soul.

About the Author

Larry Feign is a writer and artist who has lived walking distance from notorious pirate haunts in a Lantau Island village since 1991. Formerly a well-known political cartoonist, he is the author of several books about Hong Kong, as well as a children's book series under a pen name. He is married with two grown children.

To contact him and learn about his other books, please visit larryfeign.com



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Glossary

Fukien 福建	Fujian; province northeast of Kwangtung (Guangdong)
Kwangchow 廣州	Guangzhou, a.k.a. Canton; capital of Kwangtung
Kwun Yam 觀音	Guanyin, Kuan Yin, Buddhist goddess of mercy
lotus feet	women's bound feet
mudskipper	amphibious fish; lives in mangroves and mud flats
Punti 本地	land-dwelling people, considered native to Kwangtung
Tanka 蜑家	boat dwellers (insulting term)
turtle egg 龜蛋	insulting term, equivalent to "bastard"