

High-Jinks on the High Seas
Jason Shannon

The junk bounced and cut through the waves. The ship ahead, heavy with Japanese silver, fired cannon, but the shots went wide. The *Nagamura* was slow; one of its masts was damaged, so she couldn't sail under all sails.

"This is amazing!" bellowed Ryan. He put the bottle to his lips, sucked back the sorghum liquor. The *Longgui* cut starboard, cutting through the wake of the *Nagamura*, and Ryan spilled half that liquor down his shirt.

"Avast ye!" declared the ship's captain, Wu Xidao. "Mr. Pang, bring us along side. Mr. Wen, drop the sails on the mizzenmast. Mr. Yao, prepare the cannon on port!"

He was a grizzled old Chinese pirate, missing half his teeth and one eye. Yet he had a powerful voice, and absolute command of the situation as the *Longgui* brought itself alongside the Japanese vessel. He was speaking Cantonese, his words being translated through Ryan's cellphone. The World Languages App even translated the broken Cantonese into broken English.

The *Longgui* cut hard to starboard, swinging wide and coming up, slowly but surely, along the starboard side of the *Nagamura*. The two ships were one or two hundred yards from each other in the water. Japanese sailors loaded Dutch-bought muskets and blindly fired across the gap.

Charlie ducked when he heard the blasts. He was clutching white-knuckled at the mast near the centre of the ship. Ryan stood where he was, bottle in hand.

"Those muskets couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if they were standing right next to it," Ryan called to his friend. "If I see them break out the throwing stars, I'll be worried."

Captain Wu was treating them as Portuguese traders from Macao. The 'talking box', as he called it, which translated back and forth between Cantonese and 'Portuguese', was a new invention of the Brigantine court. He agreed to grant them safe passage to their home in Macao, in exchange for a few trinkets.

Captain Wu was eyeing the Japanese vessel through his spyglass, with his one good eye.

"They be tryin' to make a run for it, me hearties! Thar be a Manchu military post a hundred *li* to the north."

"'Twill ne'er make it, cap'n," responded Mr. Yao, the equivalent of a first mate.

"Keep 'er steady, lads," commanded the captain. "Mr. Wen, fifteen degrees port, 'ave yer men work those ropes quick-quick!"

The ship twisted in the wind, coming up now parallel to the *Nagamura*.

The Japanese vessel loosed cannonade once again, its gunports rocketing out balls of iron the size of basketballs.

One of them whipped through the sails, punching a half-dozen holes and ripping a chunk out of the mask. A second shot blasted a hole in the guardrail fifteen feet from where Ryan was standing. One of the pirates lost his footing above and came crashing to his death on the deck. A second man splashed into the water.

Charlie winced seeing the man fall, and abruptly looked away before he hit the deck. Saucy pirate wenches he wanted behind his eyelids at night, not snapped spines and bloody cracked skulls.

"Mr. Yao, get that sail under control! 'Undred more yards, mates!"

The *Longgui* sliced through the water. Belowdecks, cannons were rolling into place. Men danced on the masts above with ropes.

The *Nagamura* appeared not to be moving. The sun was high overhead, the waves a deep blue. The South China Sea was choppy, but not unmanageable.

The *Longgui* came in directly parallel to the larger Japanese vessel.

"Open fire, aharr!" bellowed Captain Wu.

A dozen cannons exploded at once. It was deafening. Ryan could hear nothing but a ringing in his ears.

A plume of smoke drifted up from the gunports. The whole ship seemed to rock back. When at last the smoke cleared, Ryan could see nearly every ball had hit its mark. The mainmast of the *Nagamura* was in tatters. The port side was littered with smashed wood.

"'Ard to starboard, Mr. Yao!"

The *Longgui* tacked, cutting starboard, coming closer to the *Nagamura*.

“Prepare to board!” bellowed the captain.

By the time the *Longgui* pivoted in close, the Japanese had reloaded their muskets, and popped up to fire. Two got shots off, while the third was taken down by Wu’s crew, armed with arquebuses – Dutch-made, but sold to the pirate fleet by the Portuguese. The Japanese shots went wild. Rapidly repowdering, Wu’s chief marksman, a man named Xin, fell back as two of his comrades rushed to the fore, unsheathing their swords.

The remaining Japanese had dropped their useless rifles, unsheathed katana swords. They shouted something about *bushido*.

These men were not samurai. They were little better than pirates themselves. Japan was a closed state. No one left, save black marketeers operating out of Kyushu. Millard Fillmore was due to show up in a few decades, the first time in two and a half centuries the Tokugawa court would (reluctantly) entertain international relations.

No, these men had no *bushido* honour. Perhaps they were harkening back to a different time, to the glory of their forefathers. The samurai, right now, were little better than bookkeepers in Kyoto; the hardened warriors these men learned about in storybooks were no more.

“Attack!” snarled Captain Wu.

The *Longgui* slid in right next to the *Nagamura*, their hulls nearly bumping each other. Thirty men and a few women leaped across the gap to engage the Japanese head on. Each of Wu’s fighters was equipped with a long-handled pudaos sword, and his best shots were armed with one of a dozen arquebuses.

Ryan scrambled back to what counted as the aftcastle. Charlie was already there, with Captain Wu.

Pandemonium ensued. The melee was fierce. Swords clanked against each other. There were shouts and squeals and the conservative bursts of the Dutch rifles.

The captain took a bullhorn and bellowed into it. He wasn’t speaking Cantonese, and the World Languages App couldn’t translate it without a proper input. Ryan guessed it must be Japanese, entreating them to surrender.

Most of the Japanese crew had barricaded themselves into the hold. A small area near the stern had slats which allowed their remaining riflemen to take aim and pick off the invaders one by one. They were not responding to the commands to surrender.

“Mr. Xin!” barked the captain.

“Arr, cap’n!” called back the marksman.

Xin rushed to a deck-mounted mini-cannon at the fore of the ship. This piece had cost Wu’s boss a pretty penny; it was hand-crafted in Prussia and sold to the Chinese in Timor-Leste. The salesman – Portuguese trader Ryan. A gift to the chief piratess of southern China.

It was pre-loaded. Xin jumped behind it, swivelled it around, levelled it.

“All clear!” bellowed Wu.

A ball of iron the size of a baseball rocketed out and bulldozed through the barricaded door of the hold on the *Nagamura*. For a brief instant the shooting fell silent. One of Xin’s cohorts rushed to powder and reload the mini-cannon.

The captain unsheathed his pudaos sword. To Ryan and Charlie, he said, “You chaps wait ’ere. I’ve business to be attendin’ to.”

He then rushed down the stairs and leaped, grabbing a rope and sailing across the gap. Immediately he gutted a Japanese sailor who came at him with a katana.

“Let’s wait in the captain’s chambers,” Charlie said, indicating the door behind them.

“Arr, matey,” said Ryan, taking on a pirate accent. “Do ye not enjoy the adventure? Thar be nothin’ between us and the briny deep save these scalliwags’ pirate skills.”

“Thar be nothing between us and a pellet in the head save pure luck,” replied Charlie.

“And poorly made Dutch rifles.”

“The shot has to go somewhere!”

“Often as not, it jams, or just falls out the end o’ the barrel, aharr!”

Charlie snatched the bottle of sorghum liquor from his friend’s hand. “I’m gonna need a lot of this.” He then swigged deeply.

Captain Wu won the battle. Thirteen Japanese were taken prisoner. The bodies of the dead were dropped overboard. The Japanese captain, evidently, had committed *seppuku*, despite the fact that he was a merchant mariner and smuggler besides. Ryan figured he must have adhered to his own code of honour,

even if it wasn't backed up completely by *bushido*.

In the hold were twenty chests of small silver ingots. There was also a case of Japanese *sake*, and Ryan graduated to this.

Captain Wu poured Ryan and Charlie both a cup of heated sake, bowing to them in his cabin. "Yer Prussian cannon was o' great use to us today, gents. And yet it cost only one part in a hundred o' what we took from the Japanese ship. What be the catch?"

"No catch," said Ryan quickly, sipping the sake. "We merely court the favour of your patron."

"Aye," says the captain through the phone's translation. "So do many with the Western barbarian courts. The Spanish in Manila, the British in Singapore, the French in Saigon. Now the Lisbon throne seeks to treat with Commander Ching Shih?"

"We have no ties to the throne in Lisbon," Ryan repeated for the hundredth time.

"You carry the newest communication device of the court."

"Bought in Goa for twenty silver crowns," Ryan retorted. "We are not princes or dukes. We are adventurers! And we seek adventure with the greatest piratess of the seas."

This had been Ryan's brilliant plan. He wanted adventure. He wanted swashbuckling, high seas adventure. And there'd been a history team researching Edward Teach, so it wouldn't do to show up in that timeline while they were there. On the other side of the world, however...

Captain Wu was suspicious. The Qing court had sent assassins after his patron before. They usually didn't employ barbarians, but Madam Ching Shih was enough of a problem that Beijing might try anything. Yet this Prussian gun had worked beautifully, and they'd been right when they told the captain of the *Nagamura's* course.

"We can't go altering history like that," complained Charlie, weeks ago, when they were discussing this.

"The *Nagamura* goes down before it ever reaches Ningbo," said Ryan. "Caught in a storm or taken by pirates – hell, maybe Wu himself takes it down, we don't know."

All he had found was a mention in a Chinese accounting book that the *Nagamura* never arrived.

After a moment of contemplation, Wu said, "All right. Ye wish to see me patron, seek adventure with her. Ye have been good to us. Madam Ching shall enjoy the cannon, and yer talking box be interestin'. She will enjoy that, ye might consider sellin' her one. Plus, thar be yer large bag o' goodies. I know ye've somethin' special in there for her."

Ryan briefly looked over at the time machine, in a large backpack on the floor. He wasn't letting it out of his sight. "Aye," he said hesitantly. "We have special tribute for your patron in there."

As it turned out, Commander Ching Shih was in Macao, five hundred *li* from here. She owned a number of gambling dens and brothels in the small Portuguese colony. Carpenters worked through the night on repairs, while the remainder of the crew celebrated belowdecks.

"Ye 'ave ne'er played mahjong?" exclaimed Xin. "Why, I was going to bet ye me entire haul I could win against ye."

"I'm not taking that bet," said Ryan.

He poured himself more of the sorghum liquor. It tasted like grass clippings put in a blender with a little diesel fuel. He choked it down.

"Arr, 'ave ye ever heard o' rum?" he called, echoing the broken English the app was spitting out. "'Tis be a liquor... uh, made in our Brazilian colony. We'll import some for ye, ye'd enjoy it."

One of the female pirates, an eyepatched woman of about thirty, with a crooked smile, said, "Arr, ye be seekin' adventure with our fearless leader? She will gut ye from stem to stern if ye disrespect her, and feed ye to the sharks!"

"Have you met her?" Charlie asked.

"Nay. Only the cap'n 'as met her, and allegedly through a partition screen at that!"

The woman was thin. She wore a skullcap, her hair greasy underneath. Some of her teeth were stained dark brown. She swore like a sailor and belched with every gulp of sorghum liquor she tasted.

"She be the most feared warlord in China," declared Pang, the sea artist.

"I 'eard she be the sea god's mistress," said Yao. "'Er quim be swallowin' men 'ole!"

"She once be a prostitute," nodded Pang. "And they say that if ye venture into a Macao bordello, ye could pick some doxie and ne'er know if it be the great pirate queen 'erself 'erself."

"She be gettin' 'er rocks off with common 'oremongers," smirked Xin through broken teeth.

“’Tis be ’orse dung!” declared the woman. “She nay be spreadin’ ’er legs to Porkchop missionaries. Beggin’ yer forgiveness, noble barbarian sirs. But she could be ’avin’ a prince from the Manchu court warmin’ ’er bed if she wanted. Methinks she sticks with ’er ’and since ’er honoured ’usband died.”

Ryan nudged Charlie. Covering the mic on the phone, ensuring this wouldn’t be translated, he whispered, “This has already been worth it. But imagine if we get a picture of the great Ching Shih. I bet you she’s some toothless hag.” He cackled, already quite drunk.

Charlie was more level-headed. They were, after all, surrounded by cutthroats and thieves in possession of a time machine. “In 1808, she’s thirty-three.”

The following morning, the *Longgui* coasted into port in Macao. There were no giant casinos, no dazzling lights. It was a sleepy settlement, tiny, a zit on the Portuguese Empire. The Church of St. Paul had not yet burnt down. Portuguese gunmen perched atop the high peak with their cannons, the *Longgui* disguised as a spice ship from Manila.

Ryan was tremendously hungover. Docking, the captain went ashore to meet with his mistress. He escorted the two Portuguese, indicating it was Sunday and they probably wished to attend church services. He would call upon them if and when Ching Shih deigned to see them.

“We should follow him,” whispered Charlie. “He could be going right to her.”

“Or he could be doubling back and trying to lose a tail like a goddamned Robert Ludlum novel,” groaned Ryan. “Come on, I need a bath. There’s got to be a bathhouse around here. Oh, when do they invent Gatorade again?”

Using some of their profits from the Prussian gun, Charlie bought a couple egg tarts. They found a small bathhouse, where they relieved themselves, bathed, shaved, trimmed, wetted and combed their hair. Chinese coolies laundered their clothes for them, yet Charlie insisted the time machine and oxygen masks and unitards they had in their bags would remain with them. They paid well, not bothering to haggle.

Leaving some time later, the giant pack with the wormhole generator and their gear on Charlie’s back, Ryan was feeling refreshed. “Hot-damn,” he exclaimed. “Let’s find ourselves a gambling den.”

“I don’t think blackjack will be common here, yet.”

“Well, how about a Chinese whorehouse? You got condoms in the bag, don’t you? We’ll experience a little taste of—”

Immediately four men pounced on them, emerging from a nearby alley, out of doorways, behind an ox cart on the cobblestone street. Arms grabbed them, cloth bags over their heads, the time machine yanked away, and they were pulled bodily in a direction they couldn’t discern, their feet struggling not to trip over each other.

Seconds later, their blindfolds were pulled off. There were in the alley, away from public view. Mr. Yao stood before them. Their captors, still holding shoulders and wrists, were some of the pirate goons with whom they’d just sailed.

Yao spoke in perfect Portuguese.

“Huh?” said Ryan.

Yao spoke again.

Ryan displayed only confusion.

Someone delved into the pack and fetched the translation box. It was put in Ryan’s hand. He quickly opened the World Languages App.

Yao spoke in Cantonese. “I knew you Qing assassins weren’t Portuguese. Not a word of what you’ve said into that box was the Catholic tongue.”

“It’s... uh...” Ryan thought quickly. “Basque. You’ve heard of Basque? Hill people in the north. They... we are very proud of our heritage, which dates back all the way to the Roman Empire, and we refuse to parlay in the conquistadors’ tongue.”

Charlie gritted his teeth. Playing very fast and loose with things here. Charlie was pretty sure Basque Country didn’t extend to Portugal. Hopefully Yao doesn’t know too much about the Basque... or speak English, for that matter.

“We should ’ang ye from the gallows,” said Yao. “But an ’igher power than me be decidin’ yer fate. Come with us.”

Rope quickly looped around both sets of wrists, pulled behind their backs. They were pulled to their feet and dragged along. They were led down a series of twisting alleys, never out on a main boulevard.

After ten minutes, they arrived at a walled compound on the northern side of the mountain. A servant

opened the door, bowing reverently. They were marched into a lavish house.

Captain Wu was there.

“Cap’n,” Ryan burst out, “I can explain.”

“Unless ye wish to lose yer tongue, shut it, barbarian,” said the captain.

“It be as I said, cap’n,” Yao told the man. “They nay understand the Catholic tongue.”

“We should subject ye to *lingchi* for this,” Wu snarled. “Do ye know what that be?”

“It sounds... unpleasant,” Ryan stuttered.

“Death by a thousand cuts,” Charlie whispered, his voice sombre, head down.

“That sounds... *quite* unpleasant.”

“Alas, an ’igher authority than I be makin’ such pronouncements.” Wu bent over, grabbed Ryan by the hair, twisted his head up. Ryan could feel the man’s foul breath on his face. “Ye wanted to see the queen. Ye be gettin’ yer wish, and she may be the last thing ye e’er see.”

Wu released him. He strode over and knocked on a door.

The door opened. A woman emerged. She was Chinese, perhaps mid-thirties. Her hair was jet black, straight as straw. She wore a red *cheongsam* blouse. A single-edged *dao* sword on her belt.

“Holy shit,” muttered Ryan.

It was the female pirate from the *Longgui* – with the eyepatch and the skull cap and the brown teeth. She didn’t have brown teeth now. Nor did she have an eyepatch. Her two eyes were beautiful. Her hair was smooth and combed. She stood upright, no longer stooped.

“You!” gasped Ryan. “You’re the wench from the ship. Er, I mean, you’re the fine seaman... seawoman, invaluable to the upstanding crew of such a fine vessel as was gracious enough to transport—”

“Silence, barbarian,” commanded Captain Wu.

“Madam Ching Shih,” revelled Charlie, his voice barely a whisper.

This was the most powerful Chinese pirate – the most powerful female pirate – that ever was. Actually, the most notorious pirate in history.

“Uh, apologies, Madam Shih,” sputtered Ryan. He, too, was enthralled by her. Clean her up, and she’s actually quite pretty.

“I’ve been watchin’ ye,” she said. She reached into Ryan’s shirt-pocket and snatched out the phone. “This thing’s going to become mine, ye hear? We’re forbidden to learn Manchu; well, now I can tell those devils where to stuff it – in their own tongue. What’s in that satchel?”

She must be referring to the time machine.

Yao grabbed hold of it, unbuckled the straps, opened the compartment door. “’Tis be metal tubing and bolts and placards, m’lady.”

“What be it good for?”

“Uh...” Ryan stammered. “It... careful with that, it’s a device for Basque alchemy.”

“Alchemy?” grinned Wu devilishly.

“*Reverse* alchemy, to be precise. Turns silver to lead, gold to quartz.”

Wu dropped the thing with a shove. It clattered on the wood planks of the floor with a thunk. Charlie cringed hearing it.

“Ye be tryin’ to sabotage our booty ’aul?” asked Ching Shih, her voice cutting like a knife, the phone now in her hand.

Ryan looked her dead in the eye. “Sabotage the colonial governorship in Manila. As I said, we’re Basque. Don’t you know what the Spaniards have done to our people?”

“We can demonstrate,” said Charlie urgently. No doubt he wanted access to the machine, rip a wormhole and beam themselves out of this hairy situation. “If you put a small ingot of silver on that table and stand bac—”

“Shut yer gob, barbarian,” snapped Wu. “We nay be ’andin’ over a single ounce o’ that Japanese silver. We lost three men takin’ it.”

“Wu,” she commanded, abruptly looking up at the captain, “leave us.”

Obediently, Wu, Yao and the goons left, leaving the time travellers alone with the pirate queen.

Ching Shih set the phone down on a table, where it continued to translate. “I care nay for such trinkets as yer Basque reverse alchemy mechanism. Ye know why ye be ’ere?”

Both men looked at her curiously.

She walked up, bent down, grabbed Ryan by his bearded chin. “Answer me this: the Basques nay be

prudes likes these slaggin' Catholic missionaries, are ye?"

Then she kissed him hard on the mouth, her tongue darting in, caressing his.

Ryan was blown away. He didn't know how to respond. The most powerful woman in the Orient had him chained and on his knees, and wanted him not for the time machine, but as a mere play thing.

By Davey Jones' locker – that stuff she'd said on the *Longgui* was just bullshit. She didn't want some Manchu nobleman in her bed. She wanted a foreign barbarian.

She pulled back from the kiss. Pulling out her dagger, she walked behind the two, and cut them free one by one. While freeing Charlie, she reached in and gave him a nice squeeze of the buttocks, purring as she did so.

She strode to the table, picked up the phone, motioned to a door. "I be changin' out o' me sailin' garb. Ye decide who be goin' first, and meet me aft, aharr!"

Then she strode out and latched the door.

"My god," gasped Ryan, scrambling to his feet.

"She left the time machine. Quick, while she's undressing, grab the suits and the goggles, I'll–"

"She be a ravenous doxie," cooed Ryan, interrupting. "Why, 'er quim be as wet as the Straights o' Johor – nay, make that Jo-whore," and he cackled riotously.

"Are you mad? She's commander of sixty thousand pirate scoundrels. And you want to go for a quick romp?"

"You can decline the sloppy seconds. Get the time machine ready, I won't be too long."

"She'll eviscerate you. And besides, who said you get to go first?"

"You got to nail Cleopatra."

"It's not as glamorous as it sounds. She just used her vibrating gourd on herself through most of it. She was all apologetic, saying things like, "Oh, Charlius, the waspae are quite boisterous on this batch. It is a rare day when such a gourd is prepared for me. 'Twould anger Venus were I not to maximize the vibrations when She grants me such divine gifts.' And then she gave me a handjob while she used her vibrator."

"All right, rock/paper/scissors."

When Ryan entered the spacious bedroom of the pirate queen of the East, he didn't notice the carved jade figurines, nor the tremendous bed, nor the vast view over the South China Sea, the Fortaleza do Monte to the left, ships in the harbour. He only saw Ching Shih, slender, dainty, thirty-three years old, her hair long and sleek. She was wearing a red silk robe, flowing, a deep V in the chest.

He almost jumped her then and there.

"Methinks it be a profitable venture to be plunderin' the booty. What say ye?"

"A-harr," Ryan cooed, beaming.

Ching Shih smiled devilishly.

She threw off her robe. Her stomach was taut. Her breasts were medium-sized, the nipples dark. But that's not where Ryan's eyes went. His face fell slack. Lower, strapped onto her pelvis with laces of silk, was a piece of elephant ivory, chiseled down into the shape of a phallus and polished smooth. There was even a little scrotum carved into it.

She had some sort of sachet in her hand, used it to pour what looked like lubricant into the other hand. "On the bed, wench," she said, as though this were the most obvious thing in the world.

Ryan stared blankly.

"Don't make me use me cane on ye, barbarian. Face in the pillow, forthwith." She smirked sultrily. "Unless ye be desirin' a canin'."

Ryan came rushing out of the bedroom like it was on fire, fumbled with the doorknob, grasped it white-knuckled and slammed it, throwing his back against it to catch his breath.

"Done so soon?" Charlie asked.

"That's not happening, that's not happening," he vomited out urgently. "Is that thing ready?"

Charlie studied his friend.

Ryan pulled his back off the door, looked back and forth, then whispered into his friend's ear conspiratorially.

Charlie's eyebrows went up. He handed over the bulky pack. "Shiver me timbers..."

Ryan grabbed the bundle containing his one-piece suit with urgency.

"Get your gear on. It's already programmed." Then Charlie unzipped his jumpsuit.

“Hey, wha—”

“I’ll be back in a few. You... forgot the phone. Can’t go leaving that in the nineteenth century, can we?”

Charlie slicked back his hair with his fingers. Then he clasped the doorknob, turned it, and strode inside.

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