

# Idol worship

The mighty Koxinga, who drove the Dutch out of Taiwan 350 years ago, has been called many things – a pirate, a warlord, a patriot and even a god. **Stuart Heaver** goes in search of the man behind the legend. Pictures by **Nora Tam**.

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his year marks the 350th anniversary of an event *Time* magazine has included in its top 10 most audacious acts of piracy of all time. When pirate Zheng Chenggong (better known as Koxinga) defeated the mightiest Western naval power of the time, he could not have foreseen being so

honoured more than three centuries later.

Not many 17th-century pirates can claim to have their own Facebook page, an opera named after them, more than 100 temples in their honour and more statues and commemorative plaques than the average dictator. In Taiwan, Koxinga is as celebrated today as he was in 1662. Basketball superstar Jeremy Lin notwithstanding, Koxinga remains the undisputed hero of the island and his exploits mark the very start of its official history.

So who was this character and how did he become the only Chinese commander to win a decisive battle against a major Western power, when he forcibly ejected the Dutch from Taiwan 350 years ago?

In the former capital of Tainan, on Taiwan's southwest coast, the scene of his greatest act of piracy, festivals are held in his honour. When

I visit the Koxinga shrine, in the city centre, bare-chested old men flail themselves with swords and dance in a trance accompanied by drums, cymbals, ornate dragons and attendants with exotically painted faces.

While it is accurate to describe Koxinga as a pirate, it is important to banish any Hollywood-inspired images of a Captain Jack Sparrow character swinging through the rigging with his eyepatch and cutlass. Koxinga and the rest of the Zheng clan headed a powerful and sophisticated maritime trading organisation that controlled shipping, duties, tariffs and security across the South China Sea.

Chu Cheng-yi, director of the Tree Valley Foundation's Archaeology Centre in Tainan, has been studying Koxinga for more than 15 years.

"There is archaeological evidence that his area of influence extended from Japan to Vietnam and the Philippines," he says.

With trade in Ming-dynasty China strictly regulated by the imperial court in Beijing, which prohibited contact with foreign barbarians, almost anyone who set up a private junk business was likely to be branded a pirate. And with the Japanese, Dutch, English and Portuguese all keen to establish access to Chinese goods, anyone with expert local knowledge and the right connections was in a position to make a lot of money, very quickly.

"Some people call him a pirate, but he was a businessman," says Chu.

Koxinga inherited the Zheng family business from his powerful father, Nicholas Iquan, a multilingual charmer from Fujian province who had learned the piracy game in the service of infamous pirate king Li Dan, or Captain China, as he was known to Europeans. Iquan fell in love with a Japanese woman while on a trade mission to Japan and Koxinga was the result of their long-lasting affair. Koxinga was born in August 1624 on a beach in Hirado, Nagasaki prefecture, during a violent storm, and a stone tablet, erected by the Japanese authorities, marks the spot.

Koxinga was taken from Japan to the Zheng clan's base in Fujian and educated in Confucian philosophy, with its emphasis on etiquette, loyalty and altruism.

Everything in the Zhengs' multinational pirate corporation was turned on its head in 1644, when the Ming dynasty fell to the Manchus of >>



A statue of Koxinga at Anping Fort, the site of former Dutch stronghold Fort Zeelandia, which the pirate attacked in 1662.



the north and the Qing dynasty was established with force across China. The Zheng clan, however, declared its loyalty to the Ming dynasty. In 1646, Iquan, the wily pirate, shocked members of his clan by switching sides after agreeing to a deal with the Manchu invaders. In a subsequent assault by the Manchu army, Koxinga's mother was killed at the clan's stronghold.

Having experienced battle, witnessed his father's betrayal and been devastated by his mother's death, Koxinga burnt his Confucian scholar robes and, according to Jonathan Clements in his book *Koxinga and the Fall of the Ming Dynasty*, said to his family: "In every man's life there comes a time to make a stand."

It might sound more like Arnold Schwarzenegger than Confucius, but Koxinga was determined to exact revenge on the Manchus. He fought a personal naval war against them financed by his merchant trade and remained loyal to a succession of Ming would-be emperors.

"Koxinga traded silk and porcelain from China and sugar from Taiwan to fund his navy," says Chu.

By 1661, Koxinga's relentless and violent vendetta against the Qing dynasty was losing steam. He had been weakened by defections of key admirals, one of whom, Huang Wu, advised the emperor that the only way to snuff out Koxinga would be to build a wall around the sea. Every settlement along the south China coast, including in what would become Hong Kong, was destroyed and everyone evacuated 30 *li* (estimated to be 15 kilometres) inland, severing the artery that supplied the lifeblood of Koxinga's entire operation.

Left with few alternatives, Koxinga decided that moving his entire



the highest of spring tides, allowing his shallow-draft junks to enter the inner harbour via a shallow northern channel and avoid the powerful guns of Fort Zeelandia. His admirers put the high tide down to intervention from Matsu, Goddess of the Sea, who magically raised the water levels. A more likely explanation is that Koxinga was familiar with tidal patterns.

The raid took the Dutch by complete surprise. Their deep-draft vessels could not get so close to land. One Dutch soldier, called Herport, recorded the moment: "We could not oversee them, never mind count them. There were so many masts it looked like an arid forest."

You can still see the original south wall of Fort Zeelandia (or Fort Anping, as it is now known) in Tainan. The fort teems with visitors and excited children run around the well-tended grounds of what was the battlefield. The museum houses a frightening array of Chinese weapons that would have been used by Koxinga's men against the Dutch.

## *"He defeated the foreigners and then he died. Koxinga is the classic tragic hero"*

piracy operation to Taiwan was the only feasible option, but there was one problem: the Dutch had spent more than 35 years building a well-established base on the island.

In the late-17th century, the Dutch East India Company was a very powerful maritime force. By 1669, it was the richest private company the world had ever seen, with more than 150 merchant ships, 40 warships, 50,000 employees and a private army of 10,000 soldiers.

In Tainan, the "red-haired barbarians", as they were referred to, had set up Fort Zeelandia on an isolated sandspit that curved around a shallow inland harbour. If Koxinga was to set up his operation in Taiwan he would have to kick the mighty Dutch out of Fort Zeelandia.

No Chinese navy had ever defeated a major Western sea power, so, for Koxinga's unofficial pirate outfit to attempt it was ambitious, to say the least.

On April 21, 1661, Koxinga assembled a battle fleet of 900 war junks and 25,000 troops. The army included the infamous Black Guard, recruited from the ranks of African slaves brought to Asia by the Portuguese, and the much-feared Iron Men, shadowy soldiers of legendary strength, clad in heavy ornate armour, even in the heat of summer.

On a misty summer morning, Dutch troops awoke to find Koxinga's ships anchored in the inner harbour at Tainan and his soldiers landing on the beach. Koxinga had used his naval cunning to time his arrival at

"People come to Fort Anping for the history," Chu says. "It is the first place of Taiwan history."

A smaller Dutch fort on Taiwan, Provintia, soon capitulated but the leader of the Europeans, Governor Frederick Coyett, who had less than 1,100 men at his disposal, was determined to hold out against Koxinga's forces. He raised the blood-red battle flag in defiance over Fort Zeelandia and prayed for reinforcements to arrive from the Dutch base at Batavia (modern-day Jakarta), in Indonesia.

"It was more of a siege than a battle," says Chu.

Just a short taxi ride from where the flag would have been raised are the original gate and foundations of Fort Provintia, on the site of what is now Chihkan Tower, in the centre of Tainan. Today, two pagodas stand atop the foundations. The western wall of Fort Provintia would have provided a commanding view of the inner harbour and Koxinga's fleet. Like Fort Anping, Chihkan Tower is a popular tourist site and has several historical plaques about Koxinga as well as a statue.

Unfortunately for enthusiasts, "much of the battle scene is now underground," says Chu. The inland sea was silted up in the 19th century and the view from the western wall now offers nothing more historical than a few guesthouses and restaurants.

The nine-month siege had its grisly moments. When the captive crew of a Dutch vessel tried to overpower their captors, Koxinga was brutal in his response. He ordered that the nose, ears and hands of the 12 sailors



be hacked off and that they be sent running back to the Dutch fort, screaming in agony, with their severed extremities dangling from their necks on lengths of twine.

When Dutch reinforcements finally arrived they were forced to send in smaller boats to try and reach Koxinga's fleet. A wind-change meant that the small Dutch boats lost their cover and were routed by the Chinese. Once again, it seemed, Koxinga was being protected by Matsu.

As the battle stretched into months, there were two sources of frustration for Koxinga – the stubbornness of the Dutch and the failure of his own organisation to keep the supply lines open. Feeding an army of 25,000 was no small matter and many of his men were sent to farm nearby land to keep his forces from starving.

“It was the food supply from Taiwan that would have been most important to Koxinga,” says Chu.

In desperation, Koxinga sent a captive Dutch missionary, Antonius Hambroek, to negotiate with the Dutch at Fort Zeelandia. Hambroek, his wife and two of their daughters had been captured at Fort Provintia. The Hambroeks' two other daughters were in the care of the Dutch still stationed at Zeelandia. Koxinga believed he was the ideal emissary to convince the stubborn Coyett to surrender, having threatened Hambroek and his family with death if he failed.

Hambroek, however, urged the Dutch to hold out, assuring them that Koxinga's troops were growing hungry and rebellious. Despite his daughters begging him to stay in Fort Zeelandia, Hambroek left for Provintia. But as he was leaving, he turned to his compatriots and said: “Men, I am now going to my certain death in the hope of doing a service to you and my fellow captives.”

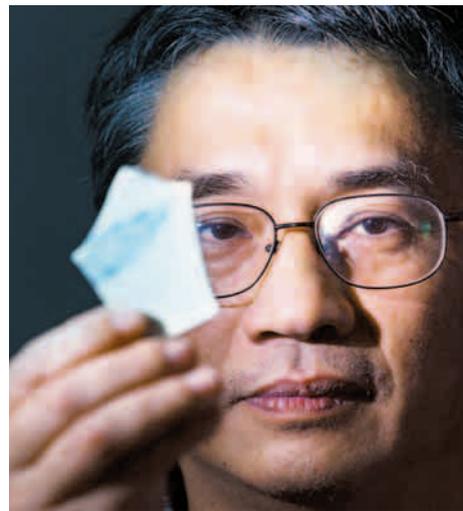
Koxinga was not amused. Hambroek was executed along with all the other adult male captives. Some of the women and children were used as hostages while those remaining were distributed among his commanders for their sexual entertainment. Koxinga himself took one of Hambroek's daughters as his concubine.

In January 1662, an increasingly impatient Koxinga mounted a final assault on Zeelandia. It is said 250,000 cannon balls battered the walls of the fort on a single day. By February 1, the Dutch had no option but to negotiate their surrender. After nine months of resistance, the Dutch left Taiwan, never to return. About 900 Europeans left for Batavia leaving 1,600 corpses in the sandy soil of Tainan.

The news of Koxinga's victory spread like wildfire, and his reputation with it.

“He was the only [Chinese] to ever win a battle against the foreigners,” says Chu.

Koxinga did not live long enough to enjoy his enhanced reputation or to rebuild his forces for another assault on the Manchus on the mainland. Depressed by the death of his father at the hands of the Manchus –



his executioners, having decided Iquan was no longer of any use to them, took several days to kill him, slicing off his extremities before turning to the vital organs – and the defection of more of his senior commanders, there are indications that Koxinga, exhausted from 15 years of conflict, was losing his grip. Matters were not improved by news that his son Jing, who was later to inherit the Taiwan-based piracy business, had fathered an heir with his stepmother (one of Koxinga's minor wives) in Fujian. An enraged Koxinga even threatened to execute Jing.

The final straw came on May 19, 1662, when news reached Taiwan that the Ming emperor-in-waiting had been captured and executed along with his 14-year-old son and heir. The campaign was finally over and the Ming emperor Koxinga had served so loyally but never met, was dead.

A distraught Koxinga collapsed with grief and died. He was 39 years old. He had been in Taiwan for little more than a year but his legacy was to last many centuries.

“He defeated the foreigners and then he died. Koxinga is the classic tragic hero,” says Chu.

Controversy rages to this day over whether Koxinga was a brutal pirate, a canny businessman, a Chinese patriot, a tragic hero or a god.

“I think it was a combination,” Chu says. “He has become a symbol of loyalty.”

Sceptics say Koxinga's reputation has been systematically enhanced to suit different political regimes.

“He can be used by everyone,” Chu says. “The Kuomintang, the Japanese, the PRC [People's Republic of China], everyone. He is a very convenient symbol.”

The Qing dynasty wanted to portray Koxinga as a loyal mainlander so Han Chinese in Taiwan would toe the line when it took the island over from the pirate's grandson. The Japanese used his half-Japanese ethnicity to highlight their close links to Taiwan and keep the Chinese in check during their occupation (1895-1945). He was the perfect nationalist hero for the KMT fleeing the communists in 1949, because they were essentially doing the same thing Koxinga had done – fleeing the mainland to regroup and overthrow an empire they despised. He suits Taiwan's modern Democratic Progressive Party politicians, who want to stress their independence from the mainland. And even now one can see new museums and shrines dedicated to Koxinga in Fujian, as Beijing seeks to seduce Taiwan back into the fold.

Perhaps his real legacy, away from the political spin, embellished legends and elaborate religious ceremonies, is simpler and more profound. While excavating sites about 20 kilometres inland from Fort Anping, Chu's team discovered pale blue and white pottery unique to the Koxinga period.

“These are Koxinga's men,” says Chu, holding a piece of the pottery. “His soldiers and sailors made these settlements. Koxinga established settlements here and archaeologists can prove this. The most important legacy of Koxinga is that his people settled here and established a Han society.”

So perhaps 350 years after his victory over the most powerful Western maritime force on the planet, Koxinga should not be revered as a pirate, patriot, warlord, businessman or god. But as the founder of modern Taiwan, whose urgent need to feed his forces drove him to set up farming settlements and establish a permanent Han Chinese society on the island. ■

**From far left:** A model of a Dutch surveyor making a formal visit to Koxinga is on display at The Koxinga Museum, Tainan; a shrine to the pirate in Tainan; the Great South Gate serves as a reminder of the city's military past; Chu Cheng-yi, director of the Archaeology Centre at Tainan's Tree Valley Foundation, holds a fragment of ceramic from the Koxinga period; a painting of Dutch ships at the Anping Fort Museum.