Attila of the East

Political interests and the dust of history have obscured the real Zheng Chenggong. So who was he?

The son of a Chinese pirate and a Japanese samurai's daughter, Zheng was born in Japan in August 1624. Coincidentally, in that same month the Dutch landed on Taiwan.

As a boy, Zheng moved to China where the Ming dynasty was slowly crumbling under the force of the Qing. Zheng led the last of the Ming resistance, and was honoured with the title Gwo-xing-ye, or lord of the imperial surname, a name the Dutch later bastardized as Koxinga. Despite the honour, Zheng was more interested in setting up his own kingdom. He wrote to his father that they ought to take China's southern provinces. Later, on an ill-fated march to drive the Qing from the south, he wrote, "I don't believe this land won't have my imperial surname." In all respects, Zheng was, as Dutch historian Lambert van der Aalsvoort says, "a self--interested warlord."

In 1661, with the Ming dynasty at an end, Zheng fled to Taiwan with 25,000 troops, and attacked the 1,140-strong Dutch force. Despite the gross mismatch, Zheng made little headway, and instead took to terrorizing the aborigines and some 100,000 Chinese immigrants already on the island. "Zheng not only set about exploiting and oppressing us but savagely killed us when we rebelled," says Taiwanese historian Su Beng.

After a stalemated nine-month battle, Zheng agreed to a truce, allowing the Dutch to leave the island "armed the the teeth and with flying banners," as the Dutch histories say. Hardly the romanticized defeat of "driving the foreigners from the island," as today's propaganda states. Even less spectacular was how Zheng met his end. Just two months after the Dutch departed, and as he was planning an invasion of the Philippines, Zheng contracted malaria and died.

A Spanish contemporary wrote that "the proud pirate became furious; the pupils of his eyes turned into fierce balls of fire. In his horrible frenzy he tore his flesh, bit his lips and tongue until they bled...Thus died Attila of the East."

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