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An Obsessed Mariner's Notes on the *Ningpo*

A Vessel from the Junk Trade

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The topic of Chinese shipping to and from Southeast Asia has fascinated me for quite a while now. One of the reasons I find it so interesting is that it's such a difficult subject to research. One of the main problems seems to be that many aspects of the private commercial sea-going trade simply went unrecorded. Often only the barest information of "size of ship" and "number of crew" was ever committed to register, while the efforts of ship construction, fitting out, manning, and the details of the actual voyages, remained known only at the village or family level. And as has been noted by many observers, officially the Chinese government had very little interest in the activities of those Chinese who went abroad, those who were foolish enough to want to travel so many miles away from home. Yet the influence of what is commonly known as the Junk Trade, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is no small subject. A wide variety of necessities, and an increasing number of emigrants or "sojourners," was shipped to overseas communities, and remittances and important trade goods made the return voyage to China.

With the establishment of the Maritime Customs Administration under international (read British) control in the mid nineteenth century, one might expect that some of this mystery might have been cleared away. This is not really the case. As Sir Robert Hart put it in 1873: "Of native trade in the interior, and the movement of native produce and foreign goods along the coast in Chinese junks, we know nothing...."¹ (Hart was the man who, more than anyone else, was responsible for the creation of the Customs Inspectorate in China.) Fortunately, several more contemporary sources deal directly with the Junk Trade. Sarasin Viraphol, Jennifer Cushman, Ng Chin-Keong, and Tien Ju-kang have all produced excellent works regarding selected aspects of eighteenth and nineteenth century Chinese trade with Southeast Asia. Leonard Blusse provides a detailed analysis of Chinese overseas trade with Batavia, including some information on conditions on board ships. And G.R.G. Worcester has produced an immense work on junks and sampans of the Yangzi River.² Yet all these sources fail to really address the question of the ocean-going (not riverine) ships themselves: what did these things really look like? How were they built?



A junk from Amoy arriving in Victoria, British Columbia, in the 1920s (photo courtesy of the San Francisco National Maritime Museum).

There is almost no end of information on western maritime topics from this period. Archives are full of ships' plans, construction details, first-hand accounts of the lifestyle "before the mast," and even Marxist reinterpretations of shipboard community and labor protest.³ Individual volumes take on rigging, fasteners, sail technology, sheathing and the like as separate topics. Anyone familiar with the VK section of Hamilton library will have seen some of this material. If so much as a cleat or a marlin spike were out of place on a depiction of any given man-of-war, somebody would know it! In other words, there's usually enough there to keep even the saltiest of sea-dogs happily browsing for the next decade or two. But, when it comes to discussing centuries of Chinese overseas trade with Southeast Asia, the technical sections are often forced to fall back onto a few well-worn, well-copied sketches of some rather large and cumbersome looking vessels...perhaps back to some block prints of late Ming dynasty...perhaps all the way to the descriptions by Marco Polo! There is simply not very much that tells us exactly what these ships looked like. All this complaining can be neatly summed up in a couple of suspiciously Chinese-sounding phrases: sources scarce, field wide open.

So with all that in mind, the hunt began. And now, after what seems like several lifetimes spent toiling away like a character in a Dickens novel, pursuing some unreachable goal (but what was, in fact, a graduate degree), there are a few things that turned up: a scattering of descriptive articles from the *Mariner's Mirror* on the construction of certain late nineteenthth early twentieth century junks, the locations around the world of collections of junk models, and shipwrecks. Academically speaking, shipwrecks fall into the realm of the archaeologists, and are, therefore, conveniently located in another department, so to speak. For me, however, it's all history. It's the history of the Chinese trade with Southeast Asia; it's the history of Fujian and Guangdong maritime society; it's the history of technology, the technical evolution of the sea-going vessel; it's the history of Chinese overseas emigration. Whatever you call it, it has something to do with ships, so perhaps we had best leave it at that.

So here is one piece of that maritime history, an artifact that has cut an historical swath down through the centuries to arrive, finally, on the very pages of the journal you now hold in your hands: the ship *Ningpo*. This is exactly the type of ship, if not one of *the* very ships, that were making those long voyages to and from Southeast Asia with passengers and goods. Now, it must be kept in mind that the chief reason we know anything about the *Ningpo* today is that she was one of a handful of large old junks that crossed the Pacific and ended up on the West Coast of the United States.⁴ And it must also be remembered that these exotic vessels from the East served as floating museums for a while; what sold the most tickets were stories of bizarre tortures, blood flowing in the scuppers, rebel heads bouncing across the decks...that sort of thing. So there is no real confirmation of many of the details of the ship's individual story beyond that fact that she is a very old Chinese craft of a certain size and shape.⁵ Nonetheless, here's the story.



The *Ningpo* on display at Catalina Island, probably around 1913 (photo courtesy of the San Francisco National Maritime Museum).

The *Ningpo*, 138 feet in length and 31 in beam, was a medium-sized (300 ton) three-masted Fujian style ocean-going ship, very similar to what's called the Fuzhou pole junk design. Her upper works were teak, with a hull and numerous bulkheads of camphor wood and ironwood hull.⁶ The ornately carved oval stern, complete with bird motif and images of the immortals, is typically Fujianese in character. If historical sources can be believed, she was built originally as the *Kin Tai Fong*, either in 1753, or maybe 1806.⁷ And here is where things start to get really interesting.

Apparently, soon after being launched, the *Kin Tai Fong* soon turned smuggler and slaver, taking part in a rebellion against the government in 1796, a time when pirates were particularly active in Southern China. Next, she was seized for smuggling (silk and opium) and piracy in 1806, and again in 1814, and again in 1823. In 1834, the *Kin Tai Fong* was reportedly confiscated by Lord Napier for smuggling and carrying slave girls to Canton. In 1841, she began her seven year stint of serving the imperial government as a prison ship. Reportedly, 158 rebels were summarily executed during this time, hence the blood in the scuppers and heads bouncing across the decks. In 1861, she was seized by Taiping rebels and converted into a fast transport. Retaken by English forces, her name was changed (by "Chinese" Gordon?) to *Ningpo*. In 1864, she fought in the battle of Nanjing. And then, at last, the tourism begins.

It is reported that for some years after 1884 the *Ningpo* made a pretty good living preying on wealthy European tourists in and around Hong Kong. Lured by fine cuisine and an enchanting moonlight tour of the local islands around the harbor, unsuspecting passengers would soon find themselves robbed of all personal belongings (including clothing?) and quickly set ashore on some distant spot. British authorities soon sent the H.M.S. *Calliope* after the *Ningpo*. The crew was imprisoned and the vessel, again confiscated, was sold in Hong Kong. Now for the big move: Hollywood.



The *Ningpo* on the rocks at San Pedro, (photo courtesy of the San Francisco National Maritime Museum).

In 1911 she was sold to Americans for \$50,000. After having been damaged in a couple typhoons, abandoned by a mutinous crew, and *rowed* 320 miles back to port after yet another storm, the *Ningpo* finally sailed across the Pacific to San Pedro, California in a fast 58 days. There she began her career as floating attraction and museum of bizarre torture implements in Los Angeles, Long Beach, and San Diego. By 1917, the *Ningpo* was towed to Catalina Island, where she eventually began to sink (literally) into oblivion but not before appearing in the background of several Hollywood adventure films. In fact, it was during one of these Hollywood productions that a prop replica of a fire ship drifted out of control when the winds shifted and ran into the slumbering hulk of the *Ningpo*, burning the topsides to the waterline. What is left of the ship is covered with mud off Ballast point at Cat Harbor, along with an assortment of artifacts at the Casino in Avalon on Catalina Island.

How much of this is believable? Well, that's hard to say...perhaps a fair portion, but that would take more indepth research. The *Ningpo* was, most assuredly, a large traditional style Chinese merchant vessel built during the Junk Trade with Southeast Asia. Many photographs exist of her. Is that not enough? This is not some line drawing or some 300-year old sketch from Batavia. This is *the ship itself* (or what's left of her). Jack Hunter, an archaeologist for the California Department of Transportation, and Sheli Smith, the director of the Newport Maritime Museum, are two other archaeologist/historian types who have a hankering to spend a summer wading around in the mud with fire hoses, clearing things away so we can get to the lower decks. (The site's not very far away from the local tavern either, perfect!) Of course, this is a classic case of one of those "back-burner" projects, or "things I'm going to get around to doing once I'm wealthy and have lots of spare time." But here's the kicker: I don't know of any other way of learning how these ships were built other than to find what's left of them and take the measurements. There are all kinds of fascinating small details that might still be apparent from the remains: "longevity" holes and sea spirit perforations performed the same roll for Chinese

mariners that placing a coin under the mast did for the Europeans. There is a lot of cultural and historic information in the details of ship construction, but I'd better climb off of this soapbox.

Of course, we'd like to build one of these some day, but that goes without saying. I mean, who wouldn't?

Still, it may be a little while before we get around to funding ourselves into this one. The Ph.D program does have a way of making demands on one's time, after all. And, the truth be told, the remains of the *Ningpo* are not the only traces left of eighteenth or nineteenth century Chinese working vessels. The *other* one is a little further north. And it's not buried by mud at all, but sitting in a dry dock covered with someone else's laundry. But that's another story altogether.

Notes

1 Stanley F. Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs* (Belfast: W.M. Mullen and Son, 1950), 400.

2 Sarasin Viraphol, *Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1652-1853* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Jennifer Wayne Cushman, *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asia Program, 1993); Ng Chin-Keong, *Trade and Society: The Amoy Network on the China Coast, 1683-1735* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1983); Leonard Blusse, *Strange Company: Chinese Settlers, Mestizo Women, and the Dutch in VOC Batavia* (Holland: Foris Publications, 1986); Worcester, G.R.G., *The Junks and Sampans of the Yangtze* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1971); and Tien Ju-kang, "The Place of Chinese Sailing Ships in Shipping and Trade of Southeast Asia from the 17th to the mid-19th centuries," *Li-shih Yen-chiu* 12: 1-12.

3 Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

4 The Whang Ho, the Amoy, and the Free China are a few of the other 19th century junks which ended up on the West Coast. Today's modern pleasure junks from Hong Kong are not representative of traditional working craft.

5 Worcester, customs inspector for the maritime service in Shanghai, recorded several large Fujian craft in the early decades of the twentieth century as having been more than 150 years old, a testimony to their extremely overbuilt construction.

6 Interestingly, the size, time period built, and use of teak on the Ning Po are all indicators suggesting that this vessel may have been built in Siam, Chinese ship construction being fairly common there at the time due to cheap labor and materials. See John Crawford, *Journal of an*

Embassy from the Governor General of India to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China (London: Henry Colburn, 1828).

7 Sources for the popular description of the Ning Po history include: William F. Brown, "Ning Po: Chinese Pirate Junk," *Mains'l Haul: A Journal of Maritime History* 29, no. 4 (1993): 19-23; Donald Kennedy, "The Infamous Ningpo," *American Neptune* (October 1969): 262-274; H.K. Ravmenton, "The Venerable Ning Po," *San Diego Historical Society Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1958): 50-54.