My research centers on a mysterious and beautifully decorated model of a Chinese barge. To better understand exactly what the origin and function of this boat may have been, it would be useful to define what a barge is. A barge is a shallow draft vessel, primarily used for navigating rivers and canals. They are typically used to transport commercial goods; however a barge can also refer to an “elaborate pleasure boat used as a state vessel” (English Dictionary of Nautical Language). To discover more about this barge, this paper will explore where and when this barge is from, what its function may have been, and what we can learn about Chinese maritime history from this vessel.

Where is this barge likely from?
According to the documentation of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology, this model represents a barge of Chinese origin. China has countless inland rivers and canals, but perhaps none as significant as the Grand Canal. Originating from Beijing in the north and flowing towards the Zhejiang province in the south, the Grand Canal “has functioned as a vital transportation artery for China for twenty-six centuries” (Batruff). Throughout China’s extensive history and up to the modern day, Chinese barges have been used to navigate and transport cargo on the Grand Canal. Given this extensive maritime history and the boat’s shallow draft construction (indicating that it is not a sea-faring vessel), it is possible that the barge has some ties to the Grand Canal, or another one of China’s major inland waterways, such as the Yellow or Yanghtzee Rivers.

**What approximate time period is the barge from?**

Definitively dating this barge to a specific time period proves very difficult. According to the Peabody Museum, this model (but not the barge it represents) dates to 1899. With this information, we can definitively say that this barge represents a vessel created before 1899. As mentioned earlier, there is an extremely long history in China of river navigation with barges and other shallow draft vessels, which makes it difficult to narrow the possibilities for dating this barge. However, I was able to identify historic Chinese paintings and scrolls, from the Song and Ming Dynasties, which feature similarly designed vessels. The Song Dynasty lasted from 960-1290 AD, and the Ming Dynasty reigned from 1368 to 1644 AD. The Song Dynasty painting displays a vessel with a similar shape to our barge model; it is a long, shallow draft river boat with a structure covering the deck. The Ming Dynasty scroll also displays a covered imperial barge, with ornate decoration. The attention to detail and aesthetic qualities of this barge is
similar to our model, and may offer clues to possible origin of this boat.

What was the function of this barge, and who may have been using it?

Perhaps this barge’s most distinctive feature is its ornate decoration. Its intricate paneling, vibrant colors, and painted decorations all feature prominently in the barge’s design. Brook notes that in Ming era China, people “made use of a bewildering range of boat types, each carefully adapted to its particular water environment” (Brook 52). He continues to point out that “the barges that transported officials up and down the canal were of the same specification as the grain boats, though the cabins had larger windows and doorways were elegantly decorated and painted red” (Brook 53). This description seems to match our barge very well. Taking into consideration the Ming-era scroll that also displays a barge transporting high-ranking officials, it is very possible that our barge was used for the transport of imperial elites. Using an ornately decorated vessel was likely a status symbol, another medium for elites to project their wealth and power while travelling.
What can you find out about seafaring in this region and culture from this barge?

This barge, along with the multitude of other Chinese vessels, indicates how significant maritime transport and culture has been to Chinese civilization. With the ornate decoration on this barge, we can speculate that at least some Chinese vessels had symbolic as well as practical functions. Ornate barges could have been one way to project wealth and prestige in historic China. As a geographically enormous empire, maritime and river navigation also represented China’s link with different regions of its territory and with the rest of the world. From grain barges to imperial junks, maritime culture forms a vital element in China’s history and development.
Works Cited


The Jiajing Emperor on His State Barge. 1583. Ming Dynasty. Public Domain.