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Sailing In Ancient Chinese Luxury

The Chinese have travelled by water for thousands of years, building everything from massive warships to mythical treasure ships. Their engineers have perfected these ancient structures whilst incorporating new technologies. It is difficult to place the point in which my model fits into this complex history, but the boat’s design and artifacts provide some clues to its origin. The wooden model I examined was labeled as a Chinese Barge by the museum staff that received it in 1899, but its true history and identity are relatively unknown. Given the similarities of its intricate nature-inspired detail and traditional Chinese artwork, I support the notion that this model represents a boat from China. However, the word barge has the connotation of a functional freight that is responsible for transporting goods, whereas functionality does not seem to be the primary purpose of this boat. Thus, in order to more accurately describe the model, I will refer to this as a Chinese pleasure barge. Although the dating is difficult, I hypothesize that this pleasure barge likely made its way through the rivers sometime between the Song and Ming dynasties (1000-1600 CE).

The model’s appearance alone suggests that this boat was more than a functional barge. The ornate gold detailing both inside and outside the darkly painted cabin evoke an air of wealth and luxury, and the phoenix painting that adorns the stern speaks to a culture that is rich in artistic tradition. Although the pieces of the deck can be removed to reveal potential storage area below, the sheer size of the main cabin suggests that this vessel was not simply for transporting goods along Chinese rivers. The cabin is segmented into several rooms by the decorated archways and a hanging cloth. The floor is decorated with a green and gray checkered pattern. Inside the cabin were two small side tables and a green desk. It is not difficult to imagine
passengers sitting inside the cabin enjoying the water breeze while the slats covering the windows still maintain privacy from the banks. This is clearly a space intended for leisure, comfort, and aesthetic appeal.

Although I could not find any academic work discussing Chinese pleasure barges, I have been able to rule out many boats that this model is not. China’s long and rich history has seen numerous seafaring ship models, but the lack of sails suggests that this model was intended for rivers. Dating the ship has been difficult, but I was able to find two sketches from the Song (1000-1300 CE) and the Qing (1600-1900 CE) dynasties that resemble its design. The Song naval ship illustration appeared in the Wujing Zongyao, a Chinese military text, and the Qing paddle-wheel ship is from an encyclopedia of the Qing dynasty.

![Naval river ship from Song Dynasty](Image Removed) ![Paddle-wheel ship from Qing Dynasty](Image Removed)

Based on the broken pegs on the edge of the deck and the numerous hats suited for oarsmen, it seems that this pleasure barge – like the Song naval barge – was propelled by oars. Unlike the Song naval barge, though, it does not have any kind of military weapon, further suggesting that this was a boat of leisure. The pleasure barge also resembles the overall structure of the Qing paddleboat, but does not have a self-propelled device. Thus, I would guess that the pleasure barge precedes the technology exhibited the Qing dynasty.
Although I have explored the purpose and time period of this pleasure barge, an important question still remains: who used this vessel? Certainly the person had to have been either very wealthy or of high social standing to travel in such a beautiful boat that was propelled by a team of oarsmen. Perhaps a wealthy merchant or a scholarly elite would have had the opportunity to travel in such a fashion, but their ability to afford such a luxury item seems unlikely. It is more reasonable to guess that this pleasure barge was used for the travel of a high-ranking military official or statesman.