Discovering the History of an Asian Vessel

The boat titled “model of a country passage boat” has many distinguishing features that help to identity such a ship. Donated to the Boston Museum Collection in 1899 by the heirs of David Kimball, the model resembles a ship of previous times, identifiable through its symbols and description.

Aside from the title of the model, many aspects of the ship indicate that it is in fact from Asia, specifically China. As you can see in figure 1 below, there are four Asian symbols painted on the boat’s stern. While I am not completely sure what the symbols mean, they are clearly recognizable as Asian. Additionally, there are five sliding doors on each side, marked by the distinct “yin and yang” symbol. A close up of the painted symbol can be seen in figure 2. While I can’t necessarily decipher the meaning associated with the symbol on the boat yet, it could possibly provide some context.

From comparing the pictures I obtained during the analysis to numerous pictures found throughout the research process, this Asian ships seems to resemble that of junk. A junk was very often involved in trade between different parts of China as well as foreign nations. The boat observed here has a rounded bottom, and thus would match the description put forth by Matsuura Akira (2008). The paper describes different types of junks throughout Chinese maritime history, specifically
a bird junk, Fuzhou junk, and Guangzhou junk as having rounded bottoms.\(^1\) Thus, if this is the case, this boat would seem to have been used for such activities as trade and transport throughout China. Yet as Akira (2008) states, these junks with more rounded bottoms were better suited for sailing on the high seas and thus more likely found in eastern China. In figure 3 you can see the shape of the rounded bottom.

Figure 3 also presents a photo of the bow of the boat, displaying what appears to be some type of graphic. The graphic appears to be a type of animal, possibly a tiger given the small, propped up ears and sharp canine teeth. Additionally, the character pictured appears to have short front arms. Although I cannot confirm that this graphic is a tiger, it would seem to offer some contextual clues as to the geographic location of such a ship. As stated above, the round bottom of the ship seems to indicate that it was used in eastern China possibly on the high seas. What is interesting is that the Chinese tiger, now an endangered species in China, only exists to this day in four provinces: Fujian, Hunan, Guangdong, and Jiangxi.\(^2\) All of these provinces are located on the eastern side of China, with two (Fujian and Guangdong) located directly on the water. In accordance with Akira (2008), this could place the ship within the time period of the latter seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century. While once again I cannot confirm that this graphic is in fact a tiger, I would not be surprised if those who built the ship decorated it with a figure native to their province.

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Figure 2
Figure 3