Navigating the Shallow Waters: An Asian Trade and Transportation Vessel

The navigation of rivers, whether for the purpose of trade or transportation, is vital to a country’s economic prosperity. In ancient Asia, river navigation was important for both the transportation of people as well as goods. The construction features of the country passage boat are helpful in associating the boat with a specific purpose within the realm of Asian river navigation. By taking a closer look at certain features of the model, specifically the stem, stern, rudder, and additional propulsion mechanisms, and connecting it with historical evidence, we are capable of gaining key insight into the thought process behind river boat construction. Built for easy embarking and debarking as well as the ability for manual propulsion, the model resembles a boat that was used for shallow water navigation plausibly as a means of transportation or trade in the form of an Asian ferryboat.

Glancing at the bow of the boat immediately reveals information about the construction techniques and purpose. Figure 1 shows an image of the bow. At first glance, it is apparent that the boat was not constructed with a stempost. The first viewable objects are the keel and the adjacent strakes. The strakes are rather large, with only four on each side of the keel. The keel itself is divided into smaller sections by cuts in the wood, yet the keel is still one piece of wood itself. Thus, the boat has a rather shallow draft, and the deck may have sat very close to the water. In Asia during this time, many landings did not have docks or piers. Therefore the boats had to dock directly on the beach. The lack of a stempost allows
those on the boat to easily embark and debark straight over the bow (Damian, 67). This tactical ability commonly associated with ferryboats greatly aided those engaging in activities that required such acts of embarking and debarking. Additionally, the superstructure of the ship indicates that some type of objects, whether people or goods, were stored inside while the ferry navigated between locations.

The model’s rudder was found separate from the boat itself. Figure 2 shows the stern of the boat. At first glance, it is clear that the boat does not have a sternpost. As noted, the rudder is not there, yet the photograph shows a cavity in which the rudder might fit. The rudder itself is shown in figure 3. During physical analysis of the boat and the adjacent rudder, the rudder fit into the cavity as the viewer would expect. Therefore analysis of the rudder can be used to determine what type of water the boat was navigating through during its use.

The rudder has a long shaft that helps to extend the object further away from the boat and into the water. The holes in the rudder, thirteen to be exact, can be explained as a means for aiding the rudder in turning through water. When the crew on the boat turns the rudder, the holes allow the rudder to swiftly cut through the water below and turn with more ease.
The presence of side railing that extends just above the gunwale provides a means of safety for crew members who needed to “walk along the edge and pole the boat through the shallower areas” (Damian, 67). Figure 4 shows a collection of objects that appear to be the means for propulsion that were used by the crew of this boat. The collection includes four identical objects that appear in the form of oars or paddles. The objects are not extremely widened at the bottom, indicating that the water they were used to navigate through may not have been extremely rough or deep. Aside from the loops of rope halfway down the object that can be seen in figure 4, there is no evidence of fixation found on the boat itself. It is possible that the rope on the objects was used to fixate them to the railing along the side of the boat, but there is no definitive evidence to confirm this. Regardless, using these objects to date the boat would be incredibly difficult given that the use of such objects in Asian maritime history has changed very little over the course of time (Worcester, 55). That being said, the presence of the side railing and the collection of oars add more evidence to the case of this boat being a river traveling ferryboat.

Traveling the rivers of Asia require not only skillful maneuvering by the crew but also the correct construction features. The model of a country passage boat displays just some of these features, such as the bow construction, side railing, and collection of propulsion oars. These features, though, do not necessarily help in distinguishing the vessel as a passenger or cargo ferry. What evidence could help generate this distinction? That is something to consider next in unraveling the history of such a vessel.
Works Cited
