Figuring out what kind of ship you are looking at without any context is far more difficult than one might think. The boat/ship I chose was described as a “Chinese barge” so I initially worked under the assumption that it was indeed a Chinese barge. However, I decided to see whether or not I could confirm or deny this characterization. It was important for me not to believe something just because it was conveniently stated or that I knew my knowledge of the subject matter was essentially nonexistent. This is something called “ruling theory”, which means one works under the impression that the site is indeed something, when it is still up in the air. I did not want to have this ruling theory become a self-fulfilling hypothesis. So, I went step by step to see where my searches might lead me.

The first step into researching this ship was to figure out from what part of the world it was from. Thankfully, there were inscriptions on various parts of it and speaking to a few friends of mine, it was possible to figure out that they were Chinese inscriptions. These inscriptions are all variations of the phrase “no noise” and “silence” written in Old Chinese which stopped being the main language in the late 19th century. This helped with dating the ship, so it was most likely used prior to the late 1800s.

Then I looked up the definition of a barge, which according to Merriam Webster is as follows: a large boat with a flat bottom that is used to carry goods in harbors and on rivers and canals. It did indeed have a flattened bottom as opposed to a pointed hull (ship bottom). It being
a river boat is a likely possibility, because the Chinese Grand Canal had been a major system of transport for centuries, and barges were a very common type of vessel used on the Canal.

An initial search for “Chinese ship” yielded results pertaining mainly to Chinese junk ships, Chinese dragon boats, and Chinese pirate ships. None matched the ship model in question. Searching for “Chinese barges” was also unsuccessful. I widened search to include “Chinese imperial barge” and “Chinese imperial boat” which were the only searches that yielded anything. I decided to add “imperial” into my search because parts of the boat were painted gold which would most likely eliminate the possibility of it being an everyday use boat for common merchants for example. Looking at the model also shows that there was intricate woodwork which might suggest it would have been expensive to build and maintain. However, it is important to note that this does not mean it is definitive evidence that it would have belonged to a high ruler.

Working with the limited information found, I decided to try a new angle. I began making comparisons between my Chinese barge and Chinese junk ships, where a lot of information exists, and see what (if anything) might become illuminated.

I took note of some similarities. I noticed that the hull shape between the ship model and the Chinese junk ship was similar: lower at the bow than the stern, which was generally elevated. There were more differences than similarities. Junk ships were developed as vessels for longer seafaring trips. They began being used as early as the 2nd century AD and in later dynasties, they were used all throughout Asia for extensive ocean voyages (mainly in China). This contrasts with what the definition of a barge is; barges took trips on canals and rivers. Furthermore, the name or term junk is used to describe a wide range of boat type: for example ocean-going, cargo-carrying, and pleasure boats. The barge is a lot smaller than what might be expected of a cargo-
carrying ship or ocean-going vessel. One of the main visual differences is that there were always at least 3 sails on the junk ship, whereas on the barge, there are none and instead paddles are used as the main method of steering. This supports the categorization of this being some sort of barge, because using paddles as the main method of steering in long ocean voyages would surely be a death sentence.

These similarities and differences exist because these vessels were most likely used for different functions and purposes. Exactly what, I am unsure. My educated guess is that it is a vessel used to transport nicer goods along rivers and canals in China, as it being a barge would suggest. More research would be required to gather more information on Chinese barges in general.
