Fighting against the Opium Trade with Chinese War Junks

When I was younger, I built a model Chinese junk out of wooden pieces. The model ship that I saw when I first walked into the conservation room was both similar to and vastly different from my toy model. The first thing I noticed was its size—measuring more than four feet, this model ship was much bigger than my wooden toy. However, the structure, specifically of the sails, was comparable to my toy model—both models had horizontal sections in the sails (Figure 1). However, other than a comparison to my Chinese junk toy model and the information from the Peabody Museum’s catalogue (Display Title: War Boat; Place of Origin: Asia, China), I had no other evidence about the nationality or age of this ship. Based on clues from artifacts on the model ship as well as information from tracing the provenance of the model, I confirmed this model as a Chinese junk used to fight in the First Opium War.

Artifacts on the ship helped narrow down both the nationality of and time period the ship is from. Along the side of the ship were multiple circular disks made of woven reeds (Figure 2); the style of and writing on these disks suggest an origin in China. The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology catalogued these disks as “woven fiber flat baskets;” however, a type of shield called the rattan shield (or “Teng Pai”) had been in use in China since the Song dynasty and fit the description (Yang, 1999). Rattan shields are circular shields made from woven rattan reeds. As this model ship is catalogued as a “War Boat” and has a variety of weapons on it, it is reasonable to conclude that these disks are Chinese shields rather than baskets. In addition, some of the rattan shields contained writing on them that looked like Chinese characters. In fact, I was able to identify two of the characters potentially to be “机会” (“Jīhuì”) which means opportunity in Chinese (Personal Communication: Tao Lu).
Using the nationality of the ship in addition to other artifacts on board, I was able to narrow down the date of the ship. Although Chinese junks have been in use since the Han Dynasty (around 220 BCE) (Donnelly, 1930), a close examination of our model suggested a more modern boat. This ship had several muskets or handguns on board as weapons in addition to spears and tridents. The earliest firearms, hand-cannons, found in China have been dated to 1288 CE (Chase, 2003), suggesting that this ship was constructed sometime between the 13th century and the 19th century.

While this information was somewhat helpful, tracing the provenance (or ownership) of the model ship proved to be the largest clue as to what time period the ship was from. According to our contact at the Peabody Museum, Emily Rose, this ship model came to the Peabody from the Boston Museum, when in 1899, after the Boston Museum caught on fire, part of the collection was given to the Peabody Museum (Personal Communication; Sellers, 1980). However, Emily could not give us any more information beyond the latest date of 1899; what she could give us was a catalogue number for the ship (#52938) and several large folders full of archival material related to this collection from the Boston Museum. Rummaging through the archival material, I came across a museum label for this catalogue number that identified it as a Chinese Boat (which I already knew) from Peale’s Museum, circa 1840 (Figure 3). The Peale’s Museum was founded by Charles Willson Peale in Philadelphia in the 18th century (Sellers, 1980). In the mid 19th century, the Boston Museum bought many of Peale’s Museum’s collection, the most well known is a Lewis and Clarke collection, and apparently this Chinese war boat (Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology). Initially, there was some confusion of whether the circa 1840 date refers to when this model ship was made or when it was given to the Boston Museum from the Peale’s Museum. A quick look through the other museum labels in
the archival collection revealed a variety of dates (suggesting that the circa 1840 refers to the date of the ship), and a quick search online of 1840 and Chinese junks confirmed that 1840 is a significant date in Chinese history. Specifically, this was the middle of the First Opium War.

The First Opium War (1839-1842) was fought between China and Britain over the opium trade (Larson, 2015). In the early 1800s, Britain’s East India Company traded opium in China for various Chinese goods including tea, silk, and spices (Vassilev, 2010). The pervasive trade of opium resulted in many Chinese (about a third of the population) becoming addicted to the drug (Vassilev, 2010). Although the Chinese Emperor, Daoguang, attempted to counteract this addiction epidemic by banning opium, due to wide-spread government corruption, over 5 million pounds of opium was still being smuggled in, weakening China’s economy (Vassilev, 2010). In 1839, Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu confined hundreds of British merchants to their factories, confiscated their opium (about three million pounds) and disposed of it by dumping it into a creek (Larson, 2015). This act escalated an already tense relationship between China and Britain and led to war between the two countries. In this war, Chinese junks played an important role in the war and were used in battle against the British (Larson, 2015). In fact, a painting of the First Opium War depicts several Chinese junks in war against British ships (Figure 4). A comparison of the Chinese junks in this painting and the model ship reveals some similarities, including two sails with horizontal sections, railings running along the ship, and a higher stern section. In conclusion, based on evidence from artifacts found on the ship, information provided by the Peale’s museum, as well as comparative studies, this ship model appears to be a Chinese war junk used to fight in the First Opium War.
Figure 1: Comparison of my toy model Chinese Junk and the Chinese Junk from the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology

Image (left) courtesy of: Amazon.com (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Assembly-Wooden-Chinese-Construction-Puzzle/dp/B00857S0RK)

Image (right) courtesy of: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology
Figure 2: Rattan shields on ship model with Chinese characters

Image courtesy of: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology
Figure 3: Museum label indicating provenance and time period of Chinese Junk

Image courtesy of: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology
Figure 4: Painting of Chinese Junks employed in the First Opium War

References


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