The Origins of Ship Model 52940

Ship Model 52940 is a relatively large, (41.8 by 91 by 21.6 cm) wooden boat with golden ornate decoration lining the sides and Asian conical hats hanging from various points. It has a light green base that resembles the color of jade. Above deck, the ship is painted dark green. Separating the two is a red border. There do not appear to be any written characters on the ship and the ship has no name. There does not appear to be a sail on this ship, though it is possible that the model is missing the sail. The conical hats provide the first clue hinting that this may be a ship of Asian origin. Inside the ship, there appears to be a lantern, which again appears to be of Asian origin. These artifacts seem to support the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology’s identification of this ship as being a Chinese vessel. However, the museum also identifies this as being a barge, which I view with some skepticism. Upon further research of Chinese ships, I find that this ship model may, in fact, represent a junk, rather than a barge. The colors and decorations suggest that this ship may have belonged to the elite, possibly even royalty. I cautiously suggest that this ship would have been used during ancient times, possibly the Han or Song Dynasty.

The Chinese designed the junk during the Han Dynasty, 220 B.C.E. – 200 C.E. (Jones 2013). This type of ship has been used throughout a large part of Chinese history, for a variety of different purposes (Gascoigne, 2001). Even today, the ship exists (with a lot of changes since it was first invented). The Chinese employed these ships for trade, transportation, and military endeavors (Jones 2013). These ships were “traditionally built without a keel (allowing access to

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1 I defer further discussion of this until the next paper, since at that point, I will focus on the ship construction styles and then I will be able to make a stronger assertion.
shallow waters)” (Jones 2013). This is consistent with Ship Model 52940. Additionally, an illustration of arguably the most famous junk, the *Keying*, reveals similar shape and decoration to Ship Model 52940 (Davies, 2013, Plate 10, Plate 19). On the stern of the ship, there is an illustration of a menacing bird, which is also present on the stern of Ship Model 52940. This presents evidence for both the ship being a Chinese vessel and for it being a model junk.

The colors and designs on the ship support the conclusion that this is, indeed, a Chinese vessel. They also may suggest that this vessel would have belonged to someone of the upper class, perhaps even royalty. The ship is embossed with golden, yellow vine-like decorations. According to Welch, “crimson, red, and yellow were the preserve of nobility and were forbidden to commoners” (Welch, 2013, 247²). The red lantern found inside of the ship appears to be of traditional Chinese design (Williams, 2006, 189). The lantern is painted, though the paint has faded. It appears as though there are characters on this lantern, though it is difficult to decipher the shape of the character. The golden, yellow designs that line the ship appear to perhaps be those of the lotus flower (Williams, 2006, 247). Apparently, the lotus flower signifies “summer” which may provide a clue as to when this ship would have been used (Williams, 2006, 200). These decorations seem to present evidence for this ship being designed for use by nobility.

Based on the preliminary research, Ship Model 52940 appears to be a Chinese vessel from possibly ancient times. Its ornamentation suggests that this ship may have been purposed for the privileged. Going forward, identifying the writing on the lantern and identifying the symbols on the green bench may provide greater, more conclusive evidence as to the origin of this ship.

² I am using the ebook, which means that the page numbers are not absolute. According to the glossary, the Five Colors are discussed on pages 218-220, the best estimate I can get for the page numbers in the hard copy.
Figure 3: Photo of Ship Model

Figure 4: Photo of Lantern inside Ship
Figure 5: Photo of Bench inside Ship Model

Figure 6: Ship Model

Figure 7: Close-up of Decoration on Stern of Model
Bibliography


