A Case of Mistaken Identity

In 1899, the Peabody Museum received Ship Model 52940, labeled it a “Barge” with origins from “Asia, China” and then placed the model into storage. But is it a barge? The ship construction seems overwhelmingly to suggest that this model depicts a Chinese pleasure junk. The characteristics of the ship (such as the lack of a keel) are consistent with the characteristics found in ancient Chinese junks. This vessel likely would have been used for pleasure, rather than trade or war given its house-like superstructure, the artifacts found on-board, and its ship construction style. The design of the ship would have made it ideal for slow, steady travel—perfect for leisure travel or trade. The lack of cargo space combined with the elaborate decorations leads me to conclude that it is more likely that this vessel was primarily a pleasure junk.

As is common in Chinese junks, this ship has a flat-bottom and no keel. This is an important feature. It prevents the ship from getting stuck on the sandbanks and makes it easier for the ship to navigate shallow waters (Jones 2013). This is important for being able to sail “between Foochow, Shanghai, and the lower Yangtze ports” where sandbanks are common (Donnelly, 2008, p. 110).

This ship exhibits another common feature seen in junks: bulkheads. At the stem of the ship, there are three such bulkheads or compartments, which are covered with flat removable pieces of wood. This model has nothing contained in the compartments. In putting the junk together, shipbuilders would traditionally “lay the flat planks for the bottom boards side by side
on the ground … and secure them together” (Turnbull, 2010, p. 12). The planks were fastened together using “wrought-iron double-ended nails” (Turnbull, 2010, p. 12). To make the bulkheads, carpenters put the divider plank (the bulkhead) on the bottom plank and then affixed them using the same iron nails (Turnbull, 2010, p. 12). Once finished, these bulkheads were watertight, making them perfect for storage.

Ship Model 52940’s stern exhibits two particularly distinct characteristics that are consistent with the Chinese junk. First, it has a raised stern (back of the boat). The Chinese seafarers chose to build their vessels this way because it made their ships more resistant to strong winds or unruly waves (Donnelly, 2008, p. 13-14). Second, the rudder placement in the stern is consistent with the design of Chinese junks (Turnbull, 2010, p. 14). Sadly, the ship model is missing its rudder, which appears to have broken off, leaving an empty gap in the stern where it would have been. The raised stern and the sternpost rudder make it easy for the person steering to look out over the boat to the stem (Donnelly, 2008, p. 14). The design of the stern is overwhelmingly consistent with that of a junk.

One puzzling aspect of the ship model is propulsion. How did would this ship have moved had it been a real ship (as opposed to a model)? There are no sails, no apparent places for oars, and the model appears far too old to even consider the possibility of engine-power. It could be that the model maker left off the sails in order to allow the model owner to open the various compartments. Based on the typical junk model, this ship would likely have had sails in reality. These sails would have been constructed using bamboo to form a stiffened sail (Turnbull, 2010, p. 13-14). Additionally, it is possible (though not obvious) that this model may have been built with oars originally. Looking at the stem, there are a number of wooden shards sticking straight
out. These may have had oars connected to them originally, as this is a design often seen in junks. The presence of nine Chinese conical hats may suggest that nine men manned this ship.

As I mentioned in my previous blog post, the sternpost is elegantly decorated with the painting of an eagle-like creature, which greatly resembles the decorations on the Keying. Upon further research, I found another similarity: the flags. On Ship Model 52940, two flags have survived the years, but judging from the empty holes, this model had at least five flags flying from the sternpost when it was first constructed. What is striking is that the placement of these flags is identical to those on the Keying. Other than these artistic similarities, the two ships are quite different. For one, the Keying had a very different stem, which bears no resemblance to our ship model. What could explain these artistic similarities? I think the most likely explanation is that the decorations on the Keying inspired the decorations on the ship model. This leads credence to my deduction that this ship is indeed a junk.

How do we know that this junk was not purposed for war or trade? The superstructure seems to provide some clues (see Figure 1). Midway between the stern and stem of the boat, there is a box-like deckhouse. The removable-roof reveals two rooms with tile-like floor. Strewn on the floor are miniature objects—stairs, two side tables, an apparent lantern, and a ladder. These objects seem like personal comforts, which would be unlikely to be found on either a war or trade vessel. Moreover, the flat-bottom would make this ship slow and steady—two unwanted qualities for a warship. So what about trade? Although the bulkheads could serve as storage for cargo, it seems odd that a model of trade vessel would omit the sails or include so much intricate decoration. For all of these reasons, I find it more plausible that this model depicts a Chinese pleasure junk.
Figure 1: The inside of the superstructure
Bibliography

Donnelly, I.A., 2008 (1st edn 1924), *Chinese Junks and Other Native Craft*. Hong Kong, China.
