Artifact number 99-12-60/52938 sits in the storage of the Peabody Museum, listed only as “War Boat”. The ship model, roughly 2 feet long and a foot and a half high, features unique and prominent sails. These sails, known as Chinese lugsails or junk rigs, have timbers called battens running across their entire width. The battens give the sails a sturdy appearance, and make the sails easy to control in changing trade winds. Wicker shields also run along the port and starboard sides of the deck and a wicker canopy covers the ship’s stern.

It is interesting to note that the wicker shields coexist with a breech loading cannon on the starboard side, as well as edged weapons at stern. The wicker shields would seemingly serve little use up against a cannon, and it is hard to believe that the two can coexist on a ship of the same era. The final initial observation is the unique deep keel and rudder, both of which have diamond shaped holes all along them. Taken together, these observations point to the ship being a Chinese Junk, and the heavy armaments on board (and the artifact’s title) point to the ship being a War Junk. Digging a little deeper, we can conclude that this ship model is likely an 1840 Chinese War Junk, like those that would have been used in the First Opium War (1839-1842).

In many ways this ship model is representative of China in the mid 19th century, a country mired in antiquated traditions facing a growingly belligerent and technological advanced world. At the turn of the 19th century, the Qing Dynasty in China was ill adept to handle the various changes of a modern world, stuck in the traditions of thousands of years of Chinese history. However, around the world the imperial powers of Europe (and soon to be the imperial powers of the United States and Japan) were increasingly viewing China as a potential market and destination for imperial expansion. Chinese maritime culture and technology was ill-
equipped to fend off encroachments from the outside world. Junks had been in use in China for many hundreds of years, and had remained largely unchanged since the Song Dynasty. Ever since China had spurned the Treasure Ships of Zheng He in the 15th century, Chinese trade had mostly remained confined to Asia. In the 1840s, hundreds of Chinese ships traded back and forth between China, Siam, Singapore, and other Asian ports and this trade “was almost entirely in junks” [Cushman]. Although junks prior to the First Opium War Chinese Junks had received somewhat preferential treatment in Asian trade, as a result of the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of 1842 “the preferential treatment of junks was abolished” [Cushman]. While these Junks were well-suited to sail the shifting trade winds and rivers of East Asia, they were not well suited for battle with blue or brown water European Fleets.

Searching through the documents that accompanied this ship model through the Peale Museum in Philadelphia to the Boston Museum to the Peabody, my group came across a label that read “Chinese Boat: Peale’s Museum, ca. 1840” and listed item number 52938. While initially we though the date of 1840 might be the date that the model entered the museum’s collection, when we went through the other labels and looked at those dates (some of them were dates before the Peale Museum was open) we came to the conclusion that 1840 must be the year of the ship model.

Taking into account the purpose and date of the ship, it seems very likely that this is the exact type of ship that would have faced off with the British Royal Navy in the First Opium War (1839-1842) and fought in lopsided battles such as the Second Battle of Chuenpee. When the Chinese and British went to war in 1839, the Chinese were well-prepared for a 17th century war not a 19th century one, with coastal forts and fortifications that were aged and outmatched by the British. This technological discrepancy was most pronounced on the seas where “the Chinese
were similarly outgunned, for their war junks were largely unwieldy affairs armed with 2 to 6 pieces of artillery lashed to blocks of wood and impossible to aim” [Headrick]. Our ship model certainly fits this description, will two breech loading cannon loosely lashed to the rail of the ship. The British however were well equipped with the most modern steamers, which “could sink the best Chinese war junks with no problems” [Headrick]. The British fleet smashed the antiquated Chinese vessels, forcing the Chinese into an unfair treaty in 1842. As a result of their crushing defeat at British hands (as well as another defeat in 1860), the Chinese made attempts towards the end of the 19th century to modernize their fleet. However this campaign had little success, as the other navies of the world had developed far superior maritime technologies.

Thinking back to when I first saw the ship model, it is hard to believe that the model dates to 1840. Compared to contemporary American and European vessels, this war junk is hopelessly outgunned, an obsolete vessel like those that were blown out of the water by the Royal Navy. This ship model is emblematic of the technological asymmetry in naval technology that allowed the Royal Navy and the imperial nations of Europe to dominate the world’s oceans, and the world’s lands, for such a long duration.

References:

