



Maritime Archaeology, Underwater Exploration and Searching for The History of “Four Oceans” Navigation in Asia-Pacific Region

Chunming Wu*

The Center for Maritime Archaeology, The Belt and Road Research Institute, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian, China

*Corresponding author: Chunming Wu, The Center for Maritime Archaeology, The Belt and Road Research Institute, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian, China

Received: 📅 November 23, 2021

Published: 📅 December 07, 2021

Abstract

Maritime culture has always been a trans-boundary creation and production across the vast ocean, even over the last thousands of years. The Asia-Pacific region has been one of the two or three most significant and vigorous maritime cultural spheres in the world. As with other regions such as the Mediterranean and North Atlantic, where European mariners developed remarkable classical maritime trade and then voyages of “discovery” and maritime globalization, the Asia-Pacific region plays a special role in the maritime history of humankind where proto-Austronesians carried out the earliest and greatest seafaring from mainland eastern Asia to the Pacific archipelagoes, and then ancient Chinese, Indian and Persian maritime merchants co-led the Maritime Silk Road between East and West before the European contact [6,12,14].

Introduction

Chinese Maritime historian and archaeologists have recognized the uniqueness of marine preferences of southeast China as one of regional features in the diversity of prehistoric and early civilizations of China and eastern Asia. Professor Huixiang Lin of Xiamen University explored, a half century ago, how the “Maritime Region of Southeastern Asia” created by the indigenous Bai-Yue ethnicities differed from the inland farming cultures of northwestern China and inner Asia anchoring the central imperial civilization [18]. Professor Chunshen Lin from Academia Sinica of Taiwan further reconstructed the model of an “Asian Mediterranean Cultural Circle” of indigenous Yi and Yue covering both the south and east coasts of China and the Southeast Asia. International and multidisciplinary investigation also confirmed that the ultimate ancestry of the Austronesians of southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands lies in the coastal areas of southeast China. This prehistoric migration of Austronesians, from mainland eastern Asia southeastward to islands in the eastern Pacific, was the greatest seafaring of the pre-industrial world. These native maritime cultures and their Neolithic seafaring activities essentially built the early foundation for the historical Maritime Silk Road between the Pacific and Indian flourishing last 1000 years as the “Four Oceans” navigation of the Asia-Pacific region [6,14].

Maritime archaeology is one facet of anthropological and historical disciplinary focusing on the investigation and research of maritime cultural heritages of humankind, which dealing with ancient materials both buried on land sites, such as historical harbors and maritime transportation remains in ancient seaports along the coast, and submerged underwater, such as a series of shipwrecks in different seas [1,2]. Since the invention of the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (the “scuba”) in 1940s, the underwater archaeology has highly developed and grown in Asia-Pacific and over the world, revealing a great amount of ancient shipwrecks and underwater artifacts along the sea routes of mariners of the east and west [2]. As the extension of field archaeology into underwater, which is essentially and methodologically the same as usual archaeology, the underwater archaeology necessarily developed a series of sophisticate techniques including electronic remote sensing in searching for submerged sites, progressive diving devices for working on deep water sites, effective methods of dredge and excavation, survey and examination, photograph and record, salvage and conservation. The tremendous growth of this new discipline of archaeology in the Asia-Pacific region during last a few decades, especially along the coast of China and Korea, Southeast Asia waters around the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and adjacent Australian, and the West coast

of north America, uncovered more than 200 historical shipwrecks sites, drawing the historical map of ancient navigation across broad oceanic world of Asia-Pacific [2,6].

Maritime archaeology is no longer purely “field” work carried out on land and impressively underwater exploration, but a discipline of thinking and recognizing the long history of people’s going down to the sea, exploiting the marine resource, living on and transporting across the blue ocean over last thousands of years. Ancient sea routes and navigation were important, dynamic factors in the emergence of Asian-Pacific civilizations, which can only be recovered through research involving maritime archaeology and underwater exploration [1]. Although the reconstruction of Asia-Pacific nautical routes during the last two millennia had been key topic for maritime historians of traditional academy, most of them often describe the mainstream of Asia-Pacific navigation or “maritime silk road” as the geographical extension of the inland silk road that reached from Europe to Asia. They stressed the central role of territorial imperial civilizations such as those early dynastic China, mostly ignoring the contributions of maritime-oriented indigenous peoples who first inhabited coastal and inland areas of Asia-Pacific region. Located in southeast China’s seaport city of Xiamen, Xiamen University has developed a traditional strength in maritime archaeology since 1930s [18]. Established in 2004, the Center for Maritime Archaeology (CMAXMU), the only one dedicated to this subject among Chinese universities, has led multiple national-level social science projects and international co-operating programs, including the archaeological exploration to “peripheral” indigenous maritime cultures of Bai-Yue and proto-Austronesian and seafaring history in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. In last a few of years, CMAXMU carried out a program of “Archaeology of Asia-Pacific Navigation”. Taking a cross cultural perspective, depending on the new investigation of maritime archaeology and underwater exploration of the vast richness of ancient shipwrecks and seaport heritages, we rethought the embedded concepts such as center vs. periphery, territorial inland vs. maritime region, and “civilized” vs. “barbarian” in maritime history of Asia-Pacific region. We restored a number of international and multidisciplinary academic dialogue on ancient Asian-Pacific navigation, deepening the understanding of the heritage of the ancient Maritime Silk Road [15,16,17].

In this program. we discovered that ancient Asia-Pacific navigation had not been a linear maritime route of West to East, but rather a complicated “Four Oceans” network. As recorded in Chinese historical documents, this Four Oceans network involved eastbound, westbound, southbound and northbound sailing routes over the last 2000 years, encompassing not only sea routes linking eastern Asia and the Indian Ocean, but also navigation across the much broader and global ocean. Drawing upon state-of-the-art research to explore various aspects of the ancient Four Oceans network that linked Asia-Pacific region is a challenging but highly significant contribution to the global study of maritime history [6,14]. Eastbound navigation and the pan-Pacific routes system centered on the busy seafaring route from mainland southeast China and extended across Taiwan, the Philippines and eastern Indonesia and into the Pacific. Navigation in this region originated

with Neolithic seafaring traditions of the native Eastern Yue and Min Yue of Bai Yue ethnic branches in southeast China, as well as proto-Austronesian peoples along the coastal areas of southeast Asia [13,15,16,18]. It continued to flourish from the first century AD into the fifteenth century, when the Spanish Manila Galleon fleet established regular, systematic voyaging linking Asia to the coast of North America as part of an ambitious and extraordinary early globalization route. We focus on both the prehistoric native navigation, the emergence of long-distance trade routes, and the Spanish pan-Pacific voyaging between Asia and the Americas [17]. Topics include:

- a) the, what, when where and how of maritime archaeology and early navigation in the Asia-Pacific region.
- b) Neolithic seafaring and early maritime cultural diffusion and migration.
- c) Prehistoric seascapes and maritime economies.
- d) Cultural interaction between early austronesian peoples and those who inhabited the asian mainland.
- e) The nautical technology of early and historic era voyaging.
- f) Historic era maritime trade; and
- g) The seaport archaeology of pacific navigation, covering such early ports as yuegang (crescent port in zhangzhou) [17], marco, nagasaki, manila and acapulco, among others.

Southbound and Westbound navigations across the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, was the most important of the Asia-Pacific historical sea routes. It has roots in Neolithic seafaring traditions of the indigenous Southern Yue and Luo Yue peoples, who inhabited coastal regions of mainland Southeast Asia and southern China [4,5,7, 8, 9,10,11]. We examine evidence revealing early indigenous navigation and historical maritime transportation across the South China Sea, covering topics including:

- a) The origins of seafaring and cultural diffusion along the coasts of southern China and Southeast Asia.
- b) The origin and dispersal of the Austronesians across South China Sea,
- c) The emergence of maritime silk road trade (involving porcelain, silk, beads made of precious stones, spices, perfumed wood and other goods);
- d) The content of sea routes and nautical technology including junks, sails, astronomy and the compass.
- e) The proceeding of archaeology of historical shipwrecks, seaport heritage, and the transportation and trade along the “maritime silk road”;
- f) Rethinking the cultural contact and significance of the “maritime silk road” for globalization.

Northbound navigation and sea route to the northwest Pacific originated with Neolithic seafaring across the Huanghai Strait

(Yellow Sea) [14,15] and in later times it flourished in the form of extensive contacts between the coast of mainland northeast Asia, Korea and Japan. Here we examine evidence for ancient seafaring and cultural diffusion that linked the indigenous Eastern Yi along the northeast coast of China with ancient Korea and Japan [2,3,6].

With the increasingly larger corpus of shipwreck data, archaeologists on both sides of the Pacific will work together to research and rebuild the life of past societies connected by the vast ocean. We will continue to explore a broad range of maritime archaeological evidence, highlighting the most significant and current research on ancient Asia-Pacific navigation. Our multidisciplinary approach draws attention to the significance of diverse lines of facts including sea routes, shipwreck archaeology, ancient seaports, maritime heritage artifacts, maritime cargoes, nautical technology and the role of indigenous peoples, presenting significantly new archaeological and historical research on the poorly-known aspects of navigation and sea routes in the Asia-Pacific region spanning the last several thousand years [18].

Acknowledgement

Supported by the National Social Science Foundation of China (NSSF-20&ZD248).

References

- Jeremy Green (1990) *Maritime Archaeology: A Technical Handbook*. Academic Press, London, UK.
- James P Delgado (1997) *Encyclopedia of Underwater and Maritime Archaeology*. Yale University Press, New Haven, USA.
- (2006) Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea, *The Shinan wreck. Mokpo: Cultural Heritage Administration and National Maritime Museum of Korea*.
- Regina Krahl, John Guy, J Keith Wilson, Julian Raby (2010) *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*. Arthue M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA.
- Heidi Tan (2012) *Marine Archaeology in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Asian Civilization Museum.
- Chunming Wu (2003) *The Shipwreck Discovered in Seas Surrounding China-Preliminary Study on Ancient Chinese Junk, Navigation and its' Cargo Economy*. Jiangxi Higher Education Press, Nanchang, Korea.
- Jeremy Green, Rosemary Harper (1983) *Maritime Archaeology in Thailand: Seven Wrecks*. Adelaide: Proceeding of the Second Southern Hemisphere Conference on Marine Archaeology.
- Jeremy Green (1977) *Australia's Oldest Wreck*. Oxford: BAR (British Archaeological Reports) Series 37 p. 2-12.
- Roxanan Maude Brown (2009) *The Ming Gap and Shipwreck Ceramics in Southeast Asia, towards a chronology of Thailand trade ware*. The Siam Society Under Royal Patronage, Bangkok, Thailand.
- Wang Gunwu (2003) *The Nanhai Trade: Early Chinese Trade in South Chinese Sea*. Times Media Private Limited, Singapore P. XV pp. 136-137.
- Pierre-Yves Manguin, 1984, *Relationships and Cross-influences between South-east Asian and Chinese Shipbuilding Traditions*. In Final Report Consultative Workshop on Research on Maritime Shipping and Trade Networks in Southeast Asia. SPAFA Coordinating Unit, Bangkok pp.197-209.
- Janet L Abu Lughod (1989) *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. Oxford University Press, New York, USA.
- Shirley Fish (2011) *The Manila-Acapulco Galleons: The Treasure Ships of the Pacific with an Annotated List of the Transpacific Galleons 1565-1815*. Milton Keynes: Author House UK Ltd. pp.18-54 & 350-385.
- Chunming Wu (2016) *A Summary on Shipwrecks of the Pre-Contact Period and the Development of Regional Maritime Trade Network in East Asia*. C Wu (ed.), *Early Navigation in the Asia-Pacific Region-A Maritime Archaeological Perspective*. Springer Nature, Singapore p. 1-28.
- Maria Cruz Berrocal, Chenghwa Tsang (2017) *Historical Archaeology of Early Modern Colonialism in Asia-Pacific*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, USA.
- Chunming Wu, Barry Vladimir Rolett (2019) *Prehistoric Maritime Cultures and Seafaring in East Asia. The Archaeology of Asia-Pacific Navigation 1*. Springer Nature, Singapore.
- Chunming Wu, Roberto Junco Sanchez, Miao Liu (2019) *Archaeology of Manila Galleon Seaports and Early Maritime Globalization. The Archaeology of Asia-Pacific Navigation*. Springer Nature, Singapore.
- Chunming Wu (2021) *The Prehistoric Maritime Frontier of Southeast China Indigenous Bai Yue and Their Oceanic Dispersal. The Archaeology of Asia-Pacific Navigation 4*. Springer Nature, Singapore.

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License

To Submit Your Article Click Here: [Submit Article](#)

DOI: [10.32474/JAAS.2021.06.000228](https://doi.org/10.32474/JAAS.2021.06.000228)



Journal Of Anthropological And Archaeological Sciences

Assets of Publishing with us

- Global archiving of articles
- Immediate, unrestricted online access
- Rigorous Peer Review Process
- Authors Retain Copyrights
- Unique DOI for all articles