

CHINESE JUNKS AND OTHER NATIVE CRAFT

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INTRODUCTORY

ALTHOUGH much has been written on China and her people, very little has been said about one of her most important industries – shipping. And this, notwithstanding the fact that China has been from the earliest times one of the foremost amongst sea-faring nations. This omission is surprising when one remembers that there are more vessels in China than in all the rest of the world put together.

Brief reference to Chinese craft has been made in all the standard works, i.e., “*Torr’s Ancient Ships*,” “*Sailing Ships and their Story*,” etc., etc., but particulars in regard to the number, variety and style have been insignificant; also in the majority of cases such pictures and models as are available have been grossly exaggerated.

WARRINGTON SMITH has dealt with Chinese junks in his “*Mast and Sail*,” and his sketches of *Southern China Fishers* and some of the coasters are delightful, but he

has only written of those met with in the regular steamer tracks. MAJOR LORING's book of Hongkong types also shows something of the South China variety.

It must be borne in mind that every port, every inlet and lake has its own peculiar vessel best suited to its particular waters, currents and needs. Literally their name is legion. It would, therefore, be a brave man who would venture to describe in detail all the junks in use by the Chinese. Week ends spent on the Whangpoo, journeys on the great Yangtze and elsewhere, up and down the coast, and in the interior give the writer confidence that of the thousands of junks offered to the observant eye, at least a representative number of types are shown.

Several writers in the past have adversely criticised the Chinese junk. It has been said to be slow and unwieldy, and absolutely unfit as a sea boat. Because John Chinaman is essentially industrious, a money-seeker, and always content with a "bird in the hand" it has been put down to his natural vanity that he has not learnt

to copy the fine ships of the West which visit his coasts. The writer emphatically disagrees with these opinions. No nation has shown greater independence in arts and craft than the Chinese. The originality that pervades their architecture, painting and whole life ashore and afloat has no comparison in the world. That their manners, modes and methods appear upside down, and contrary to all Western ideas and thoughts does not prove that **there is no good in them—and even so with their ships.**

Actually in this respect they have little to learn from the Western hemisphere. Western Nations on the other hand have learnt and copied a great deal from the Chinese. A case in point is the system of watertight compartments. Although we have no **historical records of the date when the Chinese first originated this idea, we know that it was many centuries before Father le Comte, writing on Chinese craft in 1687 (Ref. "Collections of Voyages and Travels," Vol. 2, page 510), stated:**

“Their barks are made of a very fine light timber, which makes them more apt to take all impressions one has a mind to give them. They divide into five or six compartments, so that if they touch upon a point of rock which makes a break in their vessel, only one part of the boat is filled, and the others are dry, and defend them until they can mend the hole in the other.”

Many decades before the turret principle for the saving of tonnage dues was evolved in Europe the great Pechili Traders from North China, big five-masted, three to four hundred ton vessels, sailed the high seas.

The leeboards now so common in the shallow type of boats on the English and Dutch coasts were in use in China many centuries before the seafarers of Europe became aware of their value.

Although considerable controversy has raged over the origin of the compass we have it from Chinese records that Chow-kung-taoche-man-chay (The Duke of Chow) first made the compass about A.D. 1112. There

are no records in Europe to disprove this fact and it is merely conjecture on which the historians of the West pin their faith.

The writers who treat the Chinese junk with scorn and contempt are invariably “landlubbers.” They have not studied the junk at sea, in harbour, and at work; nor the sailorman himself and his prowess as a seafarer and navigator. One can see it in the illustrations given us from time to time in glowing caricature.

In comparatively recent years the Chinese junk has proved its capability for **undertaking long sea voyages** (see “Foochow Pole Junks,” and “Amoy Fishing Junk,” pages 107 and 119).

It is not surprising that the Chinese, with such a large population directly interested in water transport by sea, canal, creek and river, should prove to be wonderful sailors. A big proportion of China’s teeming millions have **their home on the water. They are born on junks, grow up, live and die on junks.** During this process from birth to old age there is **nothing they have not learnt about the vessel**

to which they are rooted, neither, being an observant people, does much escape them in the study of the winds and waves which are life or death to their floating homes. In this connection it may be of interest to note here that in and around Hongkong there are no less than 69,000 "tan-ka" or sampan folk having their homes on the innumerable craft plying in and out of the harbour.

The Chinese sailorman has been called the Dutchman of the East owing to his similar habit of making his boat his home. Also there is a great similarity in his tastes as regards ships. He has the same love of bluff lines, bright colours and varnish, long pole masts with vanes and the same brown coloured sails, while both countries are countries of rivers and canals.

On the larger Chinese vessels the family living on board have what they would consider quite comfortable quarters in the lofty poop, although no doubt a European would expire from the foetid atmosphere and general "smelliness." To a Chinaman these details are not noticeable. Invariably

the vessel is overcrowded, old men, young men, women and children, all jumbled up together, eating, drinking, playing, smoking, and of course gambling, in its nooks on deck, or its depths below. For months and years, at sea, in port, in typhoon and calm, they live quite happily in this way. In the present day, however, women are not often seen on **ocean-going junks.**

Perhaps one of the greatest characteristics of the Chinese sailorman is his adaptability. **His training is such that literally he can handle the most unlikely vessel in a masterly manner under almost any conditions.** It is no surprise, therefore, to find that given a really fine specimen of his native junk he is an artist in his manipulations of her.

Like all seafarers the Chinese junkman is a superstitious soul. Everything in connection with his expeditions is governed by the gods, therefore it is necessary that much propitiation is made to them, or in the words of the laodah "must wanchee pay plenty chin chin joss." The date of departure is always governed by "Feng-shui," a curious

Chinese custom which is supposed to be the influence of the wind and water spirits for **good or ill.**

The first act of homage at the outset of a voyage belongs to the joss of the compass, which in China is a primitive affair of 24 points. The idea is that the "Powers that be" send fine weather and favourable winds. Should the reverse happen, there is **undoubtedly a "Jonah" on board who must be removed at the next port.**

At night when a fleet of fishing boats "go about" they light flares and beat gongs to **frighten away the devils of the sea. Doubtless this habit also tends towards avoiding collision, for there is always a certain amount of practical sense in the Chinaman's ideas, even in his "joss" pidgin. This beating of gongs is also a ceremony that takes place on the departure on a voyage of one junk from its fellows at a crowded anchorage.**

Every junk carries its own particular little "joss" idol on the poop. Much burning of silver joss paper representing "sycee" **(money in the form of a silver shoe) takes**