

MARITIME MUSEUMS: WHO NEEDS THEM?



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NALANDA-SRIWIJAYA CENTRE
WORKING PAPER SERIES NO. 11

(May 2012)

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The NSC Working Paper Series is published electronically by the **Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre** of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore.

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Citations of this electronic publication should be made in the following manner:

Stephen Davies, Maritime Museums: Who Needs Them?, **Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre** Working Paper No 11 (May 2012), http://www.iseas.edu.sg/nsc/documents/working_papers/nscwps011.pdf

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Maritime Museums? Who Needs Them?

Stephen Davies

Abstract: Maritime museums are among the Cinderellas of the museums world, nowhere more so than in Asia, where they are conspicuous by their absence. Yet this is a startling double paradox. For the sea has always been of great importance to human affairs, and especially to the lives of the peoples of Southeast Asia. The low status and skewed distribution of maritime museums is even more of a paradox today than some two centuries ago, when the first moves to found maritime museums were made, for 95% of merchandising trade in our globalised world moves by sea, 40% of it through Southeast Asian waters. The first part of this paper considers the background to this double paradox in the universally low status of the maritime world but the growth of an important difference in attitudes in Asia and Europe in the course of the 15th-20th centuries. Some thoughts are ventured as to the consequences of the different “histories” of the cultural fortunes of matters maritime in Asia and the west and how these relate to the development of maritime museums in the last two centuries. The paper concludes by considering the problems created by this context for maritime museums in Asia through the prism of the experiences of the Hong Kong Maritime Museum. Four points are addressed – the problem of founding and financing a maritime museum; the problem of creating a collection; the problem of developing acceptable and relevant storylines; the problem of attracting and holding an audience.

Introduction

To some, the title of this paper will reek with deliberate irony. Yet in an Asian context its irony is probably muted, indeed it may fail as irony altogether. For if the irony of the two questions depends on an assumed positive to their implied negative, looking around Southeast Asia – indeed in many respects littoral Asia as a whole – the title is not so much ironic as precisely descriptive of a prevailing attitude. An attitude to which the answer to the first question is, “What’s that?” and to the second is, “Who indeed?”

If you think that is harsh, ponder some numbers. We shall not bore you with reams of statistics, just some indicative pointers.

Hong Kong has one maritime museum (about which more later), a small museum fireboat and the Hong Kong Museum of Coastal Defence, which on an expansive definition one might generously rate as half a maritime museum. Singapore had a maritime museum but is now, as it were, resting between engagements without any, the small and very locally orientated Navy Museum being at present on the move between Sembawang and the new navy base at Changi.

These are two of the most affluent cities in Southeast Asia and both, on any reckoning, are amongst the top five port and trading cities in the world – a status which both have held for at least 100 years.

Denmark has a population of about 5.5 million people. That is 78% of Hong Kong’s 7 million or so inhabitants or around 120% of Singapore’s roughly 4.6 million.

Yet Denmark, with its main ports all ranked way down the league table, has 23 maritime museums – yes, maritime museums. If we are talking about museums in general, the country has 214 museums of one sort or another.¹ Just in case anyone is inclined to think – as one of Hong Kong’s civil servants was when such a number was run past him – that the comparison is unfair, because Denmark is geographically bigger than Hong Kong (or Singapore), it is worth noting that Greater London – geographically not much larger than either Hong Kong or Singapore and with a population about the same as Hong Kong, has some 242 museums and galleries,² amongst them 7 maritime museums.³

¹ <http://www.museums.dk/denmark.html> accessed 11.8.2009.

² <http://www.londonnet.co.uk/ln/guide/about/museums.html> accessed 12.8.2009

³ A possible explanation for these discrepancies – at least in terms of simple correlations – might be the respective GINI coefficients. According to 2007/2008 Human Development Report (see <http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/147.html> accessed on 21.8.2009), Hong Kong’s is 0.435 and Singapore’s 0.425 compared to Denmark’s 0.247 and the UK’s 0.36. It would be an interesting exercise to plot museum provision against GINI coefficients, since there are prima facie reasons for supposing that higher levels of provision may correlate with lower levels of inequality.

Denmark and London are two places with maritime stories no more or less interesting than either Hong Kong's or Singapore's. Their stories do not go back significantly further in time. Neither Denmark nor London is as central to world sea trade today as either of Asia's premier port cities. Yet both have vibrant maritime museum worlds with a firm status as part of the national culture and of public and private cultural provision and well supported by a significant proportion of their populations. The same is manifestly not true for either Singapore or Hong Kong. Why?

There is no agreed definition of a maritime museum, nor a universally accepted register of them, but from a fairly rough search and cross-collation⁴ - and allowing "maritime museum" to include museums dealing with shipbuilding, docks, docklands, traditional vessels of all kinds, inland waterways, navigation and navigational aids, seamen, maritime art, recreational boating, etc. - we find listed some 1,120 maritime, or maritime related museums around the world. If we include all historic vessels being preserved as museum ships of one sort or another and ethnographic, science and transport museums with a significant maritime component, the list would reach over 2,000. But the raw total is not what is significant, impressive though it is. What matters is the distribution of these museums by continent.

Looked at crudely, the total number of museums and museum ships allows one or other for every 3.3-5.9 million people in the world. On that count, Hong Kong and Brunei, for example are pretty much average. But that is misleading, because something of the order of 95% of all maritime museums and museum ships are to be found in North America, Europe and Australasia. Given that these geographical areas count for only 16% of the world's population, there is an evident disproportion. The skew can be simply expressed. There is a maritime museum or museum ship for every 400,000 to 600,000 North Americans or Europeans. In Asia the provision, even on a generous count, is more the order of one such museum to every 110,000,000.

Again, why?

Is the answer merely one of gross wealth on the one hand, and the post-colonial legacy on the other? After all, museums are an affluent country's privilege, the provision of them quite reasonably coming rather a long way after basic health care, education, clean water, a roof over the head, adequate nutrition and jobs for the working population. And although almost all high cultures would seem to have had traditions of wealthy collectors of fine art, books, memorabilia, etc., the idea of free or subsidised public access to what had formerly been largely private collections -- in effect, therefore, the very idea of a museum -- was a shift in sensibility that took until the 19th century to become fully established and was specific to a given period and context -- basically Europe and the advent of the industrialised, urbanised

⁴ See <http://www.bruzelius.info/Nautica/Museums/MMEUSE.html>, <http://people.pwf.cam.ac.uk/mhe1000/links.htm>, <http://www.european-maritime-heritage.org/default.aspx>, <http://www.maritimemuseums.net/>, http://www.icmmonline.org/pages/member_directory.htm all accessed on 12.08.09

nation-state. Such a state – and much else besides it has been argued – was denied to Asia one way or another in direct or indirect consequence of European imperialism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. So if Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular seem to be ill-provided with museums and barely provided at all with maritime museums, why worry? It will happen!

Well, maybe not without some help.

Part I

Museums and maritime museums

The earliest museums began life in Europe in the 17th century and started to become a more common feature in the last half of the 18th century. However, access to such institutions remained restricted until, by around the mid-19th century, there was a sufficient level of general affluence, public education and interest to give museums an audience, in effect a middle class.⁵ This state of affairs has only been in place in much of Asia – and then only patchily – for about a generation. The later 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe and America have accordingly been labelled the “museum age” during which most of today’s leading museums were founded. These were also years in which imperial conquest gave a boost of boastfulness and “look at what we’ve grabbed” to the whole business and did a great deal to enable the rapid creation of large and internationally comprehensive collections at comparatively low cost.⁶ It was a “one-off” state of affairs, of which anyone trying to create a museum from scratch in Asia today will be acutely aware. The public museum as we know it today is therefore a child of the 17th through 19th centuries in Europe.

But if affluence above a certain level and the development of an industrial, urbanised society are certainly part of the answer, and if imperial conquest enables a simpler route to amassing collections than entering the modern global arts market, they are hardly sufficient conditions. Indeed they are certainly not so where maritime museums are concerned for as we shall see, the latter have a very different history.

⁵ See Bettine Messias Carbonell, *Museum studies: an anthology of contexts*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, Part V and specifically Ch. IV, Philip Fisher, “Art and the Future’s past”, pp. 438-439 and Tony Bennett, *The birth of the museum: history theory and politics*, London: Routledge, 1995, esp. Part 1, History and Theory, where Bennett explicitly notes the centrality of the 19th century and its critical conjunctions.

⁶ Thereby giving birth to what is called the “international” museum, with a collection derived from sources all over the world, as opposed to national, regional or local museums with more circumscribed collections. For a discussion of some of the issues see *International Dimensions*, the British National Museum Director’s Conference Report, 2002, http://www.nationalmuseums.org.uk/media/documents/publications/int_dimensions.pdf accessed on 24.08.2009. For a robust defence of a historically generous and forgiving view, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: ethics in a world of strangers* (New York, 2006), especially Ch.8, “Whose culture is it anyway?”

Setting aside the more obvious stories of discrimination against the Dan or Tanka people (*Danjia* 蜆家), or more correctly the sea people (shui shang ren 水上人) in Hong Kong and – even if a bit less pervasive -- with respect to the *orang laut* in Southeast Asia, the status of the sea and people who make their living from it in almost all societies is not high.⁷ Put bluntly, the sea, ships and ports are on the wrong side of the tracks, at the wrong end of town and deal with the wrong element. To the vast majority of people, the sea is alien and plays no immediate or at least no immediately apparent role in their lives and identities. So why should they want to pay for or, bar a passing curiosity of the sort one might have for a raree show, visit a museum dedicated to the sea and ships?

Nothing quite illustrates that Cinderella status of the sea and sailors so well as the chequered history of maritime museums throughout the world. It is a story that puts the relative non-existence of maritime museums in Asia in a different light. Though, as we shall see below, what appears to be a general cultural disposition to downgrade the sea and those who occupy their business in great waters, has had a longer afterlife in Asia than elsewhere and significantly different consequences with respect to which the paltry role of maritime museums is a mere by-product.

The first maritime museum of which we have record starts its story, in Russia interestingly, in 1709.⁸ But the tale of Russia's naval museum, like that of the Musée Nationale de la Marine in Paris which begins a generation or so later, is actually a double illustration of the point I am seeking to make. For although the history of both collections – and indeed of many other European maritime museum collections – goes back to the early 18th century, for the first 96 years of the life of what became today's Central Navy Museum in St Petersburg, it was a private, royal collection. Typically, after a brief 22 years of life, the collection then disappeared for over forty years before emerging again in 1867 as part of the great 19th century florescence in public education, scientific curiosity (and one has to add, imperialistic boastfulness!) at which we have already briefly looked.

⁷ See, for Britain for example, Peter Earle, *Sailors: English merchant seamen 1650-1775*, London: Methuen, 2007, esp. Ch. 1. For China, see Robert J. Antony, *Like froth floating on the sea: the world of pirates and seafarers in late Imperial South China*, Berkeley: Institute of Asian Studies China Research Monograph 56, 2003, Chs. 4, 6 and 7 with its quote of the sea people's poignant self-image, "on water a dragon, but on land a worm", p. 140. For the *orang laut* see David E. Soper, *The sea nomads, a study of the maritime boat people of Southeast Asia*, 2nd ed., Singapore: National Museum, 1977; and Mariam Ali, "Singapore's Orang Seletar, Orang Kallang and Orang Selat", pp.273-292 in G. Benjamin and C. Chou (eds.), *Tribal communities in the Malay word: historical and cultural perspectives*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002. Both generally and marvellously, though lacking accepted academic rigour, Stan Hugill's rambunctious *Sailortown* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) is a splendid review as, for a pithy resumé, is Basil Greenhill, *The archaeology of boats and ships*, London: Conway Maritime, 1995, pp. 14-16.

⁸ See http://russia.rin.ru/guides_e/7045.html accessed on 15.8.2009. The history makes the point that the museum opened in 1805 only to be closed in 1827 "for lack of room".

The story of the French Musée Nationale de la Marine is just the same.⁹ Starting as a private, royal collection in 1748, it went in and out of existence until finally coming to a berth in the Louvre in 1827, where it rose to a deserved eminence under the curatorship of the doyen of marine ethnographers, Admiral F.-E. Pâris (1806-1893), from 1871 to 1893.

There is a similar story in Spain, where at the initiative of Antonio Valdés y Fernández Bazán (1744-1816), Capitán General de la Real Armada (Captain-General of the Royal Navy), the foundation of the Spanish Naval Museum was mooted in 1792...only to get lost sight of until 1843. At that date, a museum was finally opened in the Palacio o Casa de los Consejos by Isabella II. As with our other examples, the museum then led a somewhat precarious existence until 1932, when it seems finally to have begun the steady and distinguished trajectory it has followed since.

Each of these august institutions has lived a precarious existence fighting for its life and many continue to do so. The Musée Nationale de la Marine, for example, was still under threat in 2000 because the space it occupied in the Palais de Chaillot (to which it had moved in 1936) was wanted for the expansion of the Musée de l'homme, one of the seven departments of the Musée national d'histoire naturelle. When it comes to the interests of landlubbers over those of mariners, one thing is for sure -- the sea-blind majority rules. Happily in France there was a public outcry led by maritime luminaries like the late, great Eric Tabarly, and the Musée Nationale de la Marine was saved and given a purpose-built building. Now it is the centre of a network of nine maritime museums spread throughout France with one of the world's finest collections.

It is equally instructive to ponder the history of the British National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. One would think it a fair bet – to echoes of “Rule Britannia” or “Heart of Oak”¹⁰ – that most would suppose this great institution to be of an age with the maritime museums of Russia, Spain and France. They would be wrong. A National Gallery of Naval Art was founded at the then Royal Hospital for Seamen in Greenwich only in 1823. It was joined by a separate Naval Museum in 1873 when the old Royal Naval College was established.¹¹ But there was no national maritime museum until a group of private individuals formed a Trust in 1927 and founded a collection. Even that project nearly foundered for want of operating

⁹ See http://www.musee-marine.fr/site/fr/histoire_musee_1748, accessed on 15.08.2009, and the subsequent pages bringing the story up to the present.

¹⁰ “Heart of Oak”. Heart of oak is that part of the tree that is hardest and hence most resistant to cannon fire and other blows, hence the meaning of the first line of the song's chorus “Heart of oak are our ships...” The hearts of the sailors are not referred to directly, only that as “jolly tars” they are by implication spirited and of good heart. The words were by the British actor David Garrick and the music by Dr William Boyce. The song was first performed in 1759 during the Seven Years War (1754-1763) – a European conflict with significant repercussions for Southeast Asia.

¹¹ Interestingly, the 1873 Naval Museum is not the progenitor of today's Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth. The latter began life as the Dockyard Museum in 1911, and lived alongside the Society for Nautical Research funded and operated *HMS Victory* museum ship from 1928 to 1972, when the two institutions were merged to create the present Royal Naval Museum.

funds, and was only rescued by the passage of an act of parliament in 1934, which founded the present, publicly supported museum.¹²

So, maritime museums are not in the forefront of anyone's list of cultural "must haves", not even those who supposedly think saltwater flows in their veins.¹³ Ninety-nine percent plus of any population are landlubbers and, what's more, proud to be. To them the sea is OK off a beach, from the deck of a climate-controlled floating shopping mall-cum-hotel like a cruise liner, or on the other side of the TV screen. Otherwise, it is an alien element populated, as the British Dr Johnson observed, by members of a literally outlandish tribe anxious to risk death by drowning whilst living in conditions closely akin to a prison cell.¹⁴

In most of the rest of the world, where there was what we might tendentiously style a "high" culture, that fundamental attitude was not merely regnant but overwhelmingly so.¹⁵ Ships, shipbuilding, navigation, the sea and sailors remained for the most part beyond the social and cultural pale. So far so, indeed, that recovering the maritime histories and heritage of non-European societies for any time before the mid- to late 19th century is a significant challenge.

Given the maritime community of which any maritime museum is a part, its role is to collect, preserve, and display objects from the past and present maritime life of its society and of other societies with which it has maritime ties, or through which the maritime world of its mother society may be better understood by comparison and contrast, in a way that educates and informs the visitor.¹⁶ -- In short, the role is to illuminate a given society's

¹² See <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/about/history/national-maritime-museum/history-of-the-national-maritime-museum>. There is also an excellent insight into the vicissitudes faced by those who strove for a maritime museum in Britain in Geoff Quilley (ed.), *Art for the nation: the oil paintings of the National Maritime Museum*, London: National Maritime Museum, 2006, especially the first three essays by Pieter van der Merwe, Roger Quarm and Caroline Corbeau on the Greenwich Hospital, Caird and Macpherson Collections.

¹³ Sea Vision UK (http://www.seavisionuk.org/partners_&_friends/partner_list.cfm), which was founded in 2000 and has as its partners a vast range of organisations from the British maritime sector, aims at raising public awareness of the sea and all that it involves in national life. One of its first surveys discovered that most Britons dislike the sea and would not, for the life of them, contemplate taking up any sort of sea-related employment. They are also completely unaware that 95% of the trade upon which Britain depends to survive travels by sea.

¹⁴ *Boswell's Life of Johnson, including Boswell's Journal of a tour to the Hebrides and Johnson's diary of a journey into North Wales*, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887, p. 391.

¹⁵ For discussions of this contested term see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge, 1984 and Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

¹⁶ If it is a research museum then there is the additional responsibility, through an appropriate collection strategy and well-designed collection management system, of improving and enriching the collection, as fully as possible, to cover its main research subject area and making that collection accessible to scholars. See the International Council on Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics, especially sections 1 and 2 at <http://icom.museum/ethics.html#intro>

particular corner of maritime history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*,¹⁷ allowing for a presentation that appeals to and is accessible to the average member of the museum's audience whether in a permanent, temporary or special exhibition. If, with an eye to enhancing visitor appeal, a judicious eye is kept on present fashions in history and historiography as well as fashions and technical possibilities in educational and other media, it is nonetheless for that appeal to be made without sacrificing a museum's ethical and pedagogical responsibilities on the viciously complementary altars of political correctness, ideological servility, superficial populism or the slippery and almost vertical marketing slope that leads via dumbing down through edutainment and infotainment to just another "visitor attraction".

That said, most would recognise today that, where maritime history – as indeed other histories – are concerned, *wie es eigentlich gewesen* is a question of multiple perspectives. Those of officers and deckhands, of passengers and crew, of dockers and wharfies, their foremen and bosses, of slaves and slavers, of gay crew and straight crew, of victors and vanquished, of pirate and victim, and of many more besides. How it really – and despairingly – was for a slave is a story that needs to be told just as much as how the Baltimore clippers that did the slaving began expanding the design envelope of fast ships or how the Atlantic triangular trade helped provide the capital that fuelled the European Industrial Revolution. The same applies to how opium smuggling carried on the developments of hulls and rigs, whilst debauching a government and its people and as a by-product profoundly changing China in perpetuity.

However, in its apparent inclusivity, that brief paragraph masks an exclusion. It excludes not only the perspectives of those who are peripheral to what Europeans and North Americans are wont to think of as "the main story", but also the perspectives of those seafarers and denizens of coast and waterfront who seem almost to be outside maritime history itself. These are not an underclass suffering from what E.P. Thompson called "the enormous condescension of posterity".¹⁸ They are "those who go to the sea in ships and do business in great waters"¹⁹ in societies for which maritime history barely seems to exist because the

¹⁷ "*er will blos zeigen, wie es eigentlich gewesen.*" As Fritz Stern pointed out in the *New York Review of Books*, 24 Feb. 2000, it has been subsequent generations, not Ranke, who have taken this youthful, modestly throwaway remark made with quite a different intent, as a sacred injunction. The observation appears in the early *History of the Latin and German Peoples* (1824) and reads in full (in translation), "History has had assigned to it the office of judging the past and of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high offices the present work does not presume; it seeks only to show the past as it really was."

¹⁸ E.P. Thompson, *The making of the English working class*, revised ed., London, 1968, 12.

¹⁹ That rich and evocative phrase comes from the translation of Psalm 107 in the Authorised, or King James' translation of the *Christian Bible*, verses 23-30. The whole runs, "23 *They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; 24 these see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep. 25 For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. 26 They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. 27 They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end. 28 Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and he bringeth them out of their distresses. 29 He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. 30 Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven.*" It is worth pondering the nature of a society for which these were evocative phrases redolent of a lived and common experience which could be and was a crucial

maritime world has little or no written and recorded place. They are people whose world, in consequence of their relative cultural non-existence, seems bereft of the rich store of the images and artifacts, which a maritime museum would use to show how it really was for them back whenever.

Even the language that describes their Chinese representatives for example, the world of *chuan-zhu*, *duo-gong*, *cai-fu*, *song-han*, *to kung*, of *yi-* and *er-ding*, *da-liao*, *yi-er-* and *san-qian*, *ya-gong* and *shui shou*²⁰ as well as a host of other people ashore whose maritime roles fail to map onto their western – and by derivation their modern globalised – equivalents, is one which much of the established pattern of presentation in a maritime museum – the categories within which and through which stories are told and artifacts are classified – cannot readily embrace and hence allows to fall from its grasp. One is reminded of the “remote pages” described in Jorge Luis Borges charming short piece “John Wilkins’ analytical language” (*El idioma analítico de John Wilkins*).²¹

It may be a sad truth that in most cultures with a sufficient maritime littoral to have a maritime world – with the honorable exception of Polynesia perhaps – the place of the maritime world is not at the top table. But, if the pun may be forgiven, if matters maritime are often below the salt, they are at least still at table as an accepted participant at the feast. But that is not true in all cultures and it is not unfair to say that for the most part it is not true of today’s mainstream Asian and Southeast Asian cultures even if, as we shall note, that was almost certainly not the case in the past.

part of the perceived and lived cultural whole, as compared to a society for whom the words would not have the same evocative power.

²⁰ Roughly the first four were officers: owner-cum-administrative captain-cum-supercargo, sailing master-cum-navigator-cum-mate, purser-cum-mate-cum-captain’s secretary, loadmaster-cum-bosun, cox’n-cum-quartermaster; the second group were petty officers: first and second anchor boss, chief mainsail haul, Nos. 1, 2 and 3 halyard easers, ship’s husband-cum-carpenter, and then came the customarily and it seems ubiquitously lumpen world of the deckhand. As much to the point ALL were participants in the trade that was the purpose of the voyage. The majority of the crew were unpaid, but were allotted at least some cargo space right down to the deck hands who could load 933.33lbs (7 *piculs*) out and back!

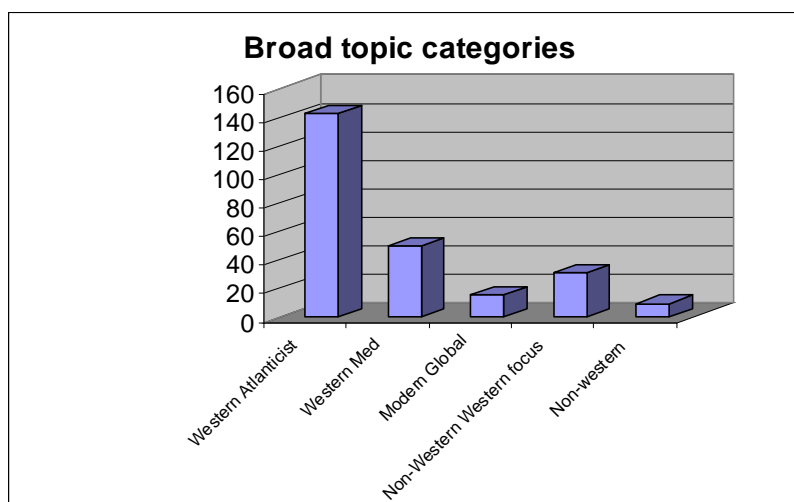
These roles – which were by no means common to every Chinese ship, though fairly normal to oceangoing ships in the *Nanyang* (or South China Sea) trades – can be found well differentiated, though as we shall note without any clear grasp of how they worked together, in the late Jennifer Cushman’s fascinating *Fields from the sea: Chinese junk trade with Siam during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries*, Ithaca, 1993, pp. 100-105 and, particularly for northern China, in the essays by Japanese researchers of the 1930s and 1940s in Andrew Watson (trans.), Mark Elvin (ed.), *Transport in transition: the evolution of traditional shipping in China*, Ann Arbor, 1972.

²¹ The paragraph runs, “These ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled “Celestial Empire of benevolent Knowledge”. In its remote pages, it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” See Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, Harmondsworth, 2000, pp. 229-232.

Consider, for a moment, maritime history as it is currently modelled in modern, globalised academia – naturally no claim is made here as to the sympathies of its practitioners. It is – if one focuses on the literature on library shelves and in academic journals – overwhelmingly Atlantico-Mediterranean centred.²² That is no more than a consequence of the simple fact that maritime history, as a subject, was born and has its intellectual centre of gravity in the Atlantico-Mediterranean world. However there are three important corollaries to – and possibly causes of – that for the topic being addressed in this paper when looked at from the standpoint of a maritime museum in Asia.

First, it is primarily in the Atlantico-Mediterranean world (and its Australian and New Zealand and coasts of North America offshoots) that one finds what we may call the infrastructure of maritime history and hence maritime museums. That is, it is primarily in these areas that one finds a social status to matters maritime and, concomitantly, a significantly and sufficiently rich and diverse corpus of professional and amateur maritime historians and nautical archaeologists, as well as the civil society entities in and by which they organise themselves and their doings. Only these provide a strong enough context within which a maritime museum may be born, exist and flourish without relying too heavily on what we can call “total external and artificial life support”. These civil society entities include academies, learned societies, journals, books, and conferences. They are the clubs, sports and avocations, hobbies and hobbyists, and traditional arts and crafts supporters and practitioners. They rest on, feed and are fed by the broad substrate of a marine art and

²² The graph below gives a broad perspective of the papers given at a typical international scholarly gathering of maritime historians – the 5th IMEHA Conference at Greenwich in June 2008. It shows the broad distribution of what we may style the “maritime area foci” of the topics of the 250 or so presentations that were given in the intensive four days of the conference. The “maritime area foci” categories are crude but, for the purposes of this discussion, useful. They clearly illustrate the point being made.



A similar bias can be found in Martin Stopford’s theory of the “Westline”, which wholly omits from its compass the centre of gravity and action of sea trade being in the Indian Ocean and China Seas areas from around 400 CE through until perhaps the end of the 17th century or possibly later – see Martin Stopford, *Maritime economics*, 3rd Edition, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 5-7, 10, 44 and 348. Stopford’s book is a major textbook for many professional courses in the modern global shipping industry.

artifacts market, with its accompanying public interested in both general maritime subject matters and the art and artifacts to which maritime life has given birth. It is upon the existence of this complex that any dynamic maritime museum is symbiotically dependent.²³

Second, there is the point that the subject matter – that is, what “counts” as maritime history and maritime studies and what constitute their informing categories, language and sub-specialisms – reflects the practices, structures and interests of the Atlantico-Mediterranean sea world.²⁴ As we shall note later, this has much significance for an Asian maritime museum.

Third and finally, there is the implication that the comparative absence or at least paucity of that historically salient maritime infrastructure elsewhere has some inevitable consequences. These are, critically, two. First, there have been too few literate and numerate agents in maritime and related occupations of sufficiently high social status, who have wielded significant military, economic, cultural and political power – the first order seamen, shipwrights, naval architects, ship owners, admirals, maritime lawyers and officials, yachtsmen, fishermen, etc., as well as the second order academics, collectors, museologists, modellers, archivists, artists, poets, composers, etc.²⁵ Second, there has been a consequent

²³ I would invite any doubter to review the availability of undergraduate courses in maritime history minors or majors, of postgraduate courses in maritime history, of schools or institutes or centres of nautical archaeology as between Asian and Southeast Asian universities and their European, North American and Australasian equivalents. Or to consider the home bases of such entities as the World Lighthouse Society, ship modelers groups (for example see http://shipmodeling.net/vb_forum/links/browselinks6.html); or of academic journals in the fields of maritime history and nautical archaeology. Equally, scan the pages of any recent catalogues of the Northeast Auctions annual Marine, *China Trade and Sporting Art Auction* (e.g. 15-16 August 2009), or the Bonham's *The Marine Sale*, Part I and II, 16760 and 16759, (24 and 25 March 2009), Christie's *Maritime Sale*, 2067, (3rd December 2008) or *Maritime Decorative Arts Sale*, 2129, (15 January 2009) to see where the sales were held and what was on offer.

²⁴ It is an interesting comment on this matter that HKMM has still not succeeded in finding a comprehensive Chinese-English/English-Chinese Maritime Dictionary that embraces not only both past and present nautical vocabularies, but does so in ways that include the highly specific vocabulary relevant to the parts of traditional Chinese vessels, Chinese traditional ship management and crewing, etc.. The best we have managed so far has been Raul Leandro dos Santos' useful, but primarily present-day orientated, *Dicionário Português-Chinês de Marinha* (Macau, 1999). A large dictionary published several years ago by the Commercial Press in Beijing proved to be out of print. There have been several dictionaries announced in the last decade (see <http://www.chinainbook.com/book/dbooks16.htm>) but getting hold of examples is another matter. For an earlier comment on the roots of this relative shortage, see J. Needham, with Wang Ling and Lu Gwei-djen, *Science and civilization in China*, vol. 4, Physics and physical technology, Pt III: Civil engineering and nautics (Cambridge, 1971), p. 403, footnotes ^b through ^d, looking *inter alia* at Worcester's path-breaking *The junks and sampans of the Yangtze*, reprint, (Annapolis, 1971), and *Sail and sweep in China: the history and development of the Chinese junk as illustrated by the collection of junk models in the Science Museum* (London, 1966).

²⁵ Cushman makes this point in Cushman, *Fields from the sea*, pp. 106-108, as does Needham in *Science and civilization in China*. Gang Deng, *Chinese maritime activities and socioeconomic development, c.2100 B.C. – 1900 A.D.*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 45, makes reference to the Tang Dynasty poet Li Bai (701-762 DE) and the Sichuan scholar Su Shi (1037-1011 CE) in the Northern Song Dynasty, both of whom refer to the sea, but it would seem these are the exceptions

relative dearth of artifacts, documents, images and so forth; a dearth that expanded very swiftly in the late 19th century. The dearth of artifacts follows, for the large part, precisely because of the paucity of creative agents and sponsors and because of the former's low status – or non-existence, with the result that not as wide a range of examples were made, written, painted or composed.²⁶ But above all the dearth follows because, even for those artifacts that were created, more were swiftly disposed of as unimportant parts of an unimportant world, and so fewer were accumulated through time.²⁷

To that largely true picture, however, we do need to add a further gloss" That is, the consequences of the European irruption into Asian waters, especially as they played out during the high period of imperialism in the 19th century, had the effect of reinforcing the problem. They did this in two ways. They effectively downgraded indigenous traditions as in some sense inferior²⁸ such that they became no more than quaint relics of a more benighted time, symbols of a "backwardness" that were worth preserving in imperial museum collections as ethnographic curiosities, but not of value in themselves as contributions to the

that prove the rule. At the same point, he also refers to Zong Que (?-465 CE) who, as an ambitious youngster, is reported to have longed for a maritime career. The same comment, surely, applies.

²⁶ The point being not that nothing at all cognate ever existed in Asia's maritime worlds, but that what there was never made the cultural mainstream, has consequently been almost entirely neglected, and that in any case the organising categories for pre-modern Asia's world of ships and boats do not necessarily map onto those current in western understanding, no more than do the categories of Asia's dominant intellectual traditions necessarily map across into the western intellectual tradition. For an exhibition mounted at HKMM, the curatorial team – all but the author being native Hong Kong Chinese – was asked if they knew any Cantonese or, more generally Chinese songs about the sea (traditional or modern Cantopop) or poems or novels about the sea, or novels about sea people, or Cantonese or Beijing operas where the sea gets a look in. The result was a profound blank. The point is not that such songs, especially modern ones, do not exist. They do. There is a western (!) collection of Min River, shanty-like songs that was published in the 1940s extracting and setting down in western notation just a few of a much larger collection gathered by an American missionary in the early part of the 20th century – see Stella Marie Graves, *Min River Boat Songs*, New York, 1946. And as far as modern songs are concerned there are also quite a few examples, as the author has learned from a private communication with Mrs Carrie Yau Tsang Ka-lai, Permanent Secretary of the Home Affairs Bureau of the Hong Kong SAR Government, recalling work she did with the government's Music Office in the 1970s. What is significant is that none of my curatorial team, whose collective memories straddle from the early 1960s to the present day, knew of even a single example.

²⁷ Ponder such things that are the stuff of western maritime museums as sailor-made ship models, woolwork, shell and other valentines, knot boards, scrimshaw, seamen's chests or, more formally, sailors and officers uniforms, accoutrements and navigational instruments and, perhaps most indicative of all, the logbooks that from the 17th century on carried the daily record of the doings, often in hourly detail, of millions of voyages and a thousand upon thousand ships.

²⁸ This is perfectly expressed in the description of the *Keying* in the publicity pamphlet issued by the ship's owners when it arrived in London: "Everything is different; the mode of construction, the absence of keel, bowsprit and shrouds; the materials employed, the mast, the sail the yard, the rudder, the compass, the anchor...Hundreds of European ships, with all their elegance of form and beauty and lightness of rigging, have been constantly before the eyes of the Chinese, without their appearing conscious of the superiority..." See *A Description of the Chinese Junk "Keying", printed for the Author and sold on board the junk*, London: J. Such, 1848, p. 13.

onward march of maritime science. And it made impossible the rise of a cultural world differently orientated towards the sea and ships whilst instead imposing as the modern norm, as it were, the way of going down to the sea in ships and doing business in great waters we now identify as the global shipping industry.

Of course that is not to say that this different but equally “modern” maritime world would have transpired had the Europeans not bullied their way to hegemony. It may be that the shift one sees in 14th/15th century Europe from a world remarkably similar to Asia, in which ships and the sea were primarily the provinces of an out caste, to one where increasingly the ruling classes became involved as part of the slow rise of the system we call industrial capitalism, would for various reasons not have happened. So where in Europe by the mid-18th century the shift had begun giving the respectability to a naval calling and matters maritime (which was indispensable to the emergence of the first maritime museums), perhaps in Asia no such change would ever have occurred.

We cannot know. But we can see the consequences. In Hong Kong for example, it is almost certainly too late to recover some of Hong Kong’s maritime past, for not a single example of a traditional, sail-powered, locally built vessel can now be found. Where the slow growth of yachting, rowing and canoeing as sports in Europe and North America acted, accidentally, to preserve traditional craft, which were adapted to suit the recreation of the affluent few, what happened in Asia tended to consign traditional craft to the impoverished margins labelled, by default, as symbols of an obsolete or obsolescent past. In the one tradition, traditional craft were incrementally transformed into the sleek, hi-tech machines of the Volvo Ocean Race, the China Coast Cup or the Singapore Straits Regatta, or preserved as loved “classics” of a vanished past. In the other, traditional craft and rigs are fast disappearing where they have not already disappeared.

It follows that imperialism acted to freeze Asia’s traditional shipping world – its naval architecture, navigational practices, shipping organisation, etc. – in its tracks, thereby largely stopping it from enjoying the benefits of further continuity and change and condemning it, at best, to a lingering death by a thousand substitutions.

There can surely be no better immediate illustration of this than a consideration of the yacht racing worlds of early Singapore and Hong Kong in contrast to those same worlds today.

In their early days, yacht racing in the twin cities was characterised by two things which, to a modern observer, seem almost incredible.²⁹ The racing was between indigenous craft; in Singapore the *kolek*³⁰ and in Hong Kong the admittedly hybrid Hong Kong sampan. And the

²⁹ See for example the articles by C.A. Gibson-Hill in the *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in the 1950s, some of which can be found in Reprint 27, *Boats, boatbuilding and fishing in Malaysia*, <http://www.mbras.org.my/R027.html>, particularly *JMBRAS*, 23 (10), 1950, pp. 144-148, “The racing jong”, *JMBRAS* 24(1), 1951, pp. 121-132, “A Note on the Small Boats of the Rhio and Lingga Archipelago” and *JMBRAS* 25(1), 1952, pp. 84-110. “Tongkang and Lighter Matters”.

³⁰ See H. Warington Smyth, *Mast and sail in Europe and Asia*, Ch. X, available at http://www.friend.ly.net/users/dadadata/smyth/mast_n_sail_00.html accessed on 24.08.09, for a charming illustration of a racing *kolek*. There was also some racing, though as far as one can see, not involving Europeans, only local boatmen, in the earlier junk or ketch-rigged tongkangs.

crews that raced the vessels were very mixed, with the indigenous crewed boats (like that of the Temenggong of Johor) as often as not winning the races with their greater skill, local knowledge and bravura. Yet today, although the *kolek* is still very much part of working life among fishing communities in the Riau Islands, it is so in unchanged form. It has all but disappeared from Singapore. And the Hong Kong sampan sailed into extinction in the 1960s. Racing instead is conducted in GRP vessels built to western designs as often as not in European, American or Australasian yards, all of which are linear outgrowths of yacht designs derived from 19th century European and American fishing craft and working craft via developments in designs and materials fomented by European and American – and now of course “international” – sporting handicap rules.

What might have happened to the *kolek* and the Hong Kong sampan had they stayed in contention? Imagine, that is, an Olympic *kolek* or the entries to the *Hong Kong Sampan Worlds*. How might either or both have happened? Pondering those questions, surely, points up not merely the evils or otherwise of imperialism, but also the consequences of there being no deep and lasting elite indigenous interest in the sea and ships, and (until too late, as it were) no rising middle class to act as the vector for carrying an indigenous tradition of working craft into the future. Whether the rising of such a middle class was nipped in the bud by imperialist subjection is too large an issue to venture into here. But since, at least in Hong Kong and Singapore, we can safely suppose that today that middle class has arrived, whilst interest in ships and the sea amongst the educated elite remains conspicuous by its absence, there might be some grounds for supposing that whatever the role played by imperialism, the damage it succeeded in inflicting on any budding elite interest in ships and the sea was at least in part working its destruction from a strong and enduring cultural substrate.

It is indicative in this respect that Indonesia’s Museum Bahari, the sole maritime museum for the world’s largest archipelagic nation and for a country that must have one of the richest and most varied maritime cultures in the world, only opened in Jakarta in 1997 and to date has a collection of just 1,700 or so objects.³¹ It is invidious, but one needs to compare that with the British National Maritime Museum – admittedly one of the world’s largest and in one of the richest states (at least for now) – with a collection of over 2,000,000 objects and a library of some 100,000 maritime books. Or, although the same reservation applies, with Mystic Seaport in Connecticut with a whole historic seaport, 4 landmark historic vessels, 500 other historic vessels and a collection of more than 2,000,000 objects, sound archives, maps and charts, photographs, film and a library. That Museum Bahari cannot rival this is not just because of Indonesia’s comparative poverty, though that is certainly a large part of the

³¹ See <http://www.indonesia-tourism.com/jakarta/maritime-museum.html> The museum’s own website at <http://www.museumbahari.org/> is silent on the size of its collection although encouraging news in December 2008 was of impending improvements to premises, collection and budget. See <http://www.museumbahari.org/english/whatsnew.htm>.

cause, but also because, one can suggest, there simply isn't the necessary quantum of public or private support, whether elite cultural, financial or in terms of gifts of artifacts.³²

Hong Kong's government museums, even more surprisingly, for the most part ignore the port, ships and the sea. Only an independent effort funded by the city's international shipping community, the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, fills the yawning void. Indeed it is an interesting point that one can visit the museums of history of either Hong Kong or Singapore and come away with the impression that the maritime element was not really all that important to the history of either society. Yet what would either Hong Kong or Singapore be without their ports? Would there even be either a Hong Kong or a Singapore?

If one pauses for thought for a moment, the oddity of the cultural invisibility of their maritime heritage in both port cities should strike home. It is a Hong Kong Maritime Museum empirical rule of thumb – not yet falsified – that two out of every three Hong Kong people have a direct connection with the sea within two degrees of separation.³³ One should not be surprised. In 1950, 50% of Hong Kong's workforce was employed in the dockyards, the waterfront or aboard ship, and in 1960 that was still true for one in four workers. One is sure that not dissimilar conclusions could be come to with respect to Singapore's population, a very large percentage of the ancestors of whom can have arrived in Singapore only by sea and many of whose lives would have depended on the maritime world, especially in Singapore's early days when shipping was more than merely a significant economic player but about the only major game in town. Even today the proportion of Singapore's workforce declared to be employed directly in the maritime sector is 5.63%. If the statistics were able to identify all those also indirectly so employed – the managers, the service providers from paint to communications and provisions to fuels, the maritime law firms, the shipping clerks, the computer operators, the insurance and banking employees, etc. – the proportion of the workforce dependent on the shipping industry would be a great deal higher, probably, as is estimated for Hong Kong, up around 15-20%, perhaps more.³⁴

³² For the absence of such support see the eloquent plea at: <http://www.museumbahari.org/english/aboutus.htm>, accessed on 24.08.09

³³ Examples of two degrees of lineage separation would be a person's grandparents, cousins or, less intimately, someone you know (first degree of separation) who knows (second degree of separation) someone who works in shipping in some way.

³⁴ See <http://www.porttechnology.org/article.php?id=3873> and http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/press_room/press_releases/2007/20071127-Workforce.html. A look at the Singapore Standard Occupational Classification 2005 (see <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/statsres/ssc/ssoc2005.html>) shows how official statistics gathering does not and probably cannot reveal such a dependency since exactly the same impossibility of identifying the real level of economic dependence on the maritime world is apparent in Hong Kong's official statistics. The point is that when there is widespread indifference to the sea, not only are there no maritime museums, or if they exist ones that are ill-supported, but the entire "way of seeing" prevailing in society at large is set to place the sea out of frame. One can spot the same bias at work in the International Standard Industrial Classification system (see <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/cr/registry/regcst.asp?Cl=17&Lg=1>) wherein the maritime industries do not cluster together, but are scattered in four or five, possibly more, of the seventeen basic categories of ISIC Rev. 3.1. In the Hong Kong Maritime Museum booklet, *Hong Kong – Maritime Focus* (Hong

At this point, no doubt, some will be asking, if preserving maritime heritage in Southeast Asia is all that difficult and anyway of such limited interest, why might anyone wish to place such matters before the public eye in a museum, especially if, in the Asian context, the items are so few, rare and, by implication, rough and ready?

There is no knock down answer to that. But there are two lines of advance which the rest of this paper will explore. One of them looks at the traditional standing of matters maritime in Asia and the consequences that have followed and ponders the role of the sea in the present and future lives of Asia's inhabitants. The other looks at the short life and times of the Hong Kong Maritime Museum as a working example of what such a context means in practice.

The sea and Asia today and tomorrow

The crudely obvious point about the significance of the sea is to emphasise how important it is to our lives. That what matters for today and tomorrow may seem to many, rather beside the point, for a museum is simply an unhappy misunderstanding. There is nothing about the concept "museum" that implies "related to the past".³⁵ The Muses, αἱ μουσῆαι, to go back to the classical Greek root, were the source of knowledge, albeit expressed, as almost all early wisdom was, in the form of performed speech in poetry and literature -- but knowledge in general, not merely remembrance of things past. Even of the three original muses, Aoidē, Meletē and Mnēmē, only the last -- the muse of memory -- looked back to the past, neither song nor gesture being in theory so tied. Even amongst the later Renaissance group of nine muses,³⁶ who would have been what most of the founders of the world's first museums -- or temples to the muses -- would have had in mind, only Clio, the muse of history is particularly backward looking.

To help you muse on the importance of the maritime world now and as it will continue to be for the foreseeable future, it is worth engaging for a moment in what historians call a counter-factual, and philosophers a *gedankenexperiment*.

You are in that delicious state of half wakefulness just before it is time to get up in the morning. You have not yet opened your eyes. Now imagine that at the moment you do finally decide it is time to get moving and open your eyes, suddenly everything there is in your immediate and local world that has spent any part of its product cycle, from raw material to usable item, on the sea disappears.

Kong: HKMM, 2007, pp. 6-7), published as part of an exhibition to celebrate the Hong Kong SAR's 10th anniversary, there is a list of 8 categories of maritime and marine related business and services listing 69 areas of activity.

³⁵ This is true in Chinese also where 博物館 (bó wù guǎn) merely means "house of many things", with the faint implication they might be rather valuable things, though that is not a necessary entailment.

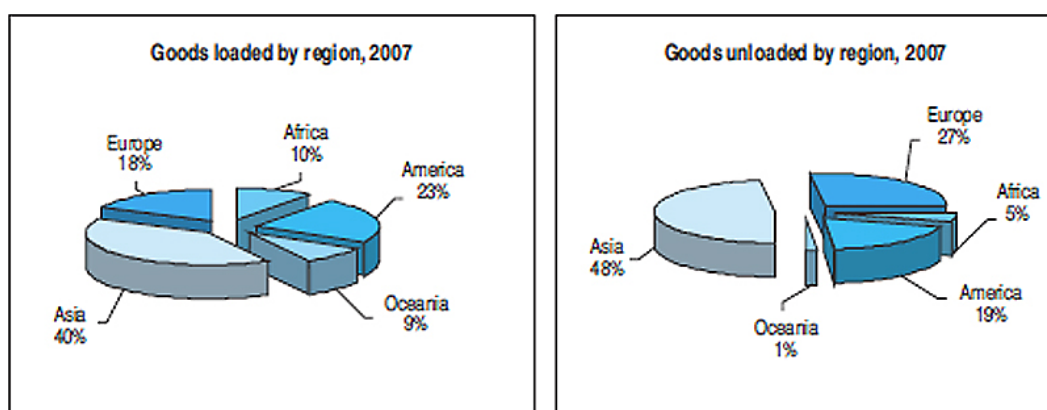
³⁶ Calliope -- epic poetry, Clio - history, Erato -- lyric poetry, Euterpe -- music, Melpomene -- tragedy, Polyhymnia -- choral poetry, Terpsichore -- dance, Thalia -- comedy, and Urania -- astronomy. One can add, by the by, that maritime museums, rather more than most, cover all of the muses and much else besides! Given female pirates like Zhang Yi, navigators like Eleanor Creesy, and single-handed sailors like Ellen MacArthur, the tenth muse, Sappho, is not neglected either.

Now describe your circumstances.

I think it fair to say that what you will be describing is an embarrassed, stark naked human being standing amongst the razed mud-flats of a vanished city with no clothes, car, home, possessions, food, job, library, museum...indeed nothing at all. For almost everything we have and use in our lives today includes in its make-up something that has, at some stage, spent some time aboard a ship being taken from some A to some B where it is processed into something – essential or frippery – that constitutes part of our everyday world. The overwhelming bulk of the world's trade consists of the raw materials from which almost everything we use or eat is made.³⁷ Some two-thirds of the contents of the container liners that carry so much of the world's merchandising trade are partially completed goods on their way from some B to some C for additional processing.³⁸ The chances of anything much escaping spending some time at sea are accordingly diminished.

This paper was delivered in Singapore and was written in Hong Kong. If any inhabitant of either of those cities is unaware of the centrality of sea trade to modern life, then he or she is either purblind or observationally challenged. For the last generation, the twin cities have vied with each other for the title of the world's busiest port in terms of one or other carefully chosen statistic which favours the side of whoever is making the argument. In fact, the rather infantile – and very masculine – “who has the bigger whatever” competition is beside the point. For that is a simple one. The two port cities are and have been for the best part of a century two of the world's most important ports.

Fig 1: World seaborne trade 2007



Source: UNCTAD *Review of Marine Transport 2008*³⁹

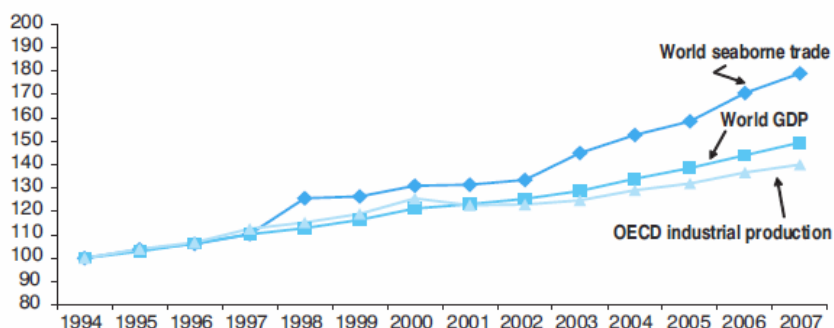
³⁷ See Stopford, *Maritime economics*, Chs. 1, 2 and 9.

³⁸ See Marc Levinson, *The Box: how the shipping container made the world smaller and the world economy bigger*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 268 and Ch.14 passim.

³⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Review of Marine Transport 2008*, Geneva: United Nations, 2008, p. 8

Fig 2: Growth of world seaborne trade 1994-2007

Indices for world economic growth (GDP), OECD industrial production and world seaborne trade
(volume), 1994–2007
(1994 = 100)



Source: UNCTAD *Review of Marine Transport 2008*⁴⁰

This status needs to be put into the context of an increasingly globalised world in which the role of seaborne trade is growing – and will continue so to do despite the correction that has been taking place since the second quarter of 2008. From a base of 100 in 1994, world GDP has increased 48%, but world seaborne trade has increased 72%.⁴¹ In 2007, just over 8 billion tons of goods loaded moved by sea – that is over a ton and a quarter of goods for every man, woman and child on the planet -- 0.42 tons of oil, 0.32 tons of dry bulk goods and 0.54 tons of general dry cargo per person, twice the figures for 1990. It represented 80% of all merchandising trade worldwide.⁴² Some 63.2% of these loadings were in the developing world – and no one needs telling what preponderance in that world the economies of Southeast and East Asia enjoy. Asian ship borne merchandising trade represents 40% of the global total, which indicates that shipping in Asia is carrying 63.5% of the developing world's seaborne trade. World seaborne trade expressed in the usual – if rather technical – units of ton-miles has gone from 10.654 billion ton-miles in 1970 to 32.932 billion ton-miles in 2007.⁴³

Each year the Singapore Strait sees some 94,000 ships in transit and as a result Singapore is home to some 110 shipping companies. Port movements in Singapore in 2008 equalled 1.621 billion gross tons through-putting, amongst many other things, 515.4 million tons of cargo split roughly one-third oil and two-thirds other cargos, including 29.9 million twenty

⁴⁰ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Review of Maritime Transport 2008*, Geneva: United Nations, 2008, p. 3.

⁴¹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *Review of Maritime Transport 2008*, Geneva: United Nations, 2008, p. 3.

⁴² Ibid., p. 5.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 10. A ton mile is exactly what it says, the movement of 1 ton of cargo over one mile.

foot equivalent units (TEUs) of containers. That movement of around 140,000 vessels linked to 600 ports in 120 countries generated S\$3.3 billion in total business spending.⁴⁴ For Hong Kong, the figures are comparable. Malaysia's main ports of Port Kelang, Pinang and Pelabuhan Tanjung Pelapas (PTP) are likewise busy maritime powerhouses. We could go on, but the point is obvious: No sea trade, no modern Southeast Asia.

Looking forward, there is no reason to suppose that anything will change – bar the advancement of technology such that in my lifetime I expect to see the first fully automated ships plying the world's oceans, crewed only when in pilotage waters but otherwise controlled remotely. Indeed all that will change is volume. World trade has never been so integrated and there is no reason to suppose that this will do anything over time but increase – though no doubt with the occasional check and even slight reversal. Ships will get larger, faster, cleaner, and more complex but cargos will change little. The raw materials vital for life – bulk goods for the most part like grains, fuels, and ores⁴⁵ – which constituted 66.6% of world seaborne trade in 2007, will simply get greater in quantity and, with the huge growth engine of China, more will flow through Southeast Asia.⁴⁶ In 2004, one quarter of the world's commerce and half of the world's oil was transiting the Malacca Strait.⁴⁷ By 2008, these proportions had increased and in 2010, as a result of the slowdown in Europe and the USA, they will almost certainly increase even more still. Figure 3 is a graphic illustration of the centrality of sea trade to Southeast Asia. Put in numbers terms, the centrality of Southeast Asia to world container shipping is clear. In 2007, 53% of world container throughput in ports was in Asia.⁴⁸

Leaving aside the volume of trade, Hong Kong and Singapore shipping industries own or control between them almost 6% of the world's 36,313 strong merchant fleet, and Asia as a whole owns or controls 17.6%. In gross tonnage terms, Singapore and Hong Kong are the flag states of 10.3% of the world fleet.⁴⁹ Perhaps, as much to the point, the countries of East

⁴⁴ See *MPA Annual Report 2008*, http://www.mpa.gov.sg/sites/pdf/mpa_annual_report_2008.pdf, p. 12 and the MPA website http://www.mpa.gov.sg/sites/maritime_singapore/what_is_maritime_singapore/premier_hub_port_page.

⁴⁵ See <http://www.intercargo.org/dry-cargo-industry/58-trades.html>, around 6,585 dry bulk carriers move the world's 2,000,000,000 tonnes of dry bulk cargo round the world each year. A very high percentage of these cargoes transit the Singapore Strait and cross the South China Sea. See Michiro Kusanagi, Romesh Bahadur Thapa and Akiro Kitazumi, "Potential future transportation infrastructure in Southeast Asia", accessed on 19 August 2009 at <http://www.gisdevelopment.net/application/utility/transport/ma05150pf.htm>.

⁴⁶ *Review of Maritime Transport 2008*, p. 15.

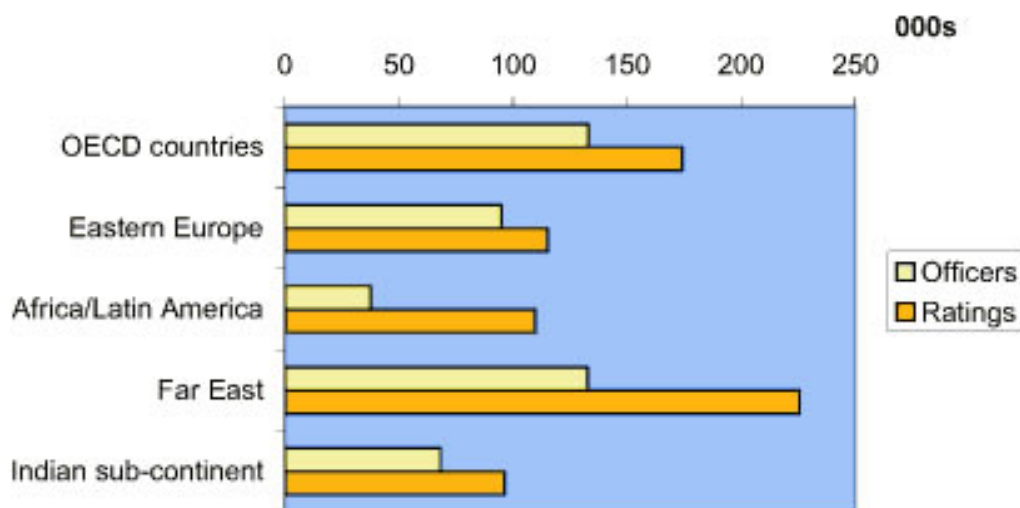
⁴⁷ E. Mitropoulos, Secretary General of International Maritime Organization, Lecture to Japan International Transport Institute 2004, cited in Kusanagi, Thapa and Kitazumi.

⁴⁸ *Review of Maritime Transport 2008*, p. 96.

⁴⁹ *Review of Maritime Transport 2008*, pp. 39 and 46.

and Southeast Asia are sources to the largest proportion of the world's 466,000 ship's officers and 721,000 ratings.

Fig 3: Origins of world fleet crews

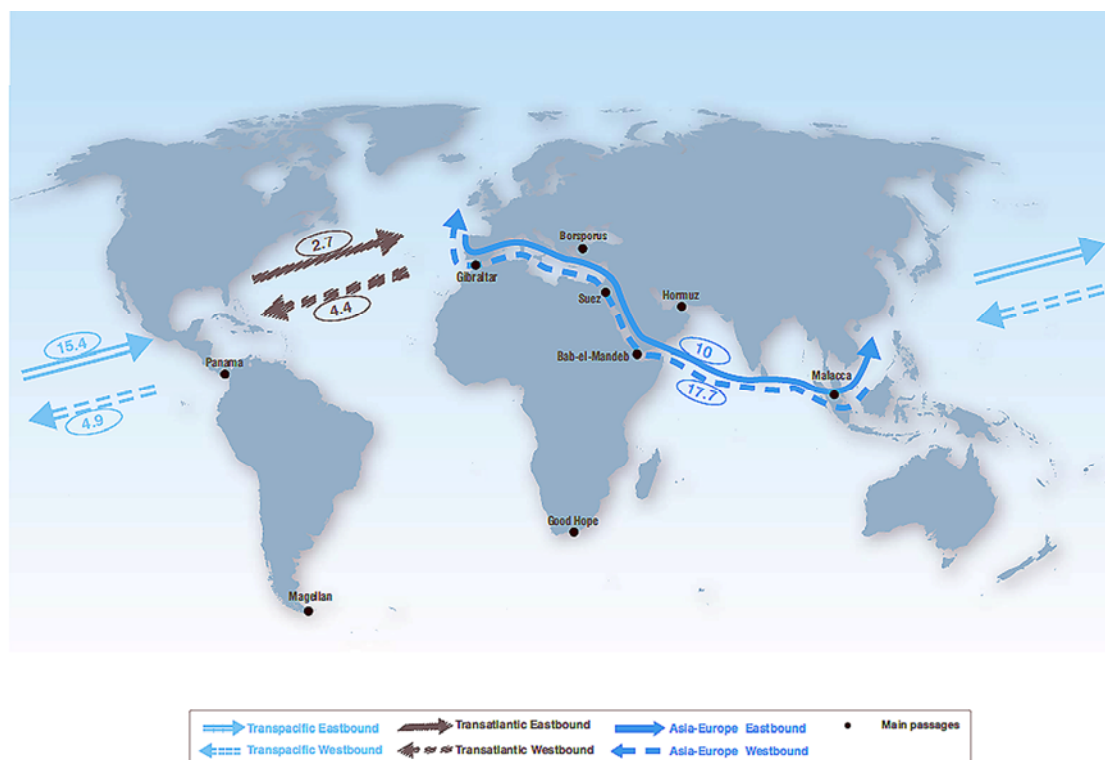


Source: <http://www.marisec.org/shippingfacts/worldtrade/world-seafarers.php> accessed 29 August 2009

What is more, the Asian share of this is growing, but not fast enough to meet demand which is already way ahead of supply, there being likely to be a shortfall of up to 27,000 ships' officers by 2015.⁵⁰

All this rush of data simply goes to show that to today's Southeast Asia, the maritime world is more important than it has ever been. A society that ignores the centrality of maritime affairs to its well-being is a society that will one day wake up to discover the magnitude of the mistake that has been occasioned by its indifference or blindness. Since maritime museums are, to couch it as a nice conceit, the memory of a society's maritime heritage and a testament to the role of the maritime world in that society's self-identity and its continuing well-being, the absence of any such museum in a given littoral society suggests more than mere cultural blinkers. It argues a purblind elite and hence a poorly-led populace. And if there is a maritime museum and it is out of the way, small and poorly-funded, the situation is not much better. To tell the history of either Hong Kong or Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia, the Philippines or Vietnam as if, somehow, the preponderance of matters of cultural and historical importance is to be found ashore, is to present to those societies pictures of themselves of breathtaking ignorance.

⁵⁰ See lecture by E. Mitropoulos originally in *Lloyd's List*, 20th February 2009, p. 7 and accessible at http://www.imo.org/inforesource/mainframe.asp?topic_id=406&doc_id=11104

Figure 3: Major maritime container traffic routes 2007

Source: UNCTAD Review of Marine Transport 2008⁵¹

Southeast Asia, the sea and the past

There is no small fact so illustrative of the key role of sea trade in Southeast Asia's very long maritime story than the obsidian trade of 6,000 years ago. In the magazine *Science* in 1996, Stephen Chia of Universiti Sains Malaysia and Robert Tykot of the University of South Florida were reported as having analysed 200 obsidian flakes found at a site at Bukit Tengkorak in Sabah.⁵² The analysis suggested that the majority of the flakes came from the island of New Britain and from the Admiralty Islands in Papua New Guinea, and the rest from sites in the Philippines. Given that we are considering 4,000 BCE, this is a staggering find with amazing implications for seafaring in Southeast Asia, pushing far back the date at which human beings were thought capable of navigation out of sight of land in a systematic way, returning whence they came and establishing a long-distance, 3,500km trade route having done so. It would seem to argue fairly strongly that seafaring in Southeast Asia has a fair claim to be a cradle of humanity's navigational skills.

There is another small vignette that helps make a similar point about how maritime museums in Southeast Asia, without petty braggadocio or infantile nationalistic chest-

⁵¹ *Review of Maritime Transport 2008*, p. 24.

⁵² See Robert F. Service, "Pacific archaeology: Rock chemistry traces ancient traders", *Science*, vol. 274, 20.12.1996, pp. 2012-2013.

thumping of the “my Daddy’s got a bigger car than your Daddy and he got it first and it cost more and it goes faster so there” schools of historiography, can help refocus **world** maritime history in ways to make it a better representation of what actually happened.

It is a dollar to a cent that if asked, the majority of readers -- perhaps the overwhelming majority -- would identify the first persons to circumnavigate the world as being one of the 18 European crew of the Spanish *nao* Victoria on 6th September 1522 when, finally, the ship made it back to Spain. Certainly that is the view of most Europeans and probably North Americans. It is what is in general taught in schools and found in history books, not least because the surviving captain, Juan Sebastian Elcano, was awarded a coat of arms by the King of Spain with the image a globe and the motto *Primus circumdedisti me* (“You went around me first”).

Except that he was not.

As you will learn if you visit the Melaka Maritime Museum, or read Antonio Pigafetta’s narrative of the voyage carefully,⁵³ the world’s first navigator was a Southeast Asian. When the Portuguese captured Melaka in 1511, one of the fighters was a man called Fernão de Magalhães, known in English as Ferdinand Magellan. After the siege he was awarded as a slave or befriended and employed – the stories differ – a young Malay whom he called Enrique but whose real name is held to have been Panglima Awang. Enrique returned to Portugal with Magellan and when, in 1519, Magellan’s small fleet set sail from San Lucar de Barrameda, he went with his master. After the long and harrowing voyage, it was Enrique who was able to interpret for Magellan when they finally arrived in the Philippines – arguing that Enrique must have known Cebuano and therefore have voyaged within Southeast Asia in the days before the Portuguese conquest of Melaka. It follows, of course, that the first person to “tie the knot” as circumnavigators say, was not a European but a Southeast Asian.

Those are just two simple vignettes which can be multiplied a thousandfold. Precisely because Asia and Southeast Asia have been so ill-served by the historical record, dominated as it has been by Eurocentric accounts, its seagoing, naval architectural, navigational and other achievements are poorly known not least, as often as not, to the majority of the inhabitants of today’s Southeast Asia. Before European hegemony, to borrow the title of an excellent and thought provoking book by the historian Janet Abu-Lughod,⁵⁴ the focus of world sea-trade and the overwhelming majority of its ships and cargo were crisscrossing Asian waters with, then as now, the Melaka and Singapore Straits as the pivot on which the maritime world turned.⁵⁵

⁵³ See Antonio Pigafetta and others, *The first journey around the world by Magellan*, ed. Lord Stanley of Alderley, London: Hakluyt Society, 1874, p. 76, though Pigafetta claims Enrique came originally from Sumatra (Taprobane) not Melaka.

⁵⁴ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European hegemony: the world system AD 1250-1350*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

⁵⁵ Paul Wheatley’s path-breaking book of almost half a century ago (*The Golden Chersonese*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1961) is a perfect illustration of the point, no matter that some of his conclusions have been revised in the light of more recent scholarship.

This has of course been the matter of extensive academic study over the last half century and more, not least here in Singapore in the first class work of the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore and the work of such scholars as Wang Gungwu, Anthony Reid and Roderick Ptak. In earlier years, there was the work of O.W. Wolters and D.G.E. Hall. In more specifically maritime matters, there has been the burgeoning field of maritime archaeology, with its regular finds helping fill out the story of the patterns of trade and the development of the vessels in which the trading was done.⁵⁶ But little of this excellent work has found a way to make itself felt through the more approachable medium of maritime museums where artefacts and displays can bring the complex stories to life and reveal to the inhabitants of Southeast Asia the enormous importance of the sea and sea trade to their lives and the lives of their forebears. Nor do people have somewhere where they can learn easily about the extent to which, looked at in the widest perspective, the domination of the world's maritime story by the west is, as it were, a blip on the timeline.⁵⁷

To write that is not to diminish the significance of the contribution of the western maritime tradition to the development of naval architecture, navigation, charting, maritime meteorology, maritime communications, ship organisation, maritime law and much else besides. But it is to make the point that there are many other strands to the complex tale of humanity's encounter with the sea. It is to affirm that there has been a great deal, more two-way flow of maritime thought and practice than most believe. It is to recall that many of the movements of peoples and ideas – movements of extraordinary importance to the development of the civilisations of Southeast Asia's past and present – are to be located in the millennia before the arrival of the Europeans and that they were, above all, movements by sea as often as not occasioned by sea trade.

There is, of course, a further point. It is one that has not been lost on the navies of Asia – as it was not lost on the Red Navy in the high days of the USSR.⁵⁸ From some time in the 18th

⁵⁶ A good "instant" guide would be <http://www.maritimeasia.ws/topic/chronology.html>, though the bibliographies in more specifically scholarly works are a better guide to recent scholarship. See, for example, Geoff Wade, "The Pre-Modern East Asian maritime realm: An Overview of European-Language Studies", Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series No. 16, Asia Research Institute, December 2003 at http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/article_view.asp?id=357.

⁵⁷ One needs to swiftly add that this is not a licence for the sillier and more exaggerated claims about the past in which one group's unscholarly "we were top dogs" accounts are simply replaced by another, equally naïve and tendentious misreading of the available evidence. Nothing better illustrates this sort of piffle than the Gavin Menzies 1421 and 1434 farragos, for which see www.1421exposed.com.

⁵⁸ See S.G. Gorshkov (trans. Alan Crozey), *Sea power of the state*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1979 *passim*; Norman Polmar, *Guide to the Soviet Navy*, 5th ed., Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991, esp. Ch. 6; Robert C. Whitten, "Soviet sea power in retrospect: Admiral of the fleet of the Soviet Union Sergei G. Gorshkov and the rise and fall of the Soviet Navy", *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 11.2 (1998), pp. 48-79; and Donald Chipman, "The Soviets at sea" at <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/aureview/1982/jul-aug/chipman.html> accessed 25.08.09. For China see B. D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy enters the Twenty-first Century*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2001, Chs. 7 and 8; James R. Holmes, "China's Way of Naval War: Mahan's Logic, Mao's Grammar," *Comparative Strategy*, 28.3 (2009), pp. 217-243. More

century until towards the end of the 20th century, western navies commanded the world's sea lanes. In Europe, for causes and reasons that are not yet fully agreed, the century or so centred around 1600 CE saw the invention of the all gun, dedicated warship and state supported and controlled navies to coordinate their use.⁵⁹

What resulted from this “turn to the sea” is the world we all now inhabit. It is a turn that was never taken by any Asian power despite the evident importance in pre-European Asian waters of trade and maritime connections. That is not to say that the intention was necessarily missing. The maritime empires of Funan, Champa and Sriwijaya; the Chola expedition to Sumatra and beyond, Yuan adventurism in Vietnam, Java and Japan; the Ming voyages of Zheng He and what J.F. Warren has labelled “the Sulu Zone”, can all be read as efforts to extend and impose maritime power.⁶⁰ What would appear to have been missing were two interrelated things. One was the technology.⁶¹ The other was an elite with a cultural disposition – however and by whatsoever occasioned – that looked to the sea not just for the extension of its realm and the aggrandisement of its wealth, but to that extension and aggrandisement in ways that involved its active intellectual and physical engagement in sea trade and sea warfare, in the technologies and skills upon which they depended and in theorising trade, the sea lanes and control of both in wholly new ways.⁶²

generally Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Asia looks Seaward: Power and Maritime Strategy*, New York: Praeger, 2007.

⁵⁹ For reviews of this and suggestions for its causes see John Keegan, *The price of Admiralty: war at sea from man of war to submarine*, London: Hutchinson, 1988, especially Ch.1; Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns, sails and empires: technological innovation and the early phases of European expansion 1400-1700*, Manhattan (Kansas): Sunflower University Press, 1985, particularly Epilogue; J.F. Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and galleys: changing Technology and Mediterranean Warfare at Sea in the sixteenth century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974, especially Introduction and Ch.1; and, of course, Nicholas Rodger's magisterial *The Command of the Ocean: a Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815*, London: Penguin, 2005 *passim*. The debate continues but the evident significance of the command of the sea by European navies using all-gun warships to prosecute a wholly new form of naval warfare in the service of expanding and controlling sea trade cannot be gainsaid.

⁶⁰ With specific reference to Zheng He, see Geoff Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages: A Reassessment”, Asia Research Institute, Working Paper Series No. 31, October 2004, at http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/article_view.asp?id=358. For James Francis Warren's take on the Sulu Zone see his *The Sulu zone 1768-1898: the dynamics of external trade, slavery, and ethnicity in the transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*, 2nd ed., Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2007.

⁶¹ This is not to decry Chinese or Southeast Asian naval architecture or its possibilities, though the author is inclined to think that the technologies and design envelopes of both, eminently suited though they were to their primary employments, were not readily conducive to extensions in the sort of directions that led via the galleon to the all-gun warship of the 17th century. What the sentence does is merely to point out what did not happen.

⁶² “Whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world and consequently the world itself” (*Judicious and select essays and observations by that renowned and learned knight Sir Walter Raleigh, upon the First Invention of Shipping*, London: printed by TW for Humphrey Mosely, 1650). A sentiment such as this may have been felt by any number of Asia's many and effective mariners, but none had the technology at his disposal

To write that is to ignore many specificities, for what were the maritime empires identified above, or the spread of Islam and the Islamic sultanates of Southeast Asia, save worlds in which rulers and systems used the sea to build sea trade? The point is a fair one. But something was missing in terms of trade volumes, trade patterns and economic attitudes, maritime military technology and hence the Asian strategic mindset, and it does not seem to be explained entirely by claims that Asia's world of the sea was open, sharing and pacific when compared to the rapacious annexationism of the West.⁶³

There was a long period – perhaps two and a half centuries – between the arrival of Vasco da Gama in India in 1492 and the achievement of any sort of effective western cultural hegemonism. Indeed in very many respects, well-reviewed by Kenneth Pomeranz, the idea that pre-1800 Europe had any sort of definitive “edge” over Asian societies save, arguably, their growing naval superiority, is hard to sustain.⁶⁴ Throughout that period, maritime struggle was a regular feature of European and Asian relations – among them the Ottomans and Angrias in India, the Iranun, Bugis and Bajau in the Eastern Archipelago,⁶⁵ and Chinese pirates and naval units in early Qing China. Yet, the western practice of naval violence was not imitated nor, in any large sense, was the technology – the innovatory all-gun warship – upon which it depended. Was this merely an instance of “nice” Asian values compared to “nasty” western ones?

That would surely be a naïve conclusion, no matter how ideologically acceptable? Might the answer not lie – to build on the suggestions at which we have been looking – in the excellent analysis of the slow eclipse of galley warfare in the Mediterranean by John Guilmartin? Instead of looking at Asian naval engagements through what Guilmartin castigates as the “Mahanian fallacy”,⁶⁶ might it not be more instructive to consider Asian maritime conflict along Guilmartin's lines? Namely we need to draw a clear distinction between two things: The first is “naval warfare”, which is stipulatively (and usefully) restricted to the “blue water” Mahanian domination of sea lanes by a fleet in being, composed of all-gun, dedicated naval ships in a state-controlled and state-financed navy used as a strategic weapon in a formal state of war against other, similarly motivated and equipped naval powers and otherwise as a potential weapon that achieves strategic objectives by its monopoly of armed violence at sea, whether defensive or offensive. In contrast he describes in the Mediterranean (and in the European world in general before the 16th century) a world of pre-naval “armed conflict

nor a status within his world equivalent to that of Sir Walter Raleigh. One thinks in particular of the 17th-century debate about the laws of the sea – the *mare liberum/mare clausum* debate (especially between Grotius and John Selden) – and the absence of any equivalent way of seeing the sea in Asia – see S.N.G. Davies, “Maritime history: sustainable development and resource management”, *Property Management (Special Issue on Institutions, Culture and Sustainable Development)*, Vol. 24, No.2 (2006).

⁶³ See, for a variant on this claim, Jan Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500-1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 77.

⁶⁴ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence, China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 16 and 259-263.

⁶⁵ To borrow a useful 19th century portmanteau term for the core area of modern Southeast Asia.

⁶⁶ Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and galleys*, Ch.1.

at sea” in which there is no thoroughgoing distinction between piracy and commerce, or merchant ship and warship (in technical terms rather than titles) and for which seagoing forces were primarily amphibious units with embarked soldiery used for short-term, mainly short-range offensive action against specific and localised ports and fortifications for short term tactical gains.⁶⁷

One way or another, the point to be explained is why pre-modern Asian attitudes to ships and the sea and to maritime conflict remained untouched by the experience of the clash with the West. Part of the explanation may be, as Guilmartin analyses may have been the case where the Ottoman sea forces were concerned, that the extant maritime armed conflict system worked in its context and that social conservatism, of a perfectly normal sort, militated against abandoning it when there was no need. That there probably was no perceived need is, surely, a reasonable conclusion to draw from the work of scholars like Janet Abu-Lughod and Kenneth Pomeranz, among others, which elucidates the three-century process whereby western maritime supremacy, at first mere potential little realised in practice, was eventually imposed.⁶⁸

That argument can bear some of the explanatory weight, but it depends, surely, on the existence of larger cultural attitudes and orientations amongst Asia’s ruling elites – the movers and shakers especially in China, but also in general – for whom matters maritime held no allure and still today seem to hold little.

⁶⁷ Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and galleys*, pp. 2-3, 5-6 and 16-23.

⁶⁸ Guilmartin’s analysis of the Portuguese failure at Jiddah in 1517 perfectly illustrates the point as does his conclusion, “Jiddah clearly showed the defensive military strength of the Mediterranean system of warfare at sea. The tactical verdict of Jiddah was not to be reversed for over a century.” (Guilmartin, *Gunpowder and galleys*, pp.7-15, quote from p. 15).

Part 2

Asian Maritime Museums

Given all the foregoing, it is clear that we should not be surprised that Southeast and East Asia's 84% or so of the world's population shares just 5% of its maritime museums. No matter the economic and strategic importance of the sea, in Asia it still has less cultural salience than in the western world and hence, in Asia, maritime museums have no cachet and maritime heritage no clout.

To the educated elite in the USA or Europe, being a collector of nauticalia or marine art has standing. Being a patron, governor or trustee of a maritime museum is quite as distinguished – as much a statement of one's contribution to society and one's social leadership position – as being a patron or trustee of one's local art museum, symphony orchestra, ballet or opera. Indeed the same person is often both. That simply is not the case in Asia save in that overlap zone of wreck cargo, where export ceramics and precious metalwares create an interest in something that would otherwise be wholly ignored.

In that context, how does a maritime museum get started?

a. Founding and financing a maritime museum

In Hong Kong in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the return of the territory to Chinese sovereignty approached, the government embarked on a significant burst of museum creation. By 2005, seven major publicly financed museums had been created. A maritime museum was not amongst them.

Indeed it was clear that a maritime museum was not on any government official's drawing board. Accepting, on a generous view, that the first gestures towards any sort of museum in Hong Kong can be traced to the original City Hall built in 1874,⁶⁹ no recorded attempt would ever appear to have been made at policy level to consider, leave alone plan or build and furnish a maritime museum in Hong Kong.

This was despite the fact that since the late 19th century, Hong Kong had been one of the world's premier ports. Instead, it reclaimed much of the surface area of historic Victoria Harbour. It had thereby destroyed the sites of the docks and dockyards that had been the core of its early prosperity, eradicated all but a paltry few hundred metres of the historic shoreline, and bulldozed

⁶⁹ All that is known appears either in the brief commentary of an early 20th-century Chinese visitor, Huang Zunxian (黃遵憲), whose largely favourable comments on Hong Kong's first and forgotten museum are in marked contrast to a report made on it in its last year by the Carnegie Corporation, which described it as "the low-water mark in museum provision throughout the whole of the (British) Empire...". See Christina Chu, "Scattered memories: a museum story", in Leisure and Cultural Services Department/Hong Kong Museum of Art, *Hong Kong Art: Open Dialogue*, exhibition series 2008-09, a launching publication, Hong Kong 2008, pp. 40-47 (in Chinese), pp. 48-55 (in English); and in G.A.C. Herklots' report on possibly creating a new museum in the late 1930s: "In the last City Hall Museum there were inter alia a collection of Australian parrots, minerological specimens from Wales, old clocks, etc... On 30th September, 1937, a report on the existing collections was submitted. The signatories recommended the destruction of the majority of the specimens, which had been damaged by insects, dry rot, neglect and by the typhoon of September 2nd. Among the specimens to be kept are a number of marine shells (many un-named) and an interesting collection of named fresh-water shells." G.A.C. Herklots, *No.1/38, Report on a new museum in Hong Kong*, Hong Kong, 1938, p. 10.

every vestige of the traditional waterfront warehouses (or godowns as they are called locally⁷⁰). It had also bade a blind goodbye to the last remnants of some two millennia of working Chinese sail and begun making redundant most of the waterborne communications that for a century and more had been the territory's essential transport link. It saw Hong Kong being built into a major force in the world merchant fleet and simultaneously saw the Hong Kong merchant service more or less disappear as a profession. The world of containerisation had arrived on China's shores in Hong Kong and thereby established the critical factor in the mainland becoming the world's workshop by becoming the world's busiest container port whilst effacing any mention of ships and re-labelling everything as "logistics". It has also watched a traditional fishing industry that goes back millennia dwindle towards oblivion whilst simultaneously obliterating the floating community which had given it life, and by policy failure and pollution, emptying of fish the waters from which they drew their living. Finally, it had closed a naval base and waved an indifferent farewell to a naval presence that, for good or ill, had been a central feature of the territory's shorescape and harbourside life for one and a half centuries.

Without government interest and with a corps of professional museologists and a cultural elite both wholly ignorant of and indifferent to matters maritime, it was clear that any initiative for a maritime museum would have to come from elsewhere.⁷¹ Fortunately it did.

Voices calling for a maritime museum in Hong Kong had been speaking up since the early 1980s, though evidently had got nowhere. Indeed, the two perfect buildings for such an institution were respectively destroyed (the handsome old Marine Department Building on the 1900s waterfront built in 1906 and destroyed in 1979)⁷² and sold to a property developer for turning into a boutique hotel and shopping mall (the late Victorian Marine Police headquarters built in 1884 which was and is the building in Hong Kong with the longest continuous connection with the sea).⁷³ It was clear that

⁷⁰ The word is from the Malay *gudang*, thought in turn possibly to derive from the Telugu *giḍ(d)angi*, or Tamil *kiṭanku* – a place where things are stored or laid down. See H. Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, reprint, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 381.

⁷¹ This is in stark contrast to Hong Kong's sister enclave of Macau where interested Portuguese naval personnel had created a maritime and fishing museum as early as 1919. This was destroyed by an incendiary bomb dropped by American bombers in 1942 and not resurrected until 1985, again with significant Portuguese naval backing. In 1991, it was re-housed in a splendid, purpose designed and built new home at present being extended to encompass the charming late 19th-century Portuguese naval dockyard. The Macau Maritime Museum has been the focus for excellent work in preserving Macau's maritime heritage, especially with its keen museum anthropology and ethnography team. It is a distinct contrast to Hong Kong which is, as a result, the best part of a generation behind; a generation during which the bulk of Hong Kong's maritime heritage has been, as we have noted, irrecoverably destroyed.

⁷² See Solomon Bard, *Voices from the past: Hong Kong 1842-1918*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2002, p. 335.

⁷³ See Bard, *Voices from the past*, p. 111. Bard mentions that before the Marine Police were relocated, the old round tower base of the first time ball, called the Round House, housed "a small maritime museum". This was the nucleus of the marine police's collection, not accessible to the public, that still exists in the new marine police headquarters building in Sai Wan Ho.

if anything was to be done, it could not and would not be through government action nor would the cultural elite lift a finger.

It is Hong Kong's good fortune that there were three senior members of the international shipping community in the territory who had other ideas.

Tan Sri Frank Tsao (well known also in Singapore), Mr Anthony Hardy and Mr KL Tam got together and began planning. Luckily for the future museum, although both Mr Hardy and Mr Tam had long been associated as patrons and friends of Hong Kong's government-operated museums, the likely costs of the proposed venture were initially markedly underestimated because it was not clear how large the museum could or would be. The reason was simple. There were no premises and it did not seem likely that, with land costs in Hong Kong as high as they were and are, whatever museum resulted would be large. With a very modest and hence not off-putting sum in mind, they turned their energies to three essential steps. Had they had any real inkling at the outset of the probable cost, there may still have been no maritime museum in Hong Kong!

First, they created a legal entity that could hire staff and begin planning – Hong Kong Maritime Museum Ltd, derived from a simple shelf company. Second, they set about raising the relatively small funds thought necessary for the museum and to buy objects that could not be acquired through gifts and loans. Third, assuming the second was successful, they prepared to create a charitable body that could ensure tax exempt status for the museum, without which there would be no future – the result was the Hong Kong Maritime Museum Trust which, crucially, was accorded charitable status by the HK Inland Revenue Department. With the first two moving forward almost hand in hand, it soon became clear that the fund-raising target – initially a very modest HK\$6 million – was a long way from realistic. The fund-raising operation accordingly raised its sights to HK\$25-30 million – or put more crudely, as much as it could get.

It is a testament to Hong Kong's international shipping community that within three weeks of starting with an almost blank slate, enough money had been raised by the new Hong Kong Maritime Museum Limited to warrant the creation of the Hong Kong Maritime Museum Trust and begin thinking of employing staff. By the time this first round of fundraising was finished, the shipping community had donated some HK\$33 million.

With the first millions in hand, the energy and organisational skills of the private sector then swung into action. Using locally sourced designers and fabricators, thereby avoiding the otherwise inescapable mark-up occasioned by using international museums experts, and by avoiding the extreme red tape and delay attendant on government contracting rules, we were able to create a high quality, visually stunning museum without overtaxing our budget in double quick time. In a remarkable 20 months from the initial moves, staff had been hired, premises had been found, a six year lease at a peppercorn rent had been signed with Hong Kong's public housing authority, a collection of around 750 objects had been bought, borrowed or accepted as gifts, two galleries totalling 427 m² had been designed and fitted out, a shop and an office suite had been completed and equipped and the museum had been launched by the territory's new Chief Executive, Mr Donald Tsang Yam-kuen.

In short, in much of Asia, without private sector initiative and a willingness to offer financial support, maritime museums face a struggle against a current they will lack the cultural and official

horsepower to counter. This shortage of official horsepower in particular was apparent from the outset – when official support was approbatory but otherwise non-committal – and for our first two years of life, despite the evident fact that any independent museum in Hong Kong without government financial support was taking on an impossible task.

The reasons it is impossible are simple.

First, and as we have seen, museums are a foreign import and for various reasons – primarily socio-historical – Hong Kong cannot yet be said to have become a museums orientated society. Put bluntly, it has the wrong GINI coefficient, its median income is too low, its proportion of graduates per capita is still low and, peculiar to Hong Kong as a society created by immigration and by two widely disparate socio-political traditions, its inhabitants' social identity is yet fully to settle.⁷⁴ To this must be added the low status of matters maritime that we have considered above, which has consequences in an overwhelmingly Chinese society for what we might call “preferred philanthropic objects”. In a hierarchy of such objects, which begin with educational and medical institutions and extend via traditional “scholar gentry”, cultural vectors to modern “high culture” institutions like art museums, symphony orchestras, ballet and opera, maritime museums do not feature.⁷⁵ Put the two together and it is clear that attempting to fund and operate a maritime museum of international standard exclusively from private sector finance in perpetuity is a non-starter.

Second, and related to the first in a complex way, because the museums world is a cultural import created for the people of Hong Kong by its government, museums have from the outset been financed and operated as cultural loss that leaders deemed integral to a “cultured” and hence “creative” and “sophisticated” society.⁷⁶ It follows that public expectations of museums provision – and especially entry costs – are set by the dominant actors, that is, the government-run museums. These are close to free (HK\$10 for an adult) and often in fact free (since Wednesdays have free entry), as do organised school and tour parties over 20 strong (many of whom are also provided with free transport to the museums).

Third, because from the government point of view anything which is a “museum” is by definition publicly provided, there is no regulatory framework within which non-government museums can be created and operated as museums. They are merely “places of public entertainment”, like cinemas and theatres, and must conform to the relevant laws. Indeed, they must as a consequence be prepared to deal with any number of other minor but cumulatively costly consequences of not

⁷⁴ UNDP 2007/2008 Human Development Report at <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/4.html>. On comparative GINI scores, out of 177 countries Hong Kong was 83rd and Singapore 80th in terms of the GINI rankings. On Hong Kong people's social identities, see below fn. 89.

⁷⁵ There are only four individual donors (as opposed to corporate donors) in the Hong Kong Maritime Museum's list of eighty one. Three are European or American.

⁷⁶ Obviously this is also attributable to a wider mentality at work in the museums field in the mid-20th century, which saw museums as a public good which, like the first nine years of schooling and basic medical care, should be free or at least heavily subsidised. The often unreflective assumption that museums, art galleries, orchestras, etc. are some sort of guarantor of a humane society is at best naïve. A thoughtful reading of George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some notes towards the redefinition of culture* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press and London: Faber, 1971) might suggest that there may in fact be no connection at all.

sheltering in the ample and regulatorily less encumbering embrace of the public sector and not having any specific regulatory or legal framework within which to work.

Fourth – and this is a more general point of global relevance – few people have any real conception of the true economic cost of museums as cultural capital. An even smaller – indeed a vanishingly small minority – has any intention whatsoever of paying an economic ticket cost. The HKMM is extremely efficiently-run in business terms. Yet on any realistic audience projection, an adult ticket economically priced would be around HK\$500. For the government-operated museums in Hong Kong, the figure would be closer to HK\$2,000.

Fifth, and finally, Hong Kong's commercial property market is prohibitively expensive,⁷⁷ ranking tenth in the world for costliness. Hong Kong is also an intensely commercial city in which there is no question, in general, of any commercial property enterprise leasing prime commercial real estate at anything other than prime commercial rates. If the maritime museum was to find a home where historically it makes sense and where, from an operational point of view, visibility and accessibility would serve to help maximise audience, only government could provide.

It follows that within two years of opening the museum faced two hurdles.

First, the money was running out, partly due to the difficulty of accurately forecasting operating costs for such an innovative venture despite the fact that it was being run far more efficiently than Hong Kong's public sector museums.⁷⁸ In part it was also because it had never been the intention of the shipping community to take on the burden of creating and providing a public museum for the people of Hong Kong forever. Shipping companies' core competence is in shipping, not museums. The shipping industry is also highly cyclical in nature and good times are succeeded by often spectacularly bad times⁷⁹ – as in 2009, which must be evident to anyone even mildly aware of recent market trends. The museum's founders knew that when there came a choice between supporting the museum and attending to their own bottom lines, their responsibilities would lie in only one direction.

⁷⁷ Hong Kong's commercial property is the 10th most expensive in the world (<http://www.overseaspropertymall.com/property-industry-news/the-world%E2%80%99s-most-expensive-office-markets/> accessed on 31.08.09) and the residential market 5th most expensive (<http://finance.yahoo.com/real-estate/article/105172/The-Most-Expensive-Real-Estate-Markets-in-the-World-accessed-31.08.09>). It sums to a situation in which either a museum is given a building by a philanthropist or manages to secure a publicly-provided home. In Hong Kong, the former was out of the question considering that a quality museum needed a minimum of 2,500 square metres gross floor area. At mid-2009 commercial rates that represents a foregone rental income of US\$2,861,058 (HK\$22,316,249) a year to a landlord.

⁷⁸ It is hard to make exact comparisons because Hong Kong's government museums do not publish proper accrual accounts and their costs are neither broken down nor fully accounted for in such accounts as are made public. From what can be worked out, the Hong Kong maritime museum operates at something between 50% and 60% of the gross costs of an equivalent government museum. The HKMM recovers on average around 20% of its expenses from operating revenue compared to a government museum's 5%-10% (average 6%). So net, the HKMM probably costs around 40%, perhaps less, to operate than an equivalent public sector operation. There is no detectable difference in standards; indeed reviews often rate HKMM more highly.

⁷⁹ Stopford, *Maritime economics*, Ch.3, Shipping market cycles, pp. 93-132, and in general.

The industry's intention, in a context of official cultural indifference bordering on wilful neglect, had thus been to get things started and then put pressure on the public sector to do what it should have done decades earlier, as the public sector does in equivalent major port cities elsewhere. The bonus would be that the public sector would be taking over a dynamic museum with a more efficient and cost-effective model of museum governance and operating management.⁸⁰

Second, with only five years to run of the temporary lease with a landlord that had recently been privatised and which was being pressured by shareholders to realise the full value of the property portfolio it controlled, the museum had to face the problem of finding a future home.⁸¹

Third, in connection with the above, the collection was rapidly growing. The museum – too small even as it began⁸² – was evidently far too small for a maritime museum commensurate with Hong Kong's standing as a major international port city with a distinguished maritime past. Such museums have on average around 10,000 m² of floor space, frequently on more than one floor, often on very much larger plots many of which include sheltered berthing for historic and other ships and boats.

It followed that we needed to raise more funds, to find a new home and to secure our long term future. That has been the struggle of the last three years.

The second round of fundraising went well. Sufficient of our old donors – 81 companies from all sectors of Hong Kong's international shipping industry – rallied to the cause and raised a further HK\$20 million. This gave the museum a guaranteed operating life through until 2012 or 2013 with sufficient funds to continue building the collection modestly.

Finding a new home was managed by a stroke of luck when we noted that because of changes in public transport passenger flows as a result of foreshore reclamation, one of the recently completed,

⁸⁰ The Hong Kong government-operated museums struggle to recover 5-10% of their operating costs. Even that is a significantly distorted figure since many costs are either not counted because some services are provided by other government departments, or they are omitted because government has not yet moved fully to accrual accounting, despite a commitment to that end in 2002. The HKMM has fairly consistently averaged around 20% whilst operating at perhaps 50-60% of the expenditure of an equivalent government museum. For the government's protracted efforts to change this, see the *Report of the Committee on Museums* (at http://www.hab.gov.hk/file_manager/en/documents/policy_responsibilities/arts_culture_recreation_and_sport/Museum_Report_e.pdf accessed on 31.08.09), especially Chapter 1: Background.

⁸¹ HKMM had signed the initial six-year lease on our present premises with the Hong Kong Housing Authority, the landlord of the government housing programme (the equivalent of the Singapore Housing Development Board), in August 2004. However, in March 2005, all of the commercial property portfolio of the HKHA, which included the relocated 1846 British army officer's mess on the ground floor of which HKMM is located, was spun off into a real estate investment trust, The Link REIT, which was floated on the Hong Kong stock exchange on 25 November 2005, two and a half months after HKMM was launched. Within a very short time, The Link was under significant pressure from a major shareholder (12.98%), The Children's Investment Fund, to enhance the return on its portfolio. It follows that on any long-term strategy, it is exceedingly unlikely that The Link would wish to have as a tenant of a large property unit, something as wholly unable to pay a commercial rental as a museum.

⁸² Most museums devote about 33% of gallery space to displays and have a square metre per object ratio in the display cases of 1:0.7 or better. From the outset, HKMM has had to manage with small galleries with only around 25% available for display and a square metre per object ratio of 1:4. See Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord (eds.), *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, Lanham (MD): AltaMira Press, 2001, Ch. 5 *passim*.

relocated “Star” ferry piers was mostly vacant and up for lease. But if finding somewhere was fortunate, securing it for our home and organising the capital to convert and equip it have proved tougher nuts.

In terms of getting a lease from government on acceptable terms, we have had significant high level government support from the very outset, though it would be exaggerating to say that the support reached all the way down the official food chain. We have also, as noted above, found official support for the museum in general, not least because after three years of successful operation, and in a context where government has had its eye on improvements in the governance model for its own museums for almost a decade, we were being seen as a possible model for change both in terms of our operational management and our governance structure. But, turning that “support in principle” into capital funding and into help with the subsequent and inevitable gap between operating costs and income when the museum moves, is taking time.

Compared to the celerity of the private sector, which got us from nothing to an open museum in 20 months, the new, publicly subvented HKMM at Pier 8, Central, is looking like taking a total of five years to create. With 100% funding for capital costs at perhaps half or less of the figure per square metre of gross floor area that the government is prepared to devote to its own, lavish new M+ art museum in the controversial West Kowloon Cultural District, and a proposal to support up to 50% of our operating deficit (NOT costs) for 5 years after opening, we are 98% there. But the curve is exponential and the last bits are an epic wrestle with red tape and bureaucrats’ dread fears of creating a precedent.⁸³ The result, at a gross internal area of around 3,800 squares metres, will be about half the size or less of a maritime museum in an equivalent port in North America or Europe, but in the context it will be a considerable achievement.⁸⁴ The long-term problem has not been solved – but we shall cross that uncharted zone when we come to it, buttressed by knowing that by that time we shall have had 12 years of life and will have a collection some 3,000 to 4,000 items strong worth in excess of HK\$35 million – that is a lot to send to the scrap-yard.

b. Creating a collection

Of course, creating a collection for an Asian maritime museum is itself a significant problem. For one has to ask, “What should it consist of?” For the reasons considered above, there is no easy

⁸³ As F.M. Cornford so wittily remarked a century ago in his witty *Microcosmographia academica* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1908, Ch. VII – accessible at <http://www.cs.kent.ac.uk/people/staff/iau/cornford/cornford7.html>), the fundamental principle of all institutional argument is that “nothing should ever be done for the first time”.

⁸⁴ It is worth pointing out at this point that the countries best endowed with maritime museums per capita in East and Southeast Asia at present – Japan and Taiwan – both represent two different funding and operating models. Of Taiwan’s three maritime museums, two are operated by shipping company founded and financed charities (the new Evergreen Maritime Museum in Taipei and the older YM Oceanic Culture and Art Museum in Keelung) and the third, mostly financed by an original donation by Evergreen, is part of the private Tamkang University campus in Tamsui. Japan’s seven maritime museums are also both publicly and privately funded. For example the NYK Museum in Tokyo is funded by the NYK shipping company’s charitable arm, the Yokohama Maritime Museum and Tokyo Museum of Maritime Science are publicly funded, as are the Kobe and Osaka Maritime Museums, though by their respective port authorities.

answer to this question and the contents of western maritime museums are not necessarily a very useful guide. The Chinese maritime tradition, distinguished though it has in many respects been, has not left behind it a particularly rich material heritage. Beyond the last century – and even there, specifically Chinese maritime artefacts are more conspicuous by their rarity than ubiquity – there truly is very little.

China has no real tradition of maritime art as such – indeed it would not be too harsh to say that there was no maritime art in the sense that the term is used in the western world. The Chinese navigational world was, comparatively, a medieval one from which very few examples of the simple tools relied upon – lead line, timing candle or incense stick, earlier wet and later drypoint compass, or kamal – have survived. There are no pre-European period transitional instruments like chip or Dutchman-type logs, traverse boards, cross staffs or backstaffs, Gunter's, hour glasses, portolans, etc. Those instruments of the modern period that are much more than half a century old are almost always of European or American, or possibly Japanese manufacture. The same is true of charts and navigational books,⁸⁵ which do not start appearing in any quantity as items for shipboard use until almost the end of the Qing dynasty and aboard Chinese owned and operated steamships.

Shipboard equipment from junks and sampans – blocks, euphroes, anchors, cables, shackles, etc. – what in the west are called chandlery, was hard used, probably mostly custom made, and little has survived, certainly insufficient to service a second-hand market in such things. Commercial sailors lacked uniforms of any distinctiveness and the more or less non-existent rank structure aboard fishing and merchant junks means there was no officer/crew uniform distinction either. Nor does there seem to have been, amongst traditional Chinese sailors, the habit of making things to entertain themselves off watch and to give to wives and sweethearts. No ship models, ditty bags, knotboards and fancy work, scrimshaw, shell valentines, woolworks or any other of the myriad nauticalia with which the auction rooms of marine art and artefacts in Europe and America are replete. And because perhaps 99% of Chinese seafarers were illiterate, there are few if any logbooks, diaries, or letters and almost no shipboard papers of the sort that, from around the 17th century in Europe, begin to amass in ever increasing numbers.⁸⁶

One can add to this that there is also a comparative dearth of information critical to telling the nub of one aspect of the story that our Museum sets out to tell, namely the technical matter of the development of Chinese naval architecture as revealed by the findings of maritime archaeology. No doubt this will change rapidly as China becomes wealthier, but as yet the archaeological record is remarkably slight, especially in terms of a rounded picture, both through time and across geographical space along China's coastline, of variations in and changes to hull forms, appendages

⁸⁵ The charts and navigational tomes that have survived – and they do exist from at least as far back as the Song Dynasty – would not appear to have been working tools for seamen. With a mainly illiterate body of seamen, they would have had no use. Rather, they would appear to have been as the 15th- and 16th-century European equivalents largely were, reference works for the wealthy ship owners and aristocrats and at best only used shipboard by a very few, literate shipmasters engaged on major voyages. For the European state of affairs, see E.G.R. Taylor, *The haven finding art: a history of navigation from Odysseus to Captain Cook*, new, augmented ed., London: Hollis & Carter, 1971, Ch. V, esp. pp. 97-98 and 102.

⁸⁶ Taylor, *The haven finding art*, pp. 234-235, is particularly useful with respect to the importance of the emergence of the practice of systematic log, or daily journal keeping.

and rigs.⁸⁷ If one compares the wrecks found in Europe, which have helped elucidate the complex development of European hull forms, appendages and rigs since the earliest times, with what is at present available for an equivalent analysis in China and more generally in Southeast Asia, the comparison is telling,⁸⁸ though here again there are promising signs of change in the work of scholars like Pierre-Yves Manguin⁸⁹ and the growing band of scholars in Taiwan and in mainland China.

So what did the Hong Kong Maritime Museum do?

The key, one might argue, lies in our self-selected mission. Our mission statement reads,

“With particular reference to the South China coast and adjacent seas and to the growth of Hong Kong as a major port and shipping centre, the Museum aims to stimulate public interest in the world of ships and the sea. In its galleries it seeks to inform and entertain local and overseas visitors. It highlights major developments in, and cross-fertilisation between, Chinese, Asian and Western naval architecture, maritime trade and exploration, and naval warfare through the centuries.”

Hong Kong is in that sense fortunate in that it is a hybrid society with a dual – if not always much loved – history this is part-colonial British and part culturally, if not often politically, loyal Chinese.⁹⁰ It follows that in interpreting our mission we can spread ourselves generously.

⁸⁷ One can add, rather tendentiously, that what is known is too often interpreted through a pre-decided agenda as to what it *has to* substantiate rather than following that sound historian’s principle, “what the evidence obliges us to believe” (see Michael Oakeshott, “History and the social sciences”, *The Social Sciences*, London: Institute of Sociology 1936, pp. 71-81 and *Experience and its modes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, new ed. 1986, Ch. 3 and p. 109). In consequence, more nonsense is written about the capacities of the balanced junk rig, the “watertightness” of compartmentalisation (and the causes of its adoption), the nature and genesis of the centreline rudder, etc. than can quite be believed.

⁸⁸ As is, too often, any comparison of the respective analyses of what has been found. Compare, for example, the work of Lionel Casson, *Ships and seamanship in the ancient world*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995; Robert Gardiner (ed.), *Cogs, caravels and galleons, the sailing ship 1000-1650*, London: Conway Maritime Press, 1994; or the magisterial J. Richard Steffy, *Wooden shipbuilding and the interpretation of shipwrecks*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994 with Joseph Needham’s (with Wang Ling and Lu Gwei-djen) sweeping (and often wrong-headed), *Science and civilization in China, Vol. 4, Physics and physical technology, Pt III: Civil engineering and nautics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971; or Deng Gang, *Chinese maritime activities and socioeconomic development, c. 2100 BC-1900 AD*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997 on almost every other page of which there is a nautical solecism. There is work in Chinese that I have seen (but been unable to read) which appears to be less inclined to select facts to prove a preordained conclusion and which in its diagrams indicates a similar commitment to “how things really were” than mostly emerges in translated work by Chinese scholars. Unfortunately this work – as much of Chinese maritime historical scholarship – remains closed to readers without Chinese.

⁸⁹ For example Pierre-Yves Manguin, “Trading ships of the South China Sea: shipbuilding techniques and their role in the development of Asian trade networks”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 36, 1993, pp. 253-280; and “Relationship and cross-influences between Southeast Asian and Chinese ship building traditions”, *Final Report, SPAFA Consultative workshop on Maritime Shipping and Trade Networks in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok, 1984, pp.197-212.

⁹⁰ For an interesting pair of takes on this hybridity, see Law Wing Sang, *Collaborative colonial power, the making of the Hong Kong Chinese*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009; and John M. Carroll, *Edge of*

The secrets to creating a collection, given the difficulties noted above -- and thanks to our mission, Hong Kong's location and its recent history -- have been six.

First, we are lucky in being on the doorstep of China where excellent craftsmen will make models of high quality and fine detail for prices that do not break the bank. This is particularly true for models of traditional Chinese seagoing junks, genuine historical examples of which are extremely rare and mostly in collections overseas.⁹¹ There are pitfalls here precisely because the archaeological record is so slender and ideas of what things ought to have looked like are powerful.⁹²

However, although we find it difficult to go overboard with respect to pre-19th century junks, particularly their designs and their rigs for sound museological and scholarly reasons,⁹³ from the 18th century onwards we have a rich repository to draw upon. These are our second and third sources. On the one hand, there is what is known as the Canton Trade. On the other, there is the Hong Kong side of the story of the larger China Trade, in effect the story of the initially imposed modernisation of navigation and shipping on China's coast. Both of these domains are, joyfully, artefact-rich and the objects are regularly traded in auction houses around the world. Even though much of this large repository is today expensive, it is in no sense in the same league as fine art and there are still excellent bargains to be had if one is careful.

This brings in the fourth secret, and the critical one, for it is what has made creating a collection with the two foci above possible. We have noted that though large in number, the artefacts of the Canton and China Trades are, relative to maritime museum finances, expensive. Fortunately for the fledgling HKMM, our founders were themselves collectors, or were good friends with collectors of Canton and China Trade artefacts. As a result, in our start-up phase, we were given or were able to borrow many fine objects – paintings, ceramics, fabrics, maps and atlases, etc. – which we would otherwise have been unable to afford.

The result was that when the museum opened, between 50% and 60% of the most impressive and most valuable items were gifts or loans. Our China Trade collection, although small, is as a result of high quality and is fairly representative across the genres. We are strict in trying to confine it to items, which although export ware nonetheless have a clear maritime connection or “flavour”. Our collection is in consequence simultaneously clearly relevant to a maritime museum whilst being

Empires: Chinese Elites and British Colonials in Hong Kong, paperback reprint, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007.

⁹¹ For example the Maze Collection in London's Science Museum, the Spencer Collection at Texas A&M University, and the “Shakey Ships” collection of junk models from the St Louis World Fair 1904, mainly commissioned by the Imperial Chinese maritime Customs, now in the National Maritime Museum, Antwerp.

⁹² For example the modern artist's renditions, based on the very crude woodblock images in Zeng Gongliang (曾公亮), Ding Du (丁度), and Yang Weide (楊惟德), *Wujing Zongyao* (武经总要), 1044, to be found in S. Turnbull, *Fighting ships of the Far East*, London: Osprey Publishing, (1) 2002 and (2) 2003, might encourage the making of replicas in complete ignorance of scale or actual measurement.

⁹³ See Stephen Davies, “Archaeology, history and modeling the past”, in *Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Penglai Ancient Ships*, Penglai Cultural Relics Bureau/Wuhan University, forthcoming.

both aesthetically pleasing and a good cross section of the main genres in this two and a half century long business.

Equally, precisely because we had access to knowledgeable collectors, we were able ourselves to secure some objects, which would otherwise have escaped us. What is arguably our prize exhibit -- the magnificent, 18m long, early-19th century Qing ink-on-silk scroll celebrating the victory of the Viceroy of the Two Guangs,⁹⁴ Bailing, over the Guangdong-based pirate confederation of Zhangbao in 1810 – came to us this way. In like manner we gained a unique ship's figurehead, probably carved by a European, but representing the Goddess of Mercy, Guan Yin, and had the glorious loan of a Ming Dynasty dragon boat figurehead still with much of its original paint. This happy access to expertise has stayed with us and, over the four years since we launched, the collection has grown steadily, improving our coverage in all areas without breaking the bank and forming the nucleus of what we hope will be a research collection in China coast hydrography. Recently we have come across, and are at present fundraising for, a magnificent new acquisition which, when we are successful, will be a major fillip to our focus on the Canton and China Trades and a major draw for scholars and connoisseurs, as well as the general public.

Fifth, although this is a source we are only just beginning to tap as we become known, there is the rich store of memorabilia from the long interaction with the sea of Hong Kong's own people: Passbooks and medals; photographs and log books; cap badges and documents; souvenirs and models. This has resulted in our acquiring two unique presentation models of Hong Kong-built ships – both in their original cases and, after restoration, in perfect order. Perhaps most charming, we have also acquired a handmade model – built precisely as the original would have been built, by eye and memory from oral tradition – of a unique Pearl River Delta sailing fishing craft, the *chaam tsung* (慘繪) or hang trawler.

We know there is a vast amount more out there in risk of being lost or destroyed and we hope we shall acquire our new home in time to save much of it.⁹⁵ At present, a call for donations would be impossible to handle partly from shortage of staff, but most of all from shortage of space. There is simply nowhere to put anything more without renting more offsite storage which we cannot afford.

Finally, because we see ourselves as a maritime museum for a polyglot, cosmopolitan city, we do not ignore maritime history in general -- the common property of sea-going humankind, we might say, and its long and inventive engagement with coming to terms with the challenge of finding the way across the oceans and staying alive and healthy whilst doing so. Our collection does not ignore examples of alternative ways of doing and being, of trading and seeing and, where there are

⁹⁴ Guangxi and Guangdong, the two provinces in China's far southeast.

⁹⁵ The present premises have no proper storage spaces. Knowing this, we designed the galleries to have storage spaces beneath and behind as many of the display cases as we could. It was not enough. Our office space (35 sq. m.), which housed six of us, and for a year seven, took some overflow but in the end was too small. So to add to our fiscal woes we had to rent two disused shop premises 250m up the hill from Murray House, in the heart of the local housing estate, as an overflow office and store. The result is a combined rental, management fee and air-conditioning bill that absorbs some 65% of our operating income. Our proposed new home will have integrated storage space that should be sufficient to allow our library and collection to treble from its present size.

examples of something that is of relevance, or which through time and the vicissitudes of history has become the common property of today's seafarers, we include it.

In like manner, since no maritime museum of any quality should suppose that only the past is its bailiwick, we also keep an eye on the present. A perfect example of how we deal with this occurred when the leading ships' communications equipment supplier in Hong Kong was moving office and store. In the back of their store, they found several mint examples of mid-1990s "state-of-the-art" ship's radio and electronic navigation equipment all in its original packaging but now, of course, obsolescent. Should it be sent to the landfill or could it find a home? Our view is that what is thrown away today in 30 years time is a rare collectible. We gave the objects a home and two have already graced an exhibition. There is much, much else of the ilk out there and we are happy to try to find a place to stow it away, difficult though that is.

We cannot boast anything like Singapore's Tang Cargo, nor any prospect of such a glittering prize, but in honesty, we have to say this may not be a bad thing. Wondrous though such a treasure is, and hugely significant though it is with respect to informing our evidentially poorly-buttressed understanding of early period eastern waters trade patterns and methods, to accommodate it would not be easy in terms of our mission. Hong Kong was peripheral to the main overseas trade from Guangzhou, and although until the Qing scorched-earth coastal policy of 1661-1684 there was flourishing local salt and minor ceramics production, it would be wrong to build this into something it was not. Indeed Hong Kong had a varied and interesting maritime history before its annexation by the British, but it was small in scale and minor in relation to the larger tale of maritime trade from Guangdong Province, let alone with respect to China as a whole. Put bluntly, the maritime silk route⁹⁶ went by our door but it did not come calling.

c. Developing acceptable and relevant storylines

This brings us to the thorny matter of the storylines the museum has developed and the pitfalls it has tried to avoid. The full story is a long one, so here we shall confine ourselves to four signal issues because they are typical of the sort of shoals that any Asia maritime museum must navigate its way round.

First there is the matter of general focus. As noted in our mission statement, we use a broad brush and a large canvas. It is a fatal temptation to start-up maritime museums in Asia to have a narrow perspective and a short focus. This is a function of a number of things, some avoidable, some less so.

⁹⁶ This is a rather misleading term typical of gross historiographical adumbrations (1066 and all that!) which so appeal to journalists and people in the PR business. As John Keay rightly points out (*The Spice Route: a history*, London: John Murray, 2005, Front Matter), if it was anything, it was primarily a spice route. But since it was not a route in any case – instead more of a complex trading web – the popular sobriquet misleads rather more than it enlightens. If "Silk Road" was invented by Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, one suspects the maritime coining was after 1977. One notes that in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, an anonymously penned 1st century CE merchant's guide, silk is but one of thirty and more items traded at Barygaza (in India) – see paras 48 and 52, for example, (e-version available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/periplus.html> accessed on 31.08.09)

The unavoidable – though perhaps evadable – issue has been touched on above. It is hard to have a broad focus and a deep perspective when one's collection does not cover so wide and deep a spectrum. Where the finds of archaeology are patchy and ambiguous, where the artefacts telling the story of a society's encounter with the sea are few, and where the market for more is skewed to a different story and the prices are exorbitant, it is natural to incline towards realigning one's ambitions.

This inclination is in turn fomented by other, more avoidable pressures. On the one hand are specific ideological, usually post-colonial, sometimes politically correct and politically imposed, and always highly limiting agendas. On the other, and reverting to an issue raised above, the lack of professional museologists with a wide-ranging nautical expertise married to a grasp of the general ambit of maritime history has a tendency to encourage and exacerbate limitations arising from a natural preference for the home focused and home grown.

Put the three together and the result, to put the matter another way, is an avoidable parochialism. The sea, after all, is precisely where boundaries dwindle to insignificance. Sailors bridge the gaps between cultures, taking the world they grew up in with them and bringing back home other ways of seeing and being. Yet too often, rather than aspire to place the local or regional gloss on the larger human encounter with the sea into its widest context, the tendency is to emphasise difference – OUR way of doing things, not THEIRS – and reduce or elide enlightening parallels, borrowings and similarities.

It has been easier to avoid these tendencies in Hong Kong precisely because it is a city of fluid identities; at once intensely Chinese and yet committed to being cosmopolitan – to being Asia's world city, as the government's PR blurb has it. It followed that just telling Hong Kong's maritime story from a small Chinese fishing and coastal trading enclave, through the rise of a British colonial entrepot to the achievement of today's superhub port, needed a larger context to make sense of that unlikely trajectory.

We are fortunate, as noted, in having a richer collection than our modest funding would have allowed if the collection had had to be bought. Hong Kong is also lucky in being part of the Pearl River Delta, one of China's great outlets to the wider world today as yesterday. The result is a collection, some of which necessarily takes the story and the resultant storylines beyond China and Hong Kong as trade goods made by Chinese craftsmen sought to satisfy foreign tastes in ways which subtly, and over time, began to percolate into the domestic market and imported Chinese design influences in their turn changed foreign tastes. We were also fortunate in our original curatorial committee, which chose our major storylines precisely to place Hong Kong's inside China's larger maritime story and to embed that story inside the largest story of all, the growth of world maritime trade and the convergence on today's shared maritime world.

Although that is easily written, it also elides three potential stumbling blocks which we had to find our way around.

First there was China's indigenous maritime story. As we have noted, the main problems here are three.

First, there is a dearth of artefacts, so to illustrate a storyline there is an inevitable need to rely on replicas. Second, there is a dearth of solidly-grounded fact out of which a story can be developed and upon which to base the construction of replicas in terms of ensuring that the result would be credible when scaled up.

The existence of Barbie Doll[®] and Bionicles[®], to name just two examples, should be enough to indicate that one can make a model of anything to illustrate whatever story one might wish to make up. Whether it will scale up to a credible, life-sized object and hence support the story being told is another matter altogether. Many of the teenage fantasies about vast Chinese warships of the past that litter the Internet are no basis for responsible museum model-making or ethical museum storylines and displays. The Hong Kong Maritime Museum is an independent member of the International Council of Museums and *a fortiori* a subscriber to its Code of Ethics.⁹⁷ It behoves us, therefore, to say and show only what we believe can be adequately supported by the evidence and by the fundamental laws of physics.

Second, there is the unavoidable fact staring one in the face, as at the end of the 19th century a millennial long Chinese naval architectural tradition was sailing steadily into the final sunset. This presented our storylines with an awkward caesura: a gap between the tale of China's illustrious maritime past and the tale of the re-emergence, a century or so later, of a revitalised maritime China in its modern, international naval architectural guise.

How were we to be honest about the caesura, as by our ethical commitment we must be? Too often, the hiccup between past and present is bridged by making Needham-like claims for the past about which more recent careful scholarship has entered many caveats. Our storylines had to avoid the temptation to play fast and loose with the history of the rudder.⁹⁸ We decline to make suggestions about the use of the compass, based on textual evidence that cannot easily be reconciled with the actualities of use at sea.⁹⁹ We also refuse to offer conclusions about the

⁹⁷ See <http://icom.museum/ethics.html> accessed on 31.08.09. Article 4.2 is relevant here:

"4.2 Interpretation of Exhibits

Museums should ensure that the information they present in displays and exhibitions is well-founded, accurate and gives appropriate consideration to represented groups or beliefs."

⁹⁸ As with so many historically less than substantiated claims, this is one of Joseph Needham's many difficult legacies to maritime historians, based -- as is so much he wrote about "navitics" -- on mistaking A's precedence over B in the written record for evidence of A causing B. As Lawrence Mott thoughtfully remarks (*The development of the rudder, a technological tale*, London: Chatham Publishing, 1997, p. 120), "...the problem is one of transmission. The spoken word is not very reliable...", whilst also pointing out that the Egyptians also had centreline steering systems as early as 2000 BCE.

⁹⁹ As J.E.D. Williams points out (*From sails to satellites, the origin and development of navigational science*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 22-27 and Ch. 8) there was almost no truly reliable magnetic steering compass in use much before the end of the 19th century -- just in time to be supplanted by the gyrocompass. As anyone who has tried to use a simple drypoint compass at sea will point out, steering by it is all but impossible because of its undamped arc of swing. And that is supposing the card to have been designed to reduce it, something we know not to have been achieved until the early 19th century (see Alan Gurney, *Compass: a story of exploration and innovation*, New York: WW Norton, 2004, pp. 206-210). How it might be to steer by any of the wet-bowl devices touted as early Chinese marine compasses boggles the mind. There is also the problem, given that Chinese ships were iron fastened, of deviation (the error caused by induced magnetism) which, unlike variation (the difference between true and magnetic north) Chinese savants seem not to have identified. Sailors steer by and orientate themselves by the stars, run of the sea and the wind.

windward capabilities of the Chinese standing lug rig that fail to take into account the aerodynamics of the ubiquitous, separate panelled, heavily battened, woven bamboo sail, including the difference between the apparent stalling angle of any aerofoil and the angle at which it loses an effective forward drive component.¹⁰⁰ We did not peddle nonsense about transverse solid frames by calling them watertight bulkheads but to give them a sensible explanation.¹⁰¹ Yet, our storylines had to do all that without outraging the sensibilities of our audience to a large majority of whom all such claims, as evidenced by the opening spectacular of the Beijing Olympic Games, have the status of gospel truth.

For whilst on the one hand there can be no question that Chinese naval architecture was brilliant in its achievement of a strong, light, economical and wonderfully seaworthy hull, driven by a rig both extraordinarily easy to handle and economical in its manpower requirements, on the other, there is the singular problem that the technology appears to peak in the late Song or possibly early Ming Dynasty, and not develop significantly thereafter. Our storylines need to leave open avenues for exploring explanations of this. There are the possible limitations to the design envelope for example – like the problem of height limitations on unstayed, pole masts, or of creating multi-through deck vessels when the traditional deck supporting members are solid transverse frames, or the difficulty of a vernacular naval architecture in strengthening a systemically weak steering system.¹⁰² There are the economics of Chinese merchant shipping with the absence of a parallel to western state involvement and monopoly creation that, in guaranteeing voyage profits, opened the way to financing innovation that, in the far more Smithian world of Chinese shipping, with its low costs of entry and fierce competition, would have been a guaranteed route to bankruptcy.¹⁰³

What is written down in books, especially with as large a gap between the practitioners and the scribes as would appear to have been true of China, is something else entirely.

¹⁰⁰ An instance of the poverty of thought that often goes into such matters can be found in Deng Gang *Chinese maritime activities and socioeconomic development*, p. 44 where there is a diagram of a junk rigged craft tacking into the wind so memorably confused (and hopelessly wrong-headed) as to leave one aghast at the quality of the publisher's editing. Needham's discussion of the same issue (Needham et al., *Science and civilization in China*, vol. 4, pp. 591-597) is predicated almost entirely on carefully ignoring any evidence (such as monsoonal sailing) which might suggest the junk rig was not in practice so weatherly as he would wish us to believe and his own cited textual evidence (pp. 604-605) in fact suggests.

¹⁰¹ Something can emerge as a vernacular design property that turns out, as a by-product, to have other uses. It is probable that the technique of Chinese junk construction arose as a way of constructing complete deck supporting framing economically from low-cost timber sources. One notes that the number of complete frames (floors, futtocks and deck beam) of the Byzantine, 11th-century CE Serçe Limani ship is the same as that of a typical contemporary junk of similar size (see Steffy, *Wooden shipbuilding*, pp. 85-91). To suggest that the intention of early medieval Chinese shipwrights was to design a hull with the damage control properties of internal compartmentalisation is to put the cart before the horse. On the partitions not being watertight (though up to a point sealable), see Sean McGrail, *Boats of the world: from the Stone Age to medieval times*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 367.

¹⁰² I have borrowed the concept of a vernacular architectural tradition, extended to cover naval architecture, from Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, London: Methuen, 1979, p. 16

¹⁰³ This very useful insight is owed to Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The world that trade created: society, culture, and the world economy 1440 to the present*, 2nd ed., New York, ME Sharpe, 2006, section 2.1, pp. 47-49.

Third, there are the “approved” histories and the other possibilities. Were Zheng He’s voyages proto-imperialism or a curiously expensive exercise in diplomacy?¹⁰⁴ Was the later Zheng confederation in any one of its two centuries of fluctuating existence engaged in piracy? Or is there a better term we could find less likely to evoke utterly misleading images of Johnny Depp or Captain Hook? Did the Yuan invasions of Japan have several thousand ships, or several thousand vessels of various sizes down to what today we would call boats, or just a few hundred ships which were subsequently exaggerated by chroniclers?¹⁰⁵

In both Hong Kong’s and China’s more recent maritime stories there are other truths, the telling of which requires equal care in our storylines and captions. Care to the point, indeed, of stepping around them altogether!

To coin a phrase, naval history is an evident minefield as is the history of the warship or any treatment of the evolution of naval strategy. From 1841 until 1997 Hong Kong was a British Royal Naval base. It has been important to remember that the Royal Navy is “their” navy, “not” ours. It was also the navy of an imperialist power engaged in exercising that power in the interests of the hegemon more than the interests of China, whatever may have been the more benign products of some of its activities like, for example, detailed charts of China’s intricate coast. Precisely because that past is emphatically not, as it was for the more relaxed Edwardian denizens of L.P. Hartley’s young go-between’s world, “a foreign country” where things are done differently,¹⁰⁶ it is a story we have not yet dared to do more than gesture towards in occasional exhibitions. Yet we are conscious that in our future, larger home, some way of telling this story must be found because we must not lose sight of the fact that quite a lot of “us” served with that navy and lost their lives in doing so whilst contributing to notable passages in the history of naval warfare in eastern seas.

Similar care needs to be exercised in writing of the coming of modern shipbuilding, ship management practices, maritime law, marine insurance and much else besides to the China Seas. Were these an imposition, or a typical, if brutal example of how technology and ideas spread?¹⁰⁷ These are important parts of the fabric of our story without which there are too few strands to make whole cloth. But presenting the tale in a way that exhibits the requisite sensitivity and tells the often brutal truth is a must.

And there is, of course, opium. There is a received “truth” about this nefarious episode that we must respect because the vast majority of our audience “knows” the story and how it should be told, and there is no question as to the soundness of that general approach. There is nothing good to say about the opium trade. But equally, from a maritime museum’s perspective, the opium

¹⁰⁴ See Wade, “The Zheng He Voyages”, fn 60 above.

¹⁰⁵ The issue of the Yuan invasions is well considered in James Delgado’s *Khubilai Khan’s Lost Fleet: History’s Greatest Naval Disaster*, London: The Bodley Head, 2009.

¹⁰⁶ LP Hartley, *The Go Between*, new ed., London: Penguin, 2004, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Laura Hosteteler’s thoughtful *Qing colonial enterprise, ethnography and cartography in early modern China*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001, is an interesting venture in taking this sort of perspective and applying it to China’s own expansion.

clippers did play an interesting role in the development of the epitome of the square-rigged sailing ship, the fabulous clippers of the 1850s-60s, and in changing the trading patterns of the South China Sea¹⁰⁸ with their ability to work to windward against the NE Monsoon. And there are other “takes” on the opium business that should not be elided merely because one approach has become received wisdom.¹⁰⁹

d. Attracting and holding an audience

Which brings us to how we hold our audience. Any museum treads a delicate line between playing to the gallery – back to dumbing down, edu- and infotainment and the Disneyfication of everything – and doing its International Council on Museums-required educational job. It treads an additional line, in the Asian context, between telling things how they were, warts and all¹¹⁰ in an attempt to present multiple perspectives as fairly as possible, or alternatively subscribing to received wisdom or, worse, nationally-required pieties.

We cannot say that HKMM has got the answer right. We do know, in a way that publicly supported museums too often cannot know, that we are attracting and holding our audience. This is because everyone – and we mean everyone – must pay to buy an entry ticket and our tickets are twice the price of the public sector museums. It follows that if we are holding our audience share – and we are¹¹¹ -- at least some things are pressing the right buttons.

Our approach uses three techniques to attract and hold our audience.

The gallery spaces are themselves part of the museum, their ambience being shiplike (like the tweendeck spaces in a modern vessel) as well as having a stunning aesthetic. As one visitor put it, “Just standing in the Ancient Gallery is itself a pleasure.”

Within our limited budget, we have striven for a mix of traditional static displays and modern, electronic “moving displays”, interactive displays and informative but fun games.

¹⁰⁸ The basic work considering these issues, now of an almost incredible “political incorrectness”, is Basil Lubbock’s *The opium clippers*, new edition, Glasgow: Brown, Son & Ferguson, 1932, though there are also thoughtful observations on the same issue in David R. MacGregor, *Fast sailing ships, their design and construction, 1775-1875*, 2nd ed., London: Conway Maritime Press, 1988, Ch. 3, though Howard I. Chapelle, *The search for speed under sail*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968, p. 317, is rather dismissive of any suggestion that the opium trade had any significant influence on design development, inclining to the view that the equally disgraceful business of slaving played a larger role.

¹⁰⁹ One thinks specifically of Frank Dikotter, Lars Laarmann and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. There are also side stories, such as the role of the opium trade in other parts of Asian waters maritime history of the sort dealt with by J.F. Warren in *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898*, pp. 19-21, 109-111.

¹¹⁰ The phrase is attributed by Horace Walpole, in his *Anecdotes of Painting in England, with some account of the principal artists* (1764) to the English Oliver Cromwell instructing the portrait painter Peter Lely to show him as he was, not to flatter.

¹¹¹ This August we have attracted 90% of our average August audience over the last four years and 110% of the number for August 2008.

In the case of the former, the curatorial committee took the very bold decision to make at least some of the displays open – that is, people can reach in and touch – and to our delight, this has proved a hit with the audience without saddling us with a constant requirement for minor repairs. In four years, we have suffered fewer than one example of damage a month, usually extremely minor, and only about five cases of something more serious. Nothing has ever been stolen or as far as we can see maliciously damaged.

The main storylines are carried through the galleries on large, well-illustrated panels which provide the links between the display cases. All materials are in Chinese (traditional) and English and in the part of the Ancient Gallery that deals specifically with China's pre-industrial maritime story, we make every effort to link the progress of Chinese naval architecture with contemporary developments in Europe. The most significant individual display items are complemented by low-cost, attractively-produced pamphlets (simple A4, two-sided, colour printed sheets in landscape orientation, folded into three) giving more detail about an exhibit or congeries of exhibits than can be managed in a standard museum caption.

The electronic moving displays include video clips, audios, simple moving images with an audio narrative, film, audio only displays, and touch screen information displays. They illustrate broad gallery themes or elaborate on specific displays

The games are intended to teach as well as entertain. They include a simple "how the wind works on sails" game (not our best!). There is an excellent Morse code game in a replica ship's radio room using the interior from a 1980s ship. Our star attraction is a simple and low-cost bridge simulator, based around the adapted bridge equipment of a 1980s-built Japanese handymax bulk carrier that was broken up in Shanghai as we were constructing HKMM. It offers two routes for the player to navigate, one berthing on the Ocean Terminal in the heart of Victoria Harbour, the other taking a container ship into Kwai Tsing Container Terminal. Children love it not so much to play the game as to charge round the harbour bumping into things, at which there is a satisfying crashing noise and the deck beneath the feet shakes. The educational virtue of the game lies mainly in teaching about the relative slowness of response of ships (they are not cars) and how one has to recall how much of one lies behind the bridge and must not be forgotten when manoeuvring. There is also a testing "load a container ship" game against the clock that illustrates graphically, if you get it wrong, why loading a ship in a balanced way is a vital part of the loading and discharge of cargo. Load the cargo wrongly and the ship rolls over and sinks!

What have turned out to be perhaps our most innovative efforts have been occasioned by our drastic shortage of space. Unlike traditional museums, we have no special exhibitions area, even supposing we had the money to afford the costs of typical international loan exhibitions. To try to compensate for this deficit, we pioneered a technique of clearing up to 30% of the "permanent" exhibition to create space within the galleries (and also using our non-climate controlled "Common Area" between the galleries) for our home-grown "thematic exhibitions". Each of these has on average cost HK\$60,000 (US\$7,700) and presents up to 200 artefacts around a given theme. In our four years of existence we have put on nine of these exhibitions. This ensures that repeat visitors will almost always find something new to see. It also allows us to show items in the growing collection which have no place in the permanent displays.

In this way we have collaborated with one of the foreign consulates in Hong Kong, that of France, to mount an exhibition about the French maritime presence in Chinese waters over the 160 years that the French have had an official presence in Hong Kong. It was Hong Kong's first trilingual exhibition. At present we are showing an exhibition simultaneously being presented at 10 other maritime museums around the world, focused on the last voyage of large commercial sailing ships which sailed from Australia to Europe 60 years ago this year. Each participating museum shows the 12 simple storyboards prepared by the host museum, the Åland Islands Maritime Museum, and if it wishes can add to them. HKMM has created one of our typical thematic exhibitions, connecting the world of the windjammers to the Chilean nitrate trade where so many Chinese "coolies" suffered so bitterly. It has also used some 1880s passage charts from a windjammer voyaging to China, some early routing charts and some navigational instruments and books – all in the collection – to show navigation and weather forecasting tools and techniques in the sailing ship era.

You will have noted there has been little mention of PR and advertising. The simple truth is that we cannot afford it. Our view is mainly that it is a Balogh tax, that is, its costs can be passed on directly to the consumer as an addition to the price of a product even though the consumer would not pay that addition were he/she to have a free choice. Given that we cannot pass on the costs of advertising, before we spend HK\$20 on any marketing exercise, we need to feel fairly confident that it will result in the increase of our audience by one adult or two children. Our visitor surveys indicate that advertising plays almost no role in visitor decisions to visit (80% are haphazard walk-ins), so we save our money for more essential matters.

Critically, our audience is mixed. 75% are Hong Kong people of whom 99% are Hong Kong Chinese. Around 15% are visitors from elsewhere in Asia, the USA, Australasia and Europe. 10% are from Mainland China. It follows that we are playing to several very different groups to all of whom our galleries must be interesting, entertaining and a visit experienced as being time well spent.

Because a significant proportion of our visitors have experience of the best museums in the world, they represent a standard we have to meet if we are to satisfy that segment of our audience. Equally, the same people do not want to see a pale version of something they can find done more expansively elsewhere.

Our mainland audience wants simultaneously to find out about the singularity of Hong Kong – a Chinese port city with western characteristics – without being reminded of China's humiliations during the 19th century of which Hong Kong is at the same time an example!

Our Hong Kong audience wants the best of all of those worlds. That is, they wish to learn about themselves as part of the new China now resuming the massive presence it had in the world – and the maritime world also – until the late 18th century. They wish to learn the story of how they and their past – the story of maritime Hong Kong – represents the vanguard without which the glorious present may never have arisen. And they want to see and learn their own story for itself – the story of the Fragarant Harbour and how it got from being shunned by most as part of the Ladrões, or Pirate Islands, to being one of the world's largest and busiest ports and a major maritime centre. Finally they want to be given a sense of the voyage that lies ahead.

It is a great role for a maritime museum and one to which a new home in the very heart of Victoria Harbour could not be better suited.

Summary and conclusion

Maritime museums, to attract and hold their audience, necessarily tell the story of ships, seafarers and the sea from a local perspective – how we did it, here. But they do so, if they are well designed, in a way that places how we did it here in the larger perspectives of how others did it elsewhere – drawing parallels and pointing up distinctions. A maritime museum, to be a good one, must show too how we exchanged ideas with others via the sea, peacefully or by force; how our people went to live over there and their people came to live here; and it helps us see thereby how the sea, sea trade and naval warfare created – and are continuing to create – the world we live in today. For a good maritime museum also shows that this story has not ended and will not end.

No aeroplane will ever replace shipping. The entire annual throughput of the world's biggest air cargo terminal, the one at Chek Lap Kok in Hong Kong, can be carried away in four or five of today's largest container ships.¹¹² When you realise that each day in 2008, 84 such vessels were on the move in Hong Kong waters, some 42 arriving and 42 leaving, you begin to get the measure of the significance of the sea. Now add the interesting – and in the present environmental context worrying – statistic that up to two-thirds of the animal protein consumed by many Southeast Asians comes from the sea. In Indonesia it is 50% and in some parts of Southeast Asia and Oceania it is 100%.¹¹³ Pondering the two numbers – and there are many more where they came from, you begin to appreciate the importance of the sea and the need to ensure that our people are educated about it.

That is what maritime museums are for. That is why we need them. That is why downplaying them is egregious folly at best, cultural barbarism at worst.

¹¹² In 2008, that was 3,660,901 tonnes (see Airports Council International, "Cargo Traffic 2008 Final" at http://www.aci.aero/cda/aci_common/display/main/aci_content07_c.jsp?zn=aci&cp=1-5-54-4819_666_2__ accessed on 27.8.09). In the same year Hong Kong's port handled 259,402,000 tonnes (see http://www.censtatd.gov.hk/hong_kong_statistics/statistical_tables/index.jsp?charsetID=1&subjectID=8&tableID=085 accessed 27.8.09). Ships also pollute a lot less – 2 tonnes carried for 5,000 kilometres in a small container ship emits 150 kg CO₂ a long-haul aeroplane over the same distance would emit 6,605 kg CO₂ – see http://airportwatch.org.uk/news/detail.php?art_id=3262 accessed on 26.8.2009

¹¹³ <http://www.peopleandplanet.net/pdoc.php?id=429> and Surajit Debnath, "Fishing Business for Sustainable Development: Current Scenario in Indo-Asia", at http://aquafind.com/articles/Indo-Asia_Fishing_business.php and bullet point 9 at <http://archive.greenpeace.org/comms/fish/amaze.html> accessed on 25.8.09