

## A Quick Glimpse of the Illustrious Chinese Junk

By

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Sailing through the central China Sea, traditional Chinese Junks could still be regularly seen in the open ocean until the early 1980s, especially in the area of the disputed Spratly Islands and Parcel Islands, albeit in reducing numbers as the years progressed. The China Sea island groups consist of many treacherous islets, cays, reefs and atolls but were rich fishing grounds for numerous south China coastal communities and remain so to this day.

Many of the Junks seen in the later years still follow traditional Chinese design and shipbuilding techniques, but the majority had been retrofitted with auxiliary diesel engines. Motorized sailing Junks formed the bulk of Hong Kong's fishing fleet well into 1960-70s when they were eventually phased out and replaced by purpose wooden built fishing trawlers. However, employment of the Junk continued in a variety of ways in Southern China waters until the mid to late -1980s.

Those remaining active were mostly engaged in fishing or as ship to shore cargo transports in such places as Hong Kong, Macau and Southern China ports. Nevertheless, an occasional glimpse can still be seen to this day in some of the smaller ports of China and Vietnam, as well as in a few of the more remote parts of Indonesia, but sightings are becoming increasingly few and far between. Even when navigating the main inland rivers of China such as, the Yangzi or Pearl Rivers; in the higher regions of the Yangzi, around the city of Chongqing in Sichuan one can still see some traditional wooden vessels, in spite none of them being wind reliant, instead usually fitted with motors. Sail power had mostly disappeared by the mid 1980s. In the Jialing River, a tributary into the Yangzi River at Chongqing, the coxswain of a ferry boat, whilst on a passage down the river from the city of Hechuan, reported that the last sailing Junks he had seen was around 1988-1989.



A typical wooden modern day Taiwanese fishing vessel closely formed along Chinese Junk Hull design.

A number of modern motorized wooden built Junks, without sails, with their distinctive Banana shaped hulls, are still used as the backbone of the large Taiwanese fishing fleet. These vessels are fitted with diesel engines and refrigeration plants and designed as true blue water vessels to freely roam far and wide into the Pacific Ocean and beyond in search of fish, in particular Tuna. In many cases they can stay at sea for prolonged periods, since they work from factory or mother ships, which take and process their catch then replenish them with water, diesel fuel and provisions. Taiwan remains one of the few places

were traditional Junk building skills still exist on a commercial scale. Other smaller Junk building shipyards may still be seen on the banks of the Pearl River, at its lower reaches, bordering Macau.

The English name “Junk” derives from a combination of the Javanese “Djong” (meaning a large ship), the Portuguese “Junco” and the Dutch “Jonk”, as a consequence of these ships being used extensively throughout the Dutch East Indies and the noticeable presence of Portuguese navigators in the Southern parts of China during the colonial era.

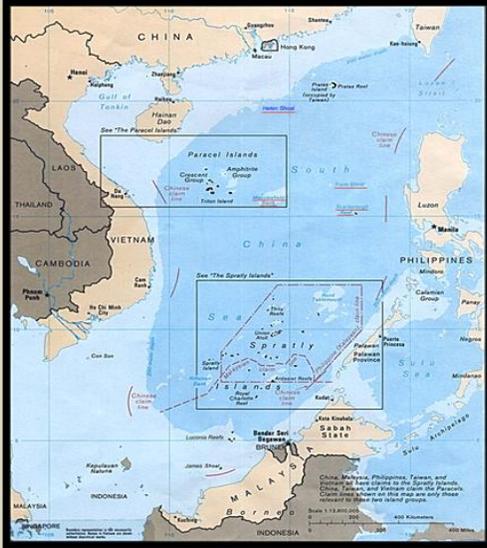
The original “Junk” was developed during the Song dynasty (960-1279) from a basic design that emerged around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century but had been progressively refined, although always maintaining its traditional design features of inner compartments separated by bulkheads each accessed by separate hatchways and ladders (intended to minimize flooding if the hull was holed), low freeboard and high poop deck. None of these vessels carried a central keel. Instead they used dagger boards and large stern rudders, which were far more advanced than any western ship design of the times. These sailing Junks were extensively used by Traders as cargo carriers, fishing boats or indeed as floating storage hulks as well as houseboats. They varied in size from small to very large and could feature a variety of rigs, all using heavy Bamboo for main masts, in the earlier versions. However, all varieties used elliptical, fully battened sails (battens used were of Bamboo), and were flat bottomed, which made them ideal for navigating up shallower rivers and coastal creeks, meaning they could sit comfortably and upright on the sea bed during periods of low water. They were generally constructed from light woods, although later built of Teak wood after 17<sup>th</sup> century. There was a slight variation in design between those Junks constructed for specific trades around Malacca (Malaya), Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia but the modifications or refinements never deviated much from the basic overall design concept and were only incorporated to facilitate local requirements.

These sailing ships were extremely good at sea and provided superb sea handling qualities. They were sleek yet robust in their structure which assured their sea handling capabilities as well as excellent hull integrity and seaworthiness. Eventually the Chinese used these vessels for military purposes which later developed into a large imperial Chinese navy.

During the era of Chinese Admiral Zheng He, (a renowned Chinese seafarer and explorer of the Ming dynasty during the 15<sup>th</sup> century), had a large naval fleet of Chinese Junks with a substantial expeditionary force placed under his command with the intention of seeking new trading routes and plundering treasures. This fleet of some 300 Junks explored as far west as India, Ceylon, the Persian Gulf, East and South Africa. The fleet also included the largest Junk ever built, the legendary nine-mast treasure ship which was 400 feet long with a 150 feet beam. Admiral Zheng He’s fleet traded mostly in Ivory and Spices whilst developing diplomatic ties with other countries visited along his route of discovery.

However, during the Ming dynasty (15-16<sup>th</sup> century) commercial seaborne trading was banned by the then Chinese Emperor. This caused a temporary decline in shipbuilding expertise and a downturn in the number of vessels constructed during the period. Nevertheless, Chinese junks resumed their Asian trades during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, in particular to Southeast Asia and to Korea and Japan, where

they competed with Japanese, Portuguese and Dutch ships. The Junks employed in these trades were usually 3 masted and ranged in size between 200-800 tons, each carrying about 130 crew members, upward of 100 traders, together with numerous passengers.



Nowadays, the area of the South China Sea within the **9 Red Lines** is claimed by China but hotly disputed by other region countries, the most contentious areas of which are the Spratly and Paracel Islands. During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century these disputes were non-existent, per se, and the shoals were common fishing grounds used by all coastal states bordering the South China Sea.

Chinese Cargo Junks in Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor. The battened sails, high poop deck and low freeboard are clearly visible in this image. One of the sail batten advantages was it restricted the tearing of sails to between the battens if they were blown out, which allowed the sail to remain partially useful, which is also illustrated in this image



Credit: Reportedly a SCMP image

A classic Chinese Junk. Clearly highlighted is the Bamboo battened sails and low freeboard. The keel free hull and sail arrangement made for a very stable sailing platform and inland river craft. Junks such as this were commonplace in such places, as Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Macau, Saigon, Singapore, Malacca and various Indonesian ports. There was also a regular lucrative sea trade between Manila and other southern China and Asian destinations.



The Chinese Junk was at the forefront of Imperial Chinese exploration in the Middle Ages and is a true icon. It is therefore fully entitled to take its pride of place in Chinese history, along with its smaller derivative the **“Sanpan”**. The Sanpan is a Chinese - Malay small wooden boat, many of which had a canvas shelter constructed on deck, allowing them to become places of permanent abode, giving rise to the term **“Boat People”**, such as the **“Tanakas”** who were a migratory group from China who lived on boats, especially in Malaya, Thailand and Vietnam. The name **“Sanpan”** is of Cantonese decent, which loosely translated, means “three planks”.

These are strictly sheltered water craft and are usually propelled by means of a single sculling oar called a “Yuloh”. At best they may also be used as inshore fishing boats. These small vessels are still conspicuous in large numbers in most South East Asian ports and like most things have become reliant on small diesel engines or outboard motors as a primary means of getting about. In the shallower waters of Asia, in such locations as the Klongs of Thailand, as well as the Mekong River of Thailand and Vietnam, many have been fitted with “Longtail” outboard motors for shallow water use.

However, nowadays the term “Sanpan” may be used more generally, to describe a wide assortment of small wooden type craft that frequent Asian waters.



“Big sisters and baby sisters” – Junks and a solitary Sanpan

Credit: Photo understood to be by Herbert Ponting taken in 1902

Nowadays, Junks are more readily found in the guise of modern Junk-rigged sailing vessels built for recreational purposes. This modern variety may be seen in yachting Marinas, worldwide and are usually built of expensive Teak with luxurious interiors and fittings – a far cry from their original concept!

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