



LI QINGXIN

# MARITIME SILK ROAD



Translated by William W. Wang



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译 者: William W. Wang

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责任编辑: 郑 磊

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# The Convergence of Early Sea Lanes of the East and the West

## Maritime Civilizations of the Far East

As one of the ancient civilizations, China is a country with enormous land area as well as having long sea coastlines. From the mouth of the Yalu River in Liaoning Province to the mouth of the Beilun River in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the coastline of Mainland China runs for more than 18,000 km. In addition, there are coastlines of the offshore islands, making the total coastline of China more than 32,000 km that stretches across temperate, sub-tropical and tropical climatic zones.

The coastal areas of China are important cradles of ancient maritime civilizations of the East. As early as prehistoric times, people living in these areas were persistent in creativity and innovations while accruing valuable experiences, resulting in improved navigation capabilities in water. They planed simple boats and then built ships, eventually learning to take advantage of astronomy and ocean currents, and mastering the ways of maritime navigation. They were able to sail far across the oceans and establish contact with Southeast and Northeast Asia, creating many unexplainable miracles which made later people gasp in admiration.

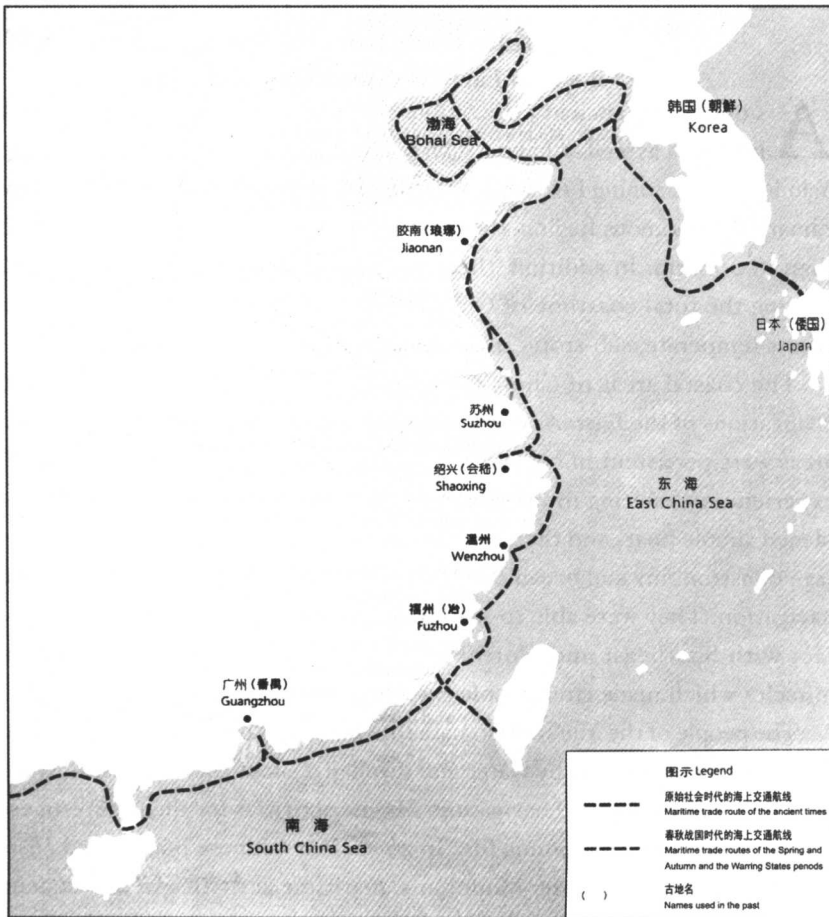
The people of the Yue Kingdom, in the southeast coastal regions of China, who relied on transport by water and dwelled against the mountains, were adept in shipbuilding and navigation. Marine activities for them were an essential part of socioeconomic life. In an ancient Chinese book titled *Huai Nan Zi*, "South of the Jiuyi Mountains, maritime activities were frequent



and activities on land were seldom. The people hung their hair loose and wore tattoos that resembled fish scales. They wore short lower garments to facilitate activities in water and rolled up sleeves to row boats more efficiently.”<sup>1</sup>

An excavation of the heritage site of the Hemudu culture (some 7000 years ago), in the area of present day Yuyao, Zhejiang Province, revealed 6 wooden oars and 1 black pottery boat with carbon contents. The pottery boat was in the shape of a weaver’s shuttle; the ends were sharp and tilt upward in the shape of a crescent. It was largely consistent with the shape of a dugout canoe. This would be the evidence of conducting maritime activities by the East Yue people. Similar relics were also found in coastal regions of Zhejiang Province, the Zhoushan Archipelago, the island of Taiwan

*Maritime trade route of the pre-Qin period*



as well as islands in the Pacific. This suggests that the East Yue culture had long ago established some kind of economic and cultural association between China mainland and its islands.<sup>2</sup>

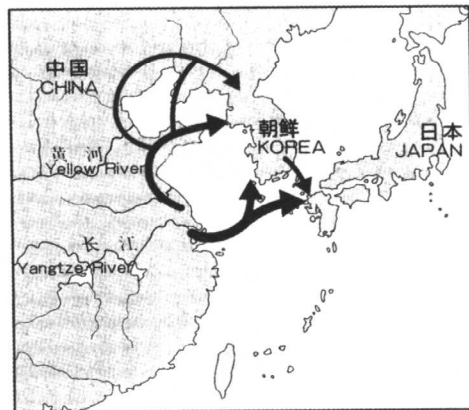
In 1989, archeologists in the province of Guangdong discovered three rock paintings, which date back some 4000 to 5000 years, in Baojing Bay on Gaolan Island of Zhuhai City. The paintings illustrated ancient vessels and the people onboard. The style and content of these paintings are very similar to those prehistoric paintings found in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other places. Archeologists firmly believe that the vessels portrayed in these rock paintings were seagoing vessels, constructed of wooden materials by the Yue people in pre-Qin Dynasty times. Compared to the primitive age of the canoes, these ancient boats already had much advancement, using primitive masts and sails and relying on wind power for driving force.

In the region at the mouth of the Pearl River, numerous stone anchors and stone weights for fishnets were also unearthed. This gave indication that the Yue people not only found a solution to the issue of anchoring ship on the sea, even their fishing industry was of considerable scale and sophistication.

From archeological studies of Guangdong, Fujian and Taiwan, the ancient mankind of southern China belonged to the Mongoloid group, South Asian type, or just South Asian Mongoloids. The “Zuozhen People” (20000-30000 years ago) from Tainan County in Taiwan and the “Changbin Culture” (10000-15000 years ago) of Taidong County in Taiwan were all migrants and introduced from southern China.

Archeological findings also point to the existence of some kind of connection between coastal cultures of southeastern China and the cultures of East Asia, Southeast Asia and even of cultures in the Pacific. Chinese archeologists believe that the Liujiang People of the late Paleolithic Age in present day Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region had evidently similar craniums with the Kellors of the Australian continent. In addition, the

*The paddy farming culture was introduced from China to Japan via different routes*



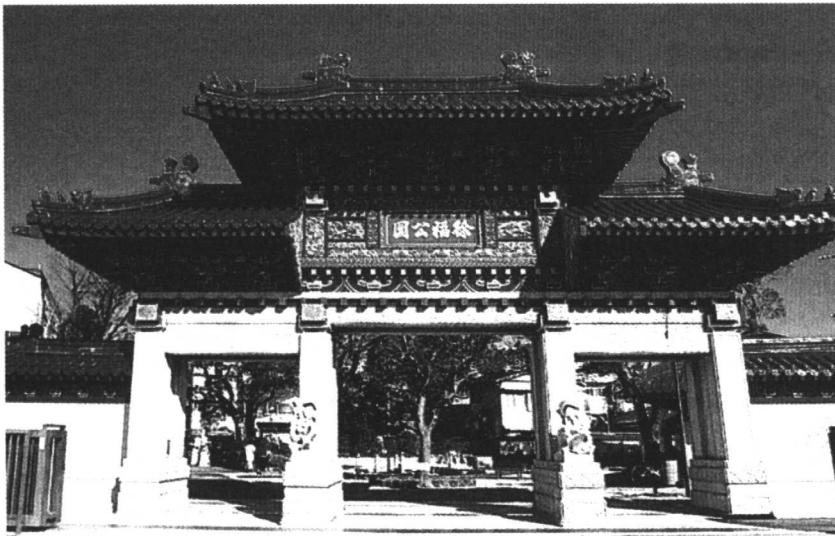
Wadjaks of Indonesia, the Tabans of the Philippines, the Nians of Kalimantan Island and the Altapes of New Guinea all have similar features with the indigenous people of Australia. Hence there was a possible migration route for primitive Asians from southern China gradually moving into Southeast Asia and Australia.<sup>3</sup>

While making use of regular patterns of ocean currents and monsoons, it was possible to gradually drift on a canoe from southern China to the islands in the South Pacific. Furthermore, early contact and communication between southwestern China and the Indian subcontinent became a solid foundation for cultural exchange between the Chinese civilization and cultures of the Indo-European language family.

During pre-Qin Dynasty times, China further substantiated the communication and exchange with surrounding regions. In the “Fuhao Tomb” of the Yin heritage site in Anyang, Henan Province, over 7,000 pieces of seashell currency were uncovered. These shells came from coastal regions of Southeast Asia, meaning that there was an association in the form of economic exchange and “tribute offering” between the Shang Dynasty (around 1675-1029 BC) and the people in the South China Sea.

During the Warring States period, the common people of China and Japan had already established commerce over the seas. Most of the time the trade route would start from Dengzhou Bay (present day Longkou, Shandong

*Jofuku Park in Shingu, Japan*



Province), through the Changshan Islands to the southern part of the Liaodong Peninsula, then around the east side of the peninsula up north to the mouth of the Yalu River, and then go along the west coast of the Korean peninsula until reaching its tip, eventually traversing Tsushima Strait and arriving on Japanese soil.

Later on, in order to dodge the atrocities of war, many Han Chinese escaped to the Korean Peninsula. Some even went as far as the Japanese Islands across the seas. What the Japanese named “Yayoi Culture,” arising from the Yayoi-cho in Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, actually refers to a kind of culture relying on a combination of iron, copper and stone vessels and utensils originating from the East Asia mainland in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC. This culture was also characteristic for its swords, caldrons and bells made of copper, among other copper-made ritualistic tools. In addition, paddy farming, with the growing of rice as principal practice, was also introduced to Japan.

In the Western Han period, Chinese historian Sima Qian in his renowned work, *Shi Ji* (Records of History), recorded the tale of Xu Fu traveling east in search of immortality. Qin Shihuangdi, China’s first emperor, who after having unified the other six kingdoms of China, felt tremendously aspired for even greater accomplishment; he prayed for immortality and eternal rule as emperor. The alchemist Xu Fu reported that there were three heavenly mountains in the sea, namely the Penglai, Fangzhang and Yingzhou, where the immortals dwelled. Xu Fu requested that the emperor adopt a vegetarian diet while he embarks on a journey into the seas to seek for the tonic of everlasting life. Qin Shihuangdi granted his request and selected several thousand virgin boys and young maidens to accompany Xu Fu on his quest for immortality. However, Xu Fu was not to be heard for a very long time, until one day, that he suddenly reappeared in front of Qin Shihuangdi. This time, Xu Fu requested that the emperor dispatch skilled archers to kill the sharks that threaten the ocean crew. Qin Shihuangdi therefore sent his skilled marksmen to Xu Fu’s aid. However, Qin Shihuangdi died before ever laying eyes on the immortality drug. Xu Fu never returned.

The legend of Xu Fu’s journey east is still being passed down through the generations. People really believe that Xu Fu was an actual historical figure. Some say that the port from which Xu’s fleet embarked its journey is present day Huanghua, Hebei Province; others say it is from the north coast (Dengzhou) of Shandong Province; or Ligen Bay in Jiaonan, Shandong Province; or the large port of Ganyu County in Jiangsu Province. It is

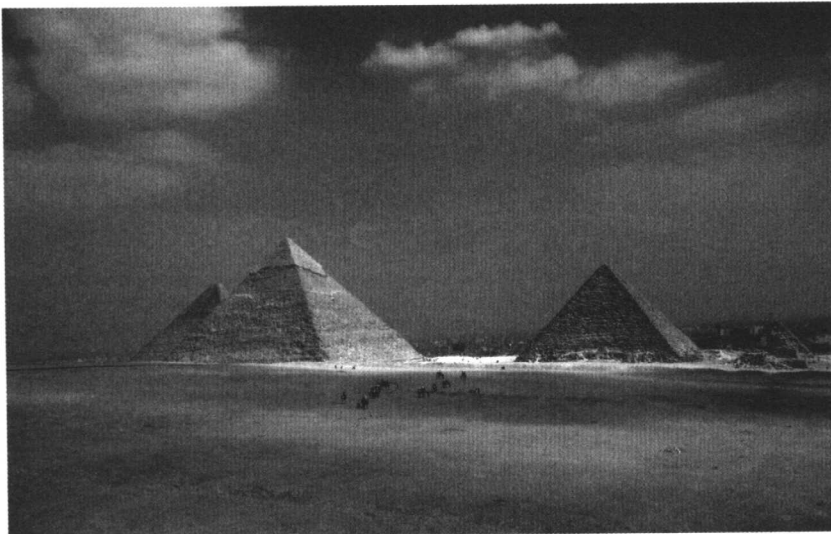
commonly believed today that the destination of Xu Fu was Japan. Today in the town of Shingu in area of Kumano on Kii Peninsula, Japan, there are the tomb and ancestral hall of Xu Fu, where it is believed to be Xu Fu's final resting place. Every August, the locals hold a grand ceremonial event for remembrance of Xu Fu.

The story of Xu Fu is one of the best evidences of early Qin Chinese culture migrating eastward and catalyzing the Japanese culture. It is also an illustration of the history of cultural exchange through the seas, around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, between early civilizations in the Far East.

## From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean: Contributions to Navigation by Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans

At around 3000 BC, the Mediterranean was the pathway of communications and exchange for Europe with the Mesopotamia region and ancient Egypt. The ancient Greeks, who were skilled in sailing the seas and doing business, set sail from the Peloponnese Peninsula to many seaports around the Mediterranean, trading with the people of Crete, Cyprus, Egypt and other places. The Greeks also made contact with the inhabitants along

*Pyramids in Egypt*



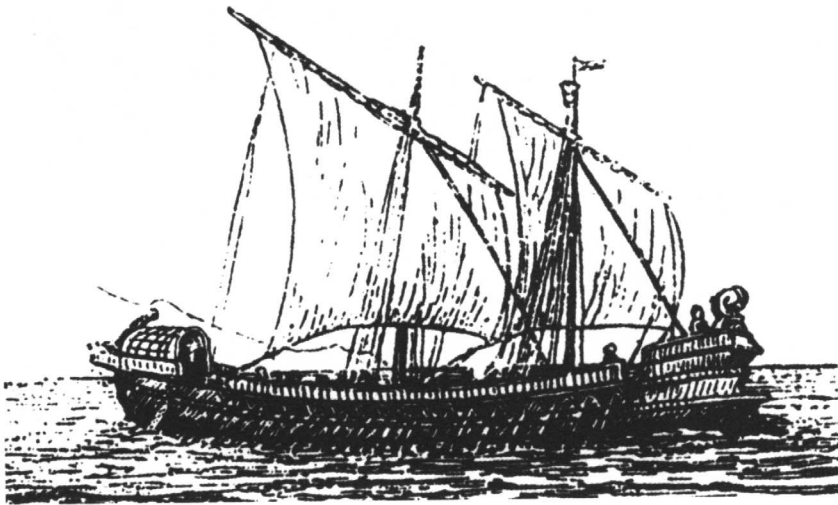
the banks of the Danube, Oder, and Elbe rivers, as well people on the Scandinavian Peninsula.

The Greek seafaring vessel was rounded in shape, which is said to have been learnt from the Phoenicians. However, the Greek ships were larger, at around 40 meters in length. There was a wide cargo area, and the sides of the ship would be constructed very high for increased cargo capacity. The Greek warships were even more intricate, which came in 2 to 3 levels. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, 3 story-high Greek warships with sails and oars reached a length of 40 meters, and on both sides of the stern sat a long oar functioning as a rudder. There erected a mast in the center of the ship, on which a high rectangular sail was attached. Each ship was allocated a crew of 170. The Greek warships owned advanced designs and were capable of high velocities which made it very adept at long voyages.

During the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, Greece became an economic power and cultural hub of Europe. City-states and colonies of Greece were set up around the Mediterranean as far as the eastern part of Sicily, south of the Italian Peninsula and northern Africa. However, the Greek expansion in the Mediterranean faced constant competition from the Etruscans and Phoenicians.

As early as 2,500 BC, the Phoenicians were already relying on the sun and the Polaris for navigation, frequenting the eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea to develop sea trade and facilitate outward expansion. They set up Carthage as a base with many trade posts throughout their commercial

*Ancient Greek oar-sailboat*



network in coastal areas of the Mediterranean.

Departing from the Middle East, there were basically three sea routes to reach the west Mediterranean area. The first one was the northern line which nestled to the northern shore, Greece and other islands, going through the Strait of Otranto and passing the

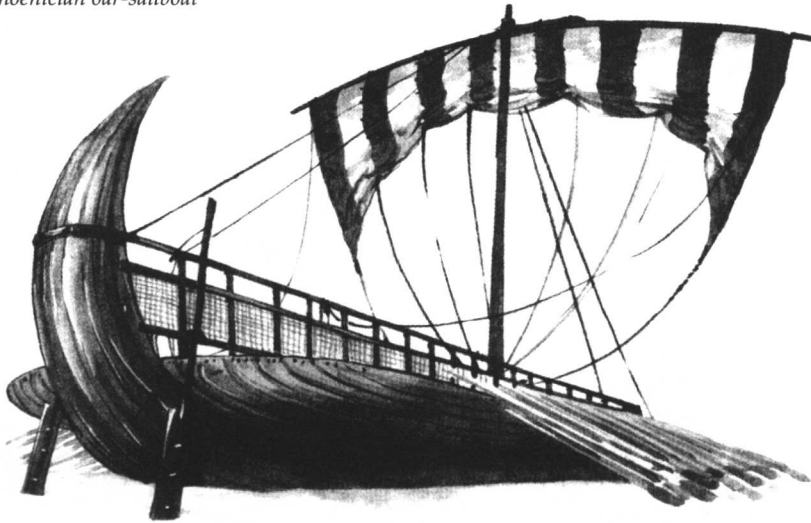


*The Acropolis of Athens*

Italian southern seacoast, until finally reaching the Strait of Messina. The second sea route would be the southern line which meandered along the African continent until reaching the Strait of Gibraltar as its destination. The Phoenicians had set up many trading posts along the way such as in the cities of the Nile Delta Region, Nora of Sardinia, and Carthage of Byrsa Hill, among others. The third navigation course went straight through the center of the Mediterranean with the many islands along the way as stopping points, including Cyprus, Crete, Malta Islands, Sicily, Sardinia, Balearic Islands and so on.<sup>4</sup>

The Phoenicians' seafaring ships came in two types. One was the commercial ship for trade and fishing, where the body of the vessel was quite large with a rounded body and flat bottom; the so-called "round ship." On the ship was a sail since it was mainly wind-powered. The other vessel type

*Phoenician oar-sailboat*



was the warship, where the body was long and narrow, so dubbed “long ship.” It is fitted with 50 crewmembers and can travel at fast speeds. On 1200 BC, the Phoenicians built a dual-level warship with oars and sail with increased crew capacity of 96 and faster speed. Even later, they created a three-level warship with oars and sail, having greatly improved speed and combat effectiveness.<sup>5</sup>

In 338 BC, the King of Macedonia, Philip II (382-336 BC), conquered Greece. His son Alexander then conquered all of the Persian Empire all the way to India, which in turn led to the formation of open trade routes to the Orient by both land and sea.

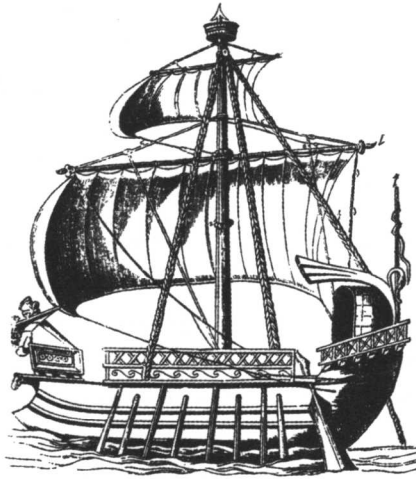
By the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Romans broke free of the rule by the Etruscans and established their own republic. Later the Romans were to rise as a maritime superpower in the Mediterranean through a series of wars. From the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, the Roman military, after 3 Punic Wars, eliminated the large Mediterranean state of Carthage. The Romans then labeled Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, among other countries and regions, as territory of the Roman Empire. The Mediterranean Sea became the “inner lake” of the Roman Empire, which the Romans themselves called “Mare Nostrum,” meaning “our sea.”

The Romans also frequently drove their ships through the English Channel to the British Isles. When eastern provinces were established, Roman ships were in constant traffic between the ports within the Mediterranean. A trip from Naples to the Port of Alexandria took around 12 days; from Corinth to the same destination took 7 days. From South Gaul to Africa took about 5 days if sailing with the wind, while from Scetis to the Port of Alexandria needed about 6 days.<sup>6</sup>

The Romans inherited the shipbuilding industry from the Greeks. There were no significant changes to the body and load of the ships. Most seafaring ships were 27 to 30 meters in length and about 9 meters wide with a carrying capacity of 250 to 300 tons. In 1998, Italian archeologists discovered 9 sunken Roman vessels, completely intact, in a construction yard in front of a railway station in the city of Pisa. These ships dated back to some time between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. They were loaded with Greek-style amphorae and Roman Arretine pottery, both were vessels for wine.

The Romans also made many innovative improvements to shipbuilding techniques. The first innovation was reflected in the use of multiple masts and multiple sails. On such a Roman ship, there was a main mast in the





*Roman oar-sailboat*

center, with an auxiliary mast at the stem. Some ships had multiple sails attached to a single mast, unprecedented at the time and a major advancement by the Roman shipbuilding industry. Another innovation was the creation of a variety of oar-sailboats. On a three-level oar-sailboat, there would be two masts and two sails, so that the ship can make a roundabout even when wind is blowing at a 45-degree angle.

Sea trade took a prominent seat among commercial activities in the Roman Empire. The Mediterranean, blessed with calm and unruffled waters, numerous islands and densely located ports, was the center of maritime trade and commercial traffic connecting southern Europe, Africa and Asia. As the “lake” of the Roman Empire, during peaceful eras under unified rule, the Mediterranean enjoyed unprecedented prosperity, echoing the traffic and trading in the Near East and on the Indian Ocean. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, a Greek man named Hippalus utilized the power of monsoons to travel from the mouth of the Red Sea, traversing the Arabian Sea to reach India. Although some linguists point out that the Greek word “monsoon” is rooted in the Arabic word “mauzim,” meaning seasons, it has to be acknowledged that understanding monsoons and being able to take advantage of monsoons are two different things. When Hippalus took on his first sea voyage utilizing monsoons, he inadvertently created a world record in navigation. This type of monsoon was therefore named after him. During the times of the Roman Empire under the reign of Augustus (27 BC-14 AD), Greek and Roman sea voyagers fully utilized their knowledge of monsoons to develop