

# East Sails West

The Voyage of the *Keying*,  
1846–1855



Stephen Davies

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# Preface

Between 1846 and 1848, one of the most extraordinary voyages ever undertaken created a record that has never been broken. The Chinese junk *Keying* became the first—and only—Chinese junk to sail on its own bottom from China via the Cape of Good Hope into the North Atlantic. In the process, it also became the first ever Chinese-built vessel to visit both Britain and the east coast of the United States.

That is not widely known. This book explains why that might be so.

The project was put together by a group of Hong Kong investors, some of whom became founders of major Hong Kong institutions. It was carried out by a mixed crew comprising a minority of British officers and sailors, and a majority of Cantonese sailors under their Cantonese sailing master. And along for the ride went a few passengers, including some of the investors, a possible mandarin of the fifth rank,<sup>1</sup> a painter and perhaps even a tailor, a props manager and a troupe of celebrated jugglers.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to problems both with the weather and the junk's performance, the voyage had to divert to the east coast of the United States, where it stopped in both New York and Boston before, following a serial break-up in the ship's crew, it finally reached London.

This is the only verified voyage of a junk into the Atlantic Ocean and on to America and Europe. Its object was not science or exploration—those twin poles of non-commercial and non-belligerent nineteenth-century seafaring—but was typical Hong Kong: a business proposition aiming to make money by entertaining visitors with exhibits of the crew members in live tableaux on deck and displaying a rather eccentric collection of Chinese objects in the accommodation below. A theme park before its day.



The voyage was a success, in that the junk completed it. But very slow progress, the detour to America and crewing problems, which resulted in a court case in New York, took their toll. A voyage expected to take four to six months took fifteen. Once in London, what today we'd probably call an over-extended business plan saw the project go steadily downhill. So the story is also about the aftermath of the voyage, from 1848 to 1855. At the end of a long drawn out dénouement, the few remaining crew dispersed to disappear from the historical record, while the junk, more or less ignored, came to an ignominious end on the mudflats of the River Mersey at Birkenhead, opposite Liverpool.

The *Keying's* story thus has two major foci, both blurred almost beyond recognition by the passage of time, thanks to ways of being and seeing in the long nineteenth century, both in the Western world and in China, that have condemned the episode to near oblivion.

First, we have a unique and unprecedented voyage by a Chinese junk, conducted as an unintended experiment in cross-cultural co-operation—in the way of Sino-Western relations of the period, the result was as ships passing in the night. As a result, it left little other than an almost accidental record.

Second, we have the junk in which the voyage was undertaken: the only full-sized, working representative of traditional Chinese naval architecture, as far as we know unaffected by any Western influence, to have arrived in Europe as the building wave of Victorian scientific interest in everything was cresting. Yet it was, from a scientific and ethnological perspective, utterly ignored.

Trying to understand why we have very little of the detail of the first, save what can be quarried from newspapers, magazines, a report of court proceedings, some letters and a couple of publicity pamphlets, and why we know almost nothing clear or certain about the second, save what can be inferred from a dubious pictorial record and some casual and not very well-informed descriptions, is what the two parts of this book are about.

In Part I, we attempt to reconstruct what happened on this remarkable and obviously historically and nautically important voyage, as eloquent with regard to its missed cultural connections and voyaging problems as in its actual achievements.

In Part II, we attempt to understand better the ship in which the voyage was undertaken and the missed opportunities it represented for a fuller and better understanding in the West of the unique qualities of Chinese naval architecture.

In both parts, we attempt to understand why the event made so little lasting 'splash'—as far as we can tell, not even an evanescent ripple in China—and why, in the century and a half that has followed, there has been little significant scholarly or popular interest—in the East as in the West—in either the voyage or the ship.

As an exercise in comparative maritime social history and comparative naval architecture, the object in the pages that follow is to dredge some clogged channels and buoy a fairway through a neglected passage that links two of the most important traditions of going down to the sea in ships and doing business in great waters—traditions normally treated as two separate worlds each to be viewed in its own exclusive terms. It is in its status as such a bridge—albeit unintended as such and something of a failure—that the *Keying's* historical importance lies.

Today, people in the Atlantic-Mediterranean world and its offshoots in Australasia are often and rightly much excited by re-enactment voyages, either in replica or equivalent vessels that trace again courses that their forefathers—or someone's forefathers—travelled as they pushed out the sea boundaries of the world.<sup>3</sup> These initiatives have started to spread beyond the world of Western maritime historians and archaeologists, as the recent voyages of the *Princess Cocachin* (2008–09), the *Taiping Gongzhu* (2008–09), the *Ngandahig* (2009) and the *Jewel of Muscat* (2010–11) attest, but as yet the main foci seem to be mainly Western, or Western-inspired.

These replicas, restorations and re-enactments elicit major sponsorship from corporations and governments. They attract TV companies. They spawn best-selling books. And because the stories are important and inspiring, exciting, even gripping, and always instructive, they appeal to a wide audience.

But even in the West, this widespread enthusiasm is a recent development. It gained a full head of steam only in the 1970s. That was a time of affluence, of the peaking of Western expansionism and economic dominance, and above all of the popularization, thanks to today's mass media, of a particular way of seeing the maritime world. That way of seeing was and is characterized by an attendant

interest in the growth and flourishing of maritime history that is arguably and certainly in origin unique to Western cultures.<sup>4</sup>

Before the Western world's late twentieth-century enthusiasm for an increasingly more generously conceived, though still very Western-orientated world of maritime exploration, discovery and diasporas, the approach was very different. There was the Western maritime world, which could be and largely was understood as *the* maritime world. And there were the also-rans that had been left behind by progress, largely, as the story went, through their own civilizational ineptitude.

That is a crude and necessarily incomplete adumbration, but for most Western people in the nineteenth century, even for the more thoughtful observers, only Westerners explored and discovered. Only they had invented the ships, the technologies, the instruments and the systems that made discovery and exploration possible. Everyone else was stuck up a backwater going nowhere, unable and unwilling to find their way out of the maritime (and often more general) cultural impasse down which they had benightedly sailed long before.

And of nowhere had that come to be seen as more true than of China.

Because of such attitudes, the 1846–48 voyage of the junk *Keying* has been almost entirely neglected since the ship and its crew left the new port of the City of Victoria, Hong Kong, on 6 December 1846. No story has been written. No replica has been researched and built. No corporation has seen in the saga a vector for publicity, for the gaining of social responsibility brownie points and for the chance of some earnings through spin-offs. No TV or film company has been provoked to a froth of excitement by the prospect of a gripping docu-drama series and lucrative tie-ins. No government has seen an opportunity for burnishing national maritime credentials and wagging the national flag in distant places.

Yet the potential for all these ingredients are there in the story that follows. Another aim of the story is thus to bring closer to the light why, in the last century and a half, the eyes that could have seen this potential richness have neither seen nor wanted to see. The half-world of Western imperialism's many awkward, often not entirely successful (because usually mutually racist), working compromises—the world most Western and Chinese workaday people inhabited most of the time during that awkward epoch—is one most people would rather bury

than learn from.<sup>5</sup> We're better than that today . . . or we like to flatter ourselves we are.

Today, we may live in more enlightened times, so here's hoping that this story of the Chinese junk *Keying*, of captains Charles Kellett and So Yin Sang Hsi, of mates Mr. G. Burton and Mr. Edward Revett, of *toumou* and *hoke* Hia Siang, Sim Agu, Ung Ti, Ling Chensi, Kho Sing Thiam, Lia Lai, Lei Na Kung, Khor Per Le, Lip Hap, Chin Ten Yeng, Tam Sam Seng, Ung Tian Yong, Chein A Tai, Yer A Chin, Lim A Lee, Go Bun Hap, Che Va A Sa, Chi Va A Chan, Lim Tai Chong, Tan A Lak, Chia A Soey, Ong A Hiong, Chien A Te, Kho Te Sun, Ung A Cong and Sio A Chiok, of 'mandarin' He Sing and ship's artist Sam Shing and perhaps two dozen other nameless European and Chinese sailors, will at last begin to attract the attention it has long deserved.

A few early readers of the manuscript commented that it was rather 'nautical' and that perhaps I should either change the specialist terms to something more familiar to a landlubber or provide a glossary. My own thought, following the lead of that titan of the maritime world—whom we shall meet again in these pages—Richard Henry Dana, is that technical terms are not usually that much of an obstacle to understanding. As Dana put it:<sup>6</sup>

There may be in some parts a good deal that is unintelligible to the general reader; but I have found from my own experience, and from what I have heard from others, that plain matters of fact in relation to customs and habits of life new to us, and descriptions of life under new aspects, act upon the inexperienced through the imagination, so that we are hardly aware of our want of technical knowledge. Thousands read the escape of the American frigate through the British channel, and the chase and wreck of the Bristol trader in the *Red Rover*, and follow the minute nautical manoeuvres with breathless interest, who do not know the name of a rope in the ship; and perhaps with none the less admiration and enthusiasm for their want of acquaintance with the professional detail.

Stephen Davies  
Hong Kong, 2013

# Acknowledgements

This book started life as a result of three quite unrelated stimuli. All three resulted from the creation by the nascent Hong Kong Maritime Museum's curatorial team, under the supervision of Mr. K. L. Tam and with the advice of the late Geoffrey Bonsall, my acquaintance and colleague of many years, of the *Keying* model in the museum's displays.

The first stimulus came when Mr. Y. K. Chan, a member of the museum's board of directors, drew my attention to a fairly critical Wikipedia entry on the museum's model. Reading its strictures, which came down to saying that the model did not look sufficiently like the floating banana in the best known images, forced me to think about why it did not, why it should not, and in general about what the *Keying* must really have been like. In effect, the book started as Part II.

A few months later, in a quite unrelated way, I got an enquiry from New Zealand asking what the Hong Kong Maritime Museum (HKMM) knew about the *Keying* and its voyage. The answer was 'Not a lot'. But the enquirer turned out to be Susan Simmons, the great-great-granddaughter of Charles Kellett, the *Keying*'s Western captain, who had amassed an amazing archive of press clippings and genealogical material which, in an act of amazing generosity, she made copies of and sent to the HKMM. In them, I realized I had the detail that would enable me to get a far clearer picture of the voyage, not only as a navigational accomplishment but also as an exercise in the vexed business of nineteenth-century cross-cultural co-operation—or its absence. To Susan, I owe the most profound thanks. Without her work over the years—supported by a family of equally interested Charles Kellett descendants—this book would have been nigh impossible.

In responding to these first two stimuli, I began reading and came across the third stimulus, John Rogers Haddad's fascinating and illuminating *The Romance of China*, which had some very hard things indeed to say about Charles Kellett, when it described the *Keying's* stay in New York and the court case that took place. Hard things that I already knew, from Susan Simmons, had been very difficult for Charles Kellett's descendants to read and to accept.

I am a sailor and grew up in a sailor's world. It seemed to me then, and seems to me now, seven years and many thousand words later, that Charles Kellett's story needed better contextualization; needed to be seen from the sea, as I have put it, in the context of what would have been perfectly ordinary nineteenth-century sea-going, however that may outrage our more enlightened, early twenty-first-century sensibilities habitually blind, as they too often are, to anachronism.

To be sure, the *Keying's* Chinese crew were probably not treated as today we would expect any crew to be treated anywhere. To be sure, it is to the credit of Samuel Wells Williams, Lin King-chew, W. Daniel Lord and Samuel Betts, the New York magistrate, that they helped twenty-six people from far away, who were in need of help. But we need also to understand the other side of the story; how ships were run in the mid-nineteenth century, and not expect Charles Kellett, his mate and his co-captain to conduct themselves in a manner that could not be required of mid-nineteenth-century mariners, either British or Chinese. We needed to see the twenty-six disaffected Cantonese crewmen rather more in the round, as denizens of a nineteenth-century, post-Opium War, Chinese waterfront. As canny enough men, who were alive to the rough-and-tumble of a contact zone and not raw bumpkins, gulls to any unscrupulous Western or Chinese chancer.

To achieve this, it would be necessary to share that troubled and troubling voyage from Hong Kong. To understand in its appropriate context what this young and obviously capable skipper had achieved. To understand the inescapable tensions and flat misunderstandings that inevitably resulted from trying to run a Chinese ship with a majority Chinese crew in 'shipshape and Bristol fashion'. And thereby to enable myself and my readers to get a handle on why everything fell apart in the way that it did, without going down the ever-tempting route of easy, moralistic outrage.



So Part II led into Chapter 6 . . . And to try to stitch the two together in a way that was not too glaringly inchoate, the rest of the book followed.

I am deeply grateful to two incisive anonymous readers for Hong Kong University Press, who astutely identified weaknesses, especially the poor structure that resulted from putting the ship before the people; Part II before Part I. I am equally grateful to the press's commissioning editor, Christopher Munn, for his comments and for his belief in the book's value. I also owe a debt of real thanks to the press's editors, especially Jessica Wang, whose care and interest have made all the difference. Good editors always improve any text. Both Vicki Low and Jessica tightened, polished and eliminated a superfluity of waffle.

I owe an obvious debt of gratitude to the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, its board of directors and its staff, especially Catalina Chor, who have put up with me maundering on for hours about the story. To Anthony Hardy, the Chairman of the Board, always interested, always with a thoughtful idea and always a strong supporter of my research work, I owe more than I can say. To Cat, Moody Tang, Phoebe Tong and Jamie Mak I am grateful for their patient help with my fumbling efforts with the Chinese language.

I am obviously grateful to the many scholars of China, Hong Kong and the maritime world on whose work I have depended. I am especially grateful to Paul van Dyke, who from his deserved eminence has always encouraged my more tarry-handed approach to maritime history and told me about the *Account*, which would otherwise probably have escaped the net. I owe much thanks as well to my friend and maritime-replica-doyen Nicholas Burningham, from whose wide-ranging knowledge and seamanship I have learned greatly. I hope I have managed to acknowledge all the main sources I have used and from whom I have learned vastly. Evidently, however, the reading of fifty years in the field of maritime history and the maritime world in general means that many who have formed my understanding, almost without my knowing it, do not appear in the bibliography. This is a blanket thanks to a world that several lifetimes of reading would never allow one honestly to say one had mastered.

I must thank Paola Calanca and Pierre-Yves Manguin of the *École française de l'Extrême Orient* for getting me to write an article about this exercise in joint crewing for the proceedings of a conference they co-organized in Beijing in 2009, which has informed much of Chapters 2 and 6. And I must thank the director and

staff at the China Maritime Museum, Shanghai, who asked me to present a paper at their first ever International Academic Symposium in July 2010, held at the same time as the opening of this impressive new contribution to Shanghai's—and China's—maritime culture, which contributed greatly to Chapters 11 and 12. They were also kind enough to invite me back to give a talk in May 2013, which led to the appendix as a way of supplementing elements of the discussion in Part II and in the conclusion. On both occasions I owed a special debt to Ms. Zhao Li, without whose help my contributions would have been much diminished. The same debt is owed to Catalina and Phoebe at HKMM, who turned frenetically full English PowerPoints into polished Chinese. Acute questions from Zhao Li, Cat and Phoebe always helped me greatly to clarify my ideas.

I am grateful to Emma Lefley and Julie Cochrane, the Picture Librarians of the Greenwich National Maritime Museum and to Cynthia CM Woo, Assistant Curator (Registration) at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, for their help with images. Thanks too to Patrick Conner of the Martyn Gregory Gallery in London, who showed the way to the second Chinese image of the *Keying* by the Chinese artist.

After she had read the manuscript and helped improve its flow and intelligibility, Suzan Walker gamely volunteered to produce the index. Friends don't come better.

I owe the biggest debt to my mate—in all three senses of that term—Elaine Morgan. With her over fifteen years I put in the fifty thousand miles of seagoing in a small sailing yacht in many of the waters where the *Keying* sailed that helped me recreate the 'view from the sea' so essential to understanding the *Keying's* voyage. Elaine has lived with the manuscript as long as I have. She has put up with my rabbiting on and on about the *Keying*. And she has not minded too much as days of our 2012 holiday at our other home in France disappeared with me tapping away, *la taupe dans sa taupinière*, revising the manuscript, too often leaving her and my sister-in-law, Elaine's equally forbearing sister Jill Sellars, to enjoy the beauties of the Roussillon without me.

All books are joint efforts. This is no exception. But as usual, whatever the contributions of others, and they have been many and most gratefully received, the errors are all mine.

Stephen Davies

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