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Protecting China's maritime heritage: Current conditions and national policy

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Abstract With its rich maritime history, China possesses a wide range of maritime cultural heritage sites – including those found underwater, in coastal regions and/or in areas of continuing maritime activity (such as fishing and shipping) – as well as historical maritime activities and folklore. However, since the 1980s many of China's maritime heritage sites have been endangered or destroyed as a result of rapid economic development and the 'modern' way of life. The problem now facing China is how best to prevent the negative impacts of modern economic development and the illegal activities that are destroying this rich heritage. Despite having established a series of laws and regulations in recent decades, and having signed the relevant UNESCO agreements, conventions and treaties, China must extend these measures and establish specialised protection laws and regulations in order to protect its maritime heritage. In addition, it must adopt a series of national policies aimed at prohibiting and penalising the illegal activities that place China's maritime heritage at risk. In particular, there is a need to protect China's maritime culture both in concept and in action, requiring both national actions and regional and international cooperation. This paper advocates a widening of the definition of 'maritime heritage' and provides specific recommendations regarding the specialised policies needed to ensure the protection of maritime heritage for future generations.

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Introduction

It would be a shame if every country and nation lost its unique identity, traditions and culture. Imagine if you came to China, for instance, and couldn't find wonderful Chinese food such as *jiaozi*, Chinese music, wedding ceremonies, Confucianism or Lao Zi for example. Similarly, imagine visiting Korea and not being able to find the various Korean dishes, costumes and music such as *arirang*; or visiting Europe and not being

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able to see the Eiffel Tower or eat European delicacies or visit the many historical villages. More and more, we are realising the importance of preserving the cultures of each of the world's regions. This paper stresses the importance of protecting maritime cultural heritage sites, such as those that exist in China, and preserving their unique history and cultural development for future generations. In doing so, this paper focuses on the current conditions facing China's maritime heritage and the national policies that exist or need to be created to deal with the current problems.

The paper firstly reviews the historical accumulation of China's maritime heritage, providing a general survey of the present conditions. It then discusses how to address the issues faced through national policies and governance institutions in order to improve maritime heritage protection and to preserve the spirit and tradition of maritime heritage, allowing this to continuously develop into the future—one of the most important aims of governing our seas and oceans regionally, nationally and globally.

A comprehensive overview of maritime heritage in China

The *Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage* adopted at UNESCO's General Conference in Paris in 2001 begins by "Acknowledging the importance of underwater cultural heritage as an integral part of the cultural heritage of humanity and a particularly important element in the history of peoples, nations, and their relations with each other concerning their common heritage". The convention provides the following definition:

"Underwater cultural heritage" means all traces of human existence having a cultural, historical or archaeological character which have been partially or totally under water, periodically or continuously, for at least 100 years such as:

- (i) sites, structures, buildings, arte-facts and human remains, together with their archaeological and natural context;*
- (ii) vessels, aircraft, other vehicles or any part thereof, their cargo or other contents, together with their archaeological and natural context; and*
- (iii) objects of prehistoric character.*

This convention is clearly important for the protection of underwater cultural heritage; however, it is also problematic. If we consider and comprehend 'underwater cultural heritage' as including all 'maritime heritage' or all 'maritime heritage' as being under the ocean then it is clear that the definition of maritime heritage is too narrow and limited. In fact, maritime heritage exists not only under the ocean, rather, because of the natural combination of the sea and the seashore; human components of maritime heritage (such as maritime activities) are evident on and in the sea, as well as on the seashore. As a result, I propose that any definition of maritime heritage must include the following five separate components:

1. Various underwater heritage elements such as shipwrecks, relics and sites. There are a significant number of such underwater heritage examples in the seas and oceans adjacent to China's coastline, in particular along the historical maritime silk routes between China and other countries. For instance, more than 2,000 sunken ships are estimated

to exist in the South China Sea. However, for economic, technical and policy reasons, maritime archaeology and protection has only been achieved for a few.

2. Various coastal cultural heritage elements, for example old seaports with their facilities, abandoned boats, lighthouses, temples of sea-gods, maritime relics and sites.
3. Various places inhabited by maritime communities on islands and in coastal regions which have retained traditional constructions, such as historical seashore cities and commercial towns, old fishery villages, fish markets, ship-making places and salt fields.
4. Various historic sea regions, such as historic shipping bays, shipping routes, and fishing grounds.
5. Various elements of traditional maritime folklore including maritime religions, beliefs, myths and stories, songs and performances, life customs and festivals.

Widening the definition of maritime heritage to include these elements will help ensure that laws, regulations, policies and actions can appropriately recognise and protect these vital components of China's maritime heritage that have accumulated over the centuries.

A historical survey of the accumulation of Chinese maritime heritage

China is a great maritime nation with an extensive maritime cultural heritage. As such, it possesses a vast array of maritime heritage examples. The geography of China offers various combinations of land and sea. Along the mainland coastline of about 18,000 km, are more than 7,000 islands (all greater than 500 m²), these, along with the massive expanse of sea and ocean adjacent to the coast, are where China's maritime culture has developed. Its history includes close interaction with and strong support of inland culture, as is evidenced by the various achievements and creations that remain. The various examples of China's maritime heritage are the memorial accumulation of China's long maritime history in which heritage examples have been composed not only of visible, material practises but also in the imaginations and activities of various Chinese peoples over generations. The heritage examples provide a vivid recollection and recording of important figures, events, creatures and living styles and conditions throughout Chinese maritime history.

Surveys of China's maritime heritage identify that they were created and accumulated by people from coastal and island locations from as early as pre-historic times. In particular, China's maritime heritage is an accumulation of the following six periods in China's history:

Period 1: the primitive age before Xia (夏) Dynasty

The first period is the primitive age before China's Xia (夏) Dynasty (2205–1782/1766 B.C.). The archaeological discoveries of the maritime historical sites of this period—especially the Neolithic era—are various and colourful, spread along and amongst almost all of the coastal regions and islands of China. From these sites we can see that since the Stone Age, about 8000 years ago, the coastal areas of China saw a flux of maritime clans, the preliminary cognition of oceanic science, the exploitation of the marine economy, the conduct

of sea and ocean transportation, and the advent of beliefs about seas and oceans and related cultural practises. All of the above demonstrate that China possesses a very rich and very long history of maritime civilization, examples of which include various shell-gathering sites,¹ and the Hemudu site (河姆渡)².

Period 2: the Three Dynasties

The second period comprises the Xia (夏), Shang (商), Zhou (周) Dynasties, also called the Three Dynasties (2205–221 B.C., 1800–1100 B.C., and 1100–221 B.C., respectively). The maritime heritage examples of this period are great both in aspects and in quantity. They are particularly found in the main maritime affiliated states of Yan (燕), Qi (齐), Wu (吴), and Yue (越) etc., as evidenced by both archaeological discoveries and historical records, such as ‘Guan Zi’ (《管子》) recounting Qi as “the most prosperous maritime state (海王之国)”, “rich in fishing, salting and shipping (渔盐之利, 舟楫之便)” The King of the Sea, 5th Chapter, Relative Importance, in Guan Zi (《管子□轻重五□海王》).

Period 3: Qin (秦), Han (汉) and Tang (唐) Dynasties

The third period comprises the Qin (秦), Han (汉) and Tang (唐) Dynasties (221 B.C.—960 B.A.). During this period the Emperors Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇) and Han Wu Di (汉武帝) were the most famous figures of their times, responsible for many historical maritime events. In particular, Qin Shi Huang and Han Wu Di both undertook several inspection tours of the sea and coastal regions, creating an increased focus on maritime issues and the building of seaports along the coastal areas. There are now many sites traditionally believed to be the seaports, mountains and related places they inspected, including most of the places visited by Xu Fu (徐福) on his voyages³ across China, Korea and Japan. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, many seaports such as Langya (琅玕), Zhifu (之罘) and Jieshi (碣石) along the Bohai Sea and Yellow Sea, and Fanyu (番禺), Xuwen (徐闻), Hepu (合浦) and Rinan (日南) along the South China Sea, were strongly developed as seaports serving the ‘maritime silk routes’ of the north and south parts of the surrounding China Seas.⁴ During this period, the so-called ‘Han Culture Cycle’ or ‘Confucian Culture Cycle’ began and developed into an elaborated form in the Tang and following Dynasties. The most prosperous duration of maritime development in this period occurred during the Tang Dynasty. Many maritime heritage sites of this Dynasty—including seaports, maritime silk routes and their related cultural heritage—are evident today as a result of archaeological discoveries and historical records both in China and abroad.

¹ There have been many shell-gathering sites discovered along Chinese coastal lines.

² Hemudu, located in the coastal line of Zhejiang Province.

³ Xu Fu (徐福), mainly recorded in *Shiji* (《史记》), *the records of History*.

⁴ See Qu Jinliang(ed.): *A Compiled Long History of Chinese Maritime Culture* (vol.1, vol. 2, vol.3, vol.4, vol.5), Qingdao: Ocean University Press, 2008

Period 4: Song (宋) and Yuan (元) Dynasties

The fourth period is that of the Song (宋) and Yuan (元) Dynasties (960–1368 B.A.). Several characteristics of maritime development and heritage from both the Song and Yuan Dynasties remain today. Foreign trade along sea routes during both dynasties were administrated by the ‘Shi-bo-si’ (市舶司) located in the seaports (as is the modern custom), which strongly determined the developments and prosperity of seaport cities, commercial markets and international cultural communications. The huge seaport of Zaiton (刺桐) (now Quanzhou (泉州)), the establishment of South-to-North sea transportation routes, as well as the opening of Jiaolai Canal (胶莱运河) in the Yuan Dynasty, typified and characterised this period of developing prosperity. It was also during this period that national belief in the Sea Goddess Mazu (妈祖), later known as Tianhou (天后), developed and spread in China and abroad—beliefs which still actively perform a very important role in today’s modern society. The exact number of temples of Mazu spread across the world is difficult to calculate due to their multiplicity but, to illustrate this, it is generally said that there are between 1500 and 2000 sites located in Taiwan and the mainland of China alone, besides those in the many countries abroad in which there are Chinese expatriate communities.

Period 5: the Ming (明) and Qing (清) Dynasties

The fifth period comprises the Ming (明) and Qing (清) Dynasties (1368–1840 B.A.). In this period, because of the vast development of the maritime silk routes, coastal seaports and cities increased in number and prosperity. The great voyages to the western oceans lead by Zheng He (郑和) in 1405–1433, in the early Ming Dynasty, were the largest maritime expeditions ever mounted. The remains of these great voyages are extensive, distributed along China’s coasts and territorial waters and abroad.

Period 6: the western influence, 1840–1949

The sixth period is the period of change that resulted from the influence of the West from 1840 to 1949—approximately one century—during which China’s maritime culture dispensed with many aspects of tradition and turned instead to modernisation. As a result, the long history of Chinese maritime tradition increasingly became marginalised as a heritage. In addition, the specific maritime characteristics of the changing period are complicated. Taking the engineering constructions and buildings of ‘the modern seaports’ at that time as examples, we can identify ‘foreign-occupied ports’, ‘treaty ports’, ‘leased ports’, and ‘self-opening ports’. All of these are now heritage sites that invoke different feelings and identifications for Chinese people from those of the traditional heritage sites. However, they provided the foundations for the rise of China’s present-day ports and large-scale port constructions serving international trade. The achievements and shortcomings of this period should be both analysed and discussed. It should be noted, however, that the heritage examples of this period are also important for their value in contemporary maritime development.⁵

⁵ See Qu Jinliang(ed.): *A Compiled Long History of Chinese Maritime Culture* (vol.1, vol. 2, vol.3, vol.4, vol.5), Qingdao: Ocean University Press, 2008

Observations on the current conditions of maritime heritage in China

Current conditions

In 1972, UNESCO's General Conference, meeting in Paris at its 17th session, established *The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. Its preamble encapsulated its rationale in the following terms "the cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction". To date, 177 countries—including China in 1985—have approved the convention.

Since the 1980s China has seen further modernisation with policy priorities focusing on coastal regions. In particular these policies have resulted in:

- Opening coastal cities to the world.
- Increasing population and enlarging urbanisation of coastal cities.
- The fast industrialisation and material modernisation of coastal areas.
- The further globalisation of economic development along the coast, as well as on, in and under the seas.

While in this sense development has been achieved, conversely traditional cultures and ways of life are in direct economic competition with modernisation. Vast numbers of maritime heritage sites have been threatened or destroyed as a result of the illegal activities that occur in the process of modernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation. In particular China's maritime heritage is at risk from activities such as:

- Illegally wrecking or covering historical maritime remains both in and outside of coastal cities and suburbs.
- Illegally occupying and damaging historic beaches and bays.
- Illegally transforming traditional features and functions of maritime regions and communities.
- Illegally changing the traditional living environments and means of living in maritime heritage areas.
- The illegal 'industrialisation' of maritime heritage sites by 'the owner'—the business enterprises who once invested money to 'rebuild' heritage constructions.
- Illegally removing underwater relics from wrecked ships.

Achievements in addressing current conditions

Dealing with these conditions, more and more people—including scholars, government officials and local residents—are recognising the seriousness of this problem. Chinese national government and non-government action contesting the loss of cultural heritage has had considerable success in recent years; five examples are described below.

The first achievement is a series of new or revised national laws and regulations that include the protection of maritime heritage to prevent its destruction. In 1989, the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China Concerning the Administration*

of the Work for the Protection of Underwater Cultural Relics (《中华人民共和国水下文物保护管理条例》) proclaimed in Article 1: "these regulations are formulated in accordance with the pertinent provisions of the Law of the People's Republic of China for the Protection of Cultural Relics for the purpose of strengthening the administration of the work for the protection of underwater cultural relics". Following this in 2002 was the revision of the *Law of the Peoples Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics* (《中华人民共和国文物保护法》)—the original having come into effect in the 1950s.

The second main achievement is coordination and cooperation with international organisations, such as UNESCO, in order to protect cultural heritage, including maritime heritage. China has signed almost all the relevant UNESCO laws, treaties, agreements and conventions. For instance, as mentioned earlier, in 1985 the Chinese Government ratified UNESCO's *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. To date 660 locations across the world have been selected as World Heritage sites. These include 35 in China—the third largest number of World Heritage sites in the world. China is now one of the 21 members of the World Heritage Committee. In 1996 the Chinese Government also ratified the *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)*. In 2001, China took part in the drafting of *The UNESCO Convention on Underwater Cultural Heritage* that is now actively in preparation for its approval.⁶

The third achievement takes the form of national political governance actions applying a series of institutional policies and practise methods. In 2005, the *Notification of Strengthening the Protection Work of Cultural Heritages* was promulgated by the State Council of the People's Republic of China, and included the determination of the second Saturday in June of every year as National Cultural Heritage day. 2006 saw the establishment of the Leading Group of National Cultural Heritage Protection. Recently, in 2007, the Political Report of the Communist Party of China's (CPC's) 17th National Congress stressed the protection of cultural heritage. The above actions highlight that Chinese national governance combined with policies will further strengthen the national direction of protecting China's cultural heritage.

The fourth achievement is the awareness by more and more non-government organisations and individuals—including common citizens and scholars—of the value and importance of China's maritime cultural heritage. For instance in 2004, when an illegal enterprise of housing and estates in Fuzhou City endangered the port-city's heritage; 62 professors petitioned against the development, garnering significant media interest and active concern regarding the protection of maritime heritage in the historical seaport city.

The final achievement is the national investment in the research and protection of cultural heritage by bodies such as the National Natural Science Foundation of China, the Foundation of National Human and Social Science, and many local government foundations. This investment by national and local governments has resulted in a greater interest by academics and practitioners, such as engineers, in researching the protection of cultural heritage, including maritime heritage.

However, despite these achievements, a gap still exists in relation to specialised laws and regulations covering the pro-

⁶ See: Zhao Yajuan: *On the UNESCO Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage*, Xiamen University Press, 2007.

tection of maritime heritage. This is largely the result of maritime heritage having its own unique characteristics, encompassing not only the ocean and the inland, but also existing within and outside of China. As a result, both research and protection need unique theories, methods, policies and technology. In particular this requires national and international cooperation.

Where to from here? Suggestions for policies and actions

Because of the complexity and uniqueness of maritime heritage, it is important to emphasise that while a series of national policies—including specialised laws and regulations on the protection of maritime heritage—are likely to be established, it will also be necessary to develop an action strategy so that the full potential of national policies can be realised.

In addition to the further revisions and adaptations of national and international laws and regulations currently governing maritime heritage, I propose the following recommendations:

- The protection of maritime heritage should be regarded as of equal importance to modern developments in national policy. In particular, national policy should regard the continuation of traditional maritime culture as a foundation and key component of modern maritime development. In essence, the nation should regard the protection of maritime heritage as being just as important as maritime economics, maritime science and technology and the marine environment.
- National policy should ensure the protection of maritime heritage through a system of rewards and penalties to enable the maximum effect of laws and regulations upon the actions of the government and people. In general, all illegal activities that are currently threatening maritime heritage and history are aimed at achieving economic benefit. As such, penalties for such activities must be higher than their illegal gains—and must be prosecuted at every opportunity.
- National policy should encourage and reward the development of archaeological and technological advances in maritime heritage protection. There is currently a gap in development with the need for significant investment to cover the vast quantity of heritage sites that need to be researched and protected.
- Quality researchers and technicians should be encouraged and rewarded through national policy to undertake maritime (especially underwater) heritage research and protection activities. Given the specialised nature of the work and the limited funding to pay researchers and technicians; students in related fields should be also encouraged and rewarded to increase their involvement. As is known, the large number of Chinese maritime heritage sites far outweighs China's current research and education efforts.

- National policy should actively encourage and reward international and regional cooperation regarding research into, and the protection of, maritime heritage sites—not only because maritime heritage (particularly underwater heritage sites) often exists in trans-border locations, requiring cooperation with other countries; but also because international cooperation will benefit all partners, enabling them to learn from each others' policies and technologies, to exchange information and materials, and to avoid overlapping investigations so as to speed up the development of maritime heritage protection both nationally and internationally.

Conclusion

Like many countries with a long and rich maritime history, China possesses a vast array of maritime heritage sites. Today these heritage sites are in danger of being destroyed by illegal activities as a result of modernisation, urbanisation, globalisation and industrialisation. While national and international laws, regulations and conventions play an important role in the protection of cultural heritage there is still a lack of specialised laws and regulations available to specifically address the protection of maritime cultural heritage. It is not enough to rely on these existing national and international laws, regulations and conventions or to establish national and international policy. To ensure the full potential of these will require both a national action strategy and national, regional and international cooperation.

There can be nothing more disastrous for a nation that to lose its cultural identity. Maritime cultural heritage provides a link to the past, allowing people to recall and understand their maritime history, facilitating a transfer of knowledge from experience and wisdom to modern maritime development. It is therefore essential that we continue to recognise and protect our maritime cultural heritage. Recent efforts by governments, non-governmental organisations and individuals have seen some key achievements in this area. However, there is still a long way to go—more effort and investment is still needed to secure China's maritime heritage for future generations.

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