

Interpreting the Mute Shipping Languages: the Decorations on Ancient Vessels in China and the U. K.

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ABSTRACT

Vessel decorations recorded the shifts of oceanic aesthetic and beliefs in different countries and regions, therefore serving as valuable cultural relics and tangible shipping documents. By comparing the boat eyes and colorful paintings on the Chinese vessels with the figureheads on the British ones, this article explored the ornaments on the ancient ships in China and the U.K. which played an important role in the eastern and the western shipping history. The results showed: Both China and the U.K. valued the shipping spirit of enterprise, courage and loyalty, but differed in their understanding of the relationship between humans and the ocean, and therefore developed different approaches in their exploration of the ocean. The contrastive studies unveiled the deep roots for the varied navigational traditions and beliefs in the two countries and proposed new perspectives in researching the eastern and western shipping cultures.

1. Introduction

Vessel decorations, including the interior and the exterior ones, developed from the ancient tradition of decorating ships with painted eyes, figureheads, colorful patterns, flags, and even weapons. Mute and lasting, these ornaments have recorded the shifts of the oceanic aesthetics and beliefs in various countries and regions along history, thus becoming popular artworks and valuable documents of nautical cultures. China and the U.K. have both contributed significantly to the development of shipping industry in the East and the West, whose ancient vessel decorations can serve as most telltale archives for tracing the evolution and characteristics in the navigational cultures and spirit. Duan (2020:22) defined navigational spirit as the ideology, values and attitudes formed in the process of sailing, which lend the unfailingly psychological support and drive the unremitting pursuit of the sailors.

In ancient China, the boat eyes, and the colorful carvings and paintings on the bow and stern of ships were the most prevailing ornaments, while in the U.K., the figureheads played critical roles and were deemed among the most valued ones on vessels. However, little studies have been conducted on those ship fixture, and even less

on the contrastive studies between the two countries. The previous researches on Chinese boat eyes and hull paintings have mostly focused on their historical development, and feature descriptions, with little discussion on navigational beliefs or values reflected in them (Cheng, 2003; Zhu, 2009; He, 2019). The studies on British figureheads attached more importance to their history, carving skills and the introduction of the most famous ones, but little about the nautical culture and spiritual connotations they embodied (Tarver, 2007; Pulvertaft, 2014; Mills, 2020). To unveil the history and nautical connotations lying behind those ancient decorations, and characteristics of the Eastern and the Western navigational cultures, this article intends to conduct a contrastive study on the above-mentioned Chinese and British ship ornaments, thus offering reference for further appreciation of those glimmering navigational cultures.

2. Chinese Hull Carvings and Paintings

China's history of building ships on a large scale can trace back to more than 3000 years ago, and reached maturity in the Ming and Qing dynasties (between 14-19th century A.D.). Four major sea-going types have been distinctly developed in the Qing dynasties based on their appearance and performance, known as "the four ancient Chinese ships": 1) the Fu Ship (a junk vessel with pointed bottom, "fu" meaning "happiness"), which was the main type of vessels used in General Zheng He's fleets during his seven visits to the South Asia and Africa between 1405 and 1433; 2) the Sha Ship (a flat-bottom vessel with a square head and a square tail, "sha" meaning "sand", here referring to its good performance on shallow waters, and the most famous ones are those built in Shanghai, which bears Sha Ship on its city emblem to manifest the history; 3) the Guang Ship (a large vessel with pointed bottom, "guang" meaning "Guangdong Province", referring to its origin in South China), generally made of Chinese fir, featuring good seaworthiness and endurance; 4) the Niao Ship (a vessel with pointed bottom and protruding bow, "niao" meaning "bird", for its bow shaping like a bird's beak), light but strong, sailing quickly along the coasts of Eastern China.

Although varying in the appearance and functions, the four ancient Chinese ships are all decorated with fascinating boat eyes and colorful hull carving and paintings, representing China's rich maritime culture and beliefs.

2.1 The Boat Eyes

The boat eyes are a pair of decorative fish eyes on both sides of the bow of ancient Chinese ships, usually in black and white. There are many legends about its origin, among which two are the most popular: one is derived from the nautical belief: In ancient China, ships were called "wooden dragons" or "water dragons". People believed that the eyes of wooden dragons were very critical for navigation for they could guide the ship to avoid getting lost, and also frighten away the sea monsters. At the same time, the eyes are also used to identify the direction of

sailing, thus reducing collision; another is from folklore: There was once a girl named "Hai Nan"(means “sea daughter”) in Zhejiang Province, who saved a magic fish and the fish’s grateful tears turned into a pair of smart eyes. Hai Nan fixed the smart eyes on her boat, which could then quickly and precisely locate fishes in the sea and became the pilot boat of local fishing fleets (Zhu, 2003: 9-10).

In accordance with the boat’s function, the direction of the eyes varies: those of the fishing boat look downward, symbolizing that they can locate the fish and shrimps in the sea; those of the merchant ship look straight forward, praying for the ship sailing smoothly on the waves; the official ship is gazing upward, highlighting its noble status; for a special paper ship, "Shen Ship"(means “Deity Ship”), the eyes also looking upward, indicating that the Gods will drive away the evil and plagues. For the painted boat eyes, the carpenter just draw the eyes and paint them; for those carves ones, the carpenter needs to carve wood into two hemispheres, and then nail and paint them. Camphor wood, solid and termite-proof, is often the first choice for making boat eyes. As the critical part of the wooden dragon, the ship-owner used to attached great importance to the production and installation of the ship's eyes, usually involving 3 steps: the first step, "setting the color" (the making of the eyes). When the eyes have been carved, the ship owner will be invited to tie the colored silk threads, corresponding to the Chinese Five Elements of gold, wood, water, fire, and earth, to the silver nails that are to fix the eyes. The second step, "sealing the eyes" (that is, the covering of the eyes). After having the eyes installed, the owner will put gold, silver or coins into the holes reserved behind the eyes for good luck, and then cover the eyes with red cloth or red paper. The third step, “wooden dragon opening eyes”(the lifting of the eye covering). On a chosen auspicious day of the



Fig 1. The green eye-brows

zodiac, the ship owner excitedly lifted the red silk or red paper to the sound of firecrackers, revealing a pair of big round eyes of the wooden dragon, and the new boat then sailed into the water, indicating the wooden dragon starting its sea voyage, driving monsters away, and ensuring safety and prosperity(He, 2019: 104).

The Niao Ship in Zhoushan, Zhejiang Province, the east of China, has a distinctive decoration. The ship hull is black, and the very front of the bulwarks, the parts above the boat eyes, are painted green, which look like curved crescent-shape eyebrows, so this ship is nicknamed "the green eyebrows"(see Fig 1.). The Guang Ship in Chaozhou City, Guangdong Province of the south China, has the front section of the bulwark painted red, and the black-and-white boat eyes are fixed on the middle rear of the bulwark, which wins it another name, “the red-headed ship”.

2.2 Other Carvings and Paintings on the Bow and the Stern



Fig 2. Lion-head & the rising star

Ancient Chinese sea-going ships preferred to decorate the hull with colorful carvings and paintings, which were mostly located on the bow and the stern. Those on the bow are generally auspicious carved or painted beast heads, such as the tigers and lions with mouths wide open, bringing their faces more menacing (see Fig 2.); the stern transom plate is more spacious, therefore decorated with various fixture, such as auspicious animals, flowers and grass, human figures, landscapes, and even auspicious expressions, etc.. The animals mostly are mythical rocs and eagles soaring with stretched wings, for warding off the evil and misfortunes. In addition, there are also dragons, phoenixes, sea loach (generally considered as the nephew of the dragon), and Yin-and-Yang Fish (shaped like a Taiji map of Yin Yang) all representing good luck in Chinese folklore. Rich techniques are employed in carving, including relief, openwork and double-sided carving, as well as some mosaics.

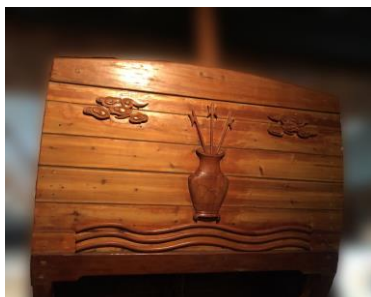


Fig 3. Stern carvings

The most popular flower decoration is lotus for its religious connotation of purity, nobility and auspice. In Buddhism, Buddha and other gods are often depicted as sitting on lotus platforms. In Fig 3., three halberds stand in the vase (pronouncing as “ping sheng san ji”) (“瓶生三戟”), which in Chinese sounds similar to “being promoted three times in a row”). The vase is surrounded by surging waves and rolling clouds, all symbolizing good luck in Chinese nautical culture.

Figure paintings include the two famous fairy seniors of "Fu" (“福”, means happiness) and "Shou" (“寿”, refers to longevity), the Eight Immortals crossing the sea (“八仙过海”), Goddess of Mercy (believed to be the guardian of sailors), as well as Monkey King, Nezha on firing wheels, General Yue Fei (1103-1142), General Guan Yu (162-220), General Zhao Yun (?-229), Warrior Wu Song (1026-1055) and other fairy or historical Chinese heroes embodying courage and loyalty.

For landscape paintings, such as the rising sun on sea, and waterfalls flowing down the mountains, together with the auspicious expressions, mostly with meaning of "good luck" "smooth journey" "happiness and prosperity", etc.. It is also common practice to decorate the transom with the shipowner's name or the ship's name, especially for the merchant ship, starting with “Jin” (means “Gold”), and then words for good luck and fortune, such as Jin Quansheng (“金全胜”, means “all victory”), Jin Manfa (“金满发”, means “good fortune”), Jin Taifeng (“金泰丰”, means “big harvest”), Jin Wanli (“金万利”, means “good pay”), Jin Ping'An (“金平安”, means “peace”), etc. (Dun.& Cheng, 2004: 49; He, 2019: 106).

3. The Figureheads in the U.K.

The figureheads, also known as “wave-breaking spirit(s)”, are ornamental wooden statues of humans or animals at the bow of the vessels, varying as the full-length, three-quarter or bust-length. Till the beginning of 20th century, the figureheads had been customary practice in the western shipping industry, for they symbolized the spirit and soul of the vessels, and embodied the beliefs of the shipowners and the sailors that those guardian carvings could guarantee the ships safe sailing.

As the largest maritime museum in the world, the British National Maritime Museum hosts the biggest collection of figureheads, numbering nearly 100, mostly taken from British naval and merchant ships. "Cutty Sark", the historic tea clipper, displays more than 80 merchant ship carvings. In the 17th century, due to the tight control over naval expenditure, the sizes and themes of the Royal Navy carvings became relatively simpler, while those of the merchant ships remained more varied, mainly depending on the shipowners' pockets. British figureheads mainly can be divided into six categories: literary, military, animals, royal, political, and other figures. The following three representative types will be introduced: literary figures, military figures, and animals.

3.1 The Figureheads with Literary Background

As two important sources of Western marine culture, Greek mythology and Western folklore are also the inspiration of the ship's carvings, which comprised the majority of British naval and merchant figureheads.

Poseidon. As the sea god in charge of the ocean and one of the twelve main gods of Olympus, Poseidon is second only to Zeus in authority. Poseidon is a metaphoric figure for the powerful and unpredictable characteristics of the sea, and also a personification of the ancient Greek’s understanding of the sea (Ma, 2019).

Ajax. Derived from Homer's epic "*The Iliad*", , the Greek hero is tall, muscular, and strong enough to lift his enemies with only one hand. Ajax became the perfect symbol of masculinity in ancient Greece because of his bravery, stoicism, and self-sacrifice.



Fig 4. Nannie the witch

Nannie. She is a famous legendary character in Western folklore, appearing in the poem "Tam o' Shanter" by Scottish poet Robert Burns, recounting a drunken man, Tam o' Shanter, stumbles into a dance of warlocks and witches late at night. Entranced by the beautiful Nannie in her linen shift, called cutty sark, Tam exclaims “Well done, Cutty-sark”, which sets him in the angry chase of the hellish legion. Finally Tam manages to escape Nannie’s vengeful wrath at the cost of his horse’s tail. Fig 4. shows Nannie holding a bunch of ponytail in her left hand, vividly replaying the scene of the

relentless chase. This folk story depicts a horrifying ghost scene, and also warns the sailors about the danger of alcohol and women.

The adoption of Nannie is an interesting and paradoxical choice. In British folklore, witches often conjure up

storms at sea to sink the ships and the sailors used to believe woman on board would bring bad luck to the ship. But in Burns' poems, the witches are fearful of wading water. Contrary to the traditional "Victorian angels" of modesty, chastity, and submissiveness, Nannie is a sexy and depraved the witch with a ferocious temper, therefore not an ideal adoption as a figurehead. For multiple purposes, the shipowner, John Willis, chose Nannie as the figurehead, and even named the ship after her favorite short skirt, "Cutty Sark". First, he may wish the vessel could sail as fast as the furious Nannie chasing Tam; second, Burns' warnings about alcohol and women are full of wisdom and humor for sailors at sea (Prichard & Michell, 2020:15-17) .

3.2 Figureheads with military background

As one of the oldest British armies, the British navy reminds of the country's maritime glory in history. There are carvings of many well-known generals from both navy and ground troops, among which the most striking ones are Vice-admiral Horatio Nelson and General Colin Campbell.



Fig 5. Admiral Nelson

Horatio Nelson (1758-1805). A famous British admiral and military strategist, known as "the soul of the British Royal Navy", Nelson was courageous and brilliant in wars. He participated in many battles, such as the Battle of the Nile Estuary in 1798 and the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801, who lost his right eyesight and his right forearm in wars. At the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, the British navy, though with fewer warships, defeated the combined fleet of France and Spain, thus establishing its maritime supremacy for the following 200 years at sea. Fought bravely at the battle, Vice-admiral Nelson was unfortunately shot and died on the flagship, Victory.

Britain held a state funeral for him in London, and from then on, Nelson and the flagship, Victory, have both regarded as the symbol of British naval bravery and loyalty. Many cities in the U.K. have squares or streets named after Trafalgar and Nelson. Many British museums set rooms for exhibiting the documents, statues, and souvenirs of Nelson, such as The National Maritime Museum, the Royal Naval Museum, and the ship museum of "Victory" at the Historic Dockyard in Portsmouth. Fig 5. shows the bust of Vice-admiral Nelson: although with only one eye left, he stares ahead firmly and fearlessly.

3.3 Animal Figureheads

In addition to human figures, animals and birds are also preferred as figureheads. Among them, bulldogs and lions are the most favorite images. The bulldog is representation of Britain, while the lion symbolizes the British royal family. They are traditional themes of British Royal Navy ship carvings.

The British bulldog. This unique breed is stocky, muscular and aggressive. With a strong vice-like jaw, it is brave enough to fight any animals larger than itself and is often used to bate the bull. It is said that if they are

carried to other countries, this species will degenerate. The characteristics of the bulldog embodies England so



perfectly, just like John Bull, the renowned human personification: strength, courage, and perseverance. In the Second World War, Winston Churchill was even projected by the media as symbolic British bulldog stubbornly resisting Nazi Germany. Fig 6. is the carving of British paddle sloop HMS *Bulldog*, which highlights the fierce bulldog with white fangs, its front paws resting on an escutcheon decorated with the Union flag. Its wide collar bears Latin words "*Cave Canum*"(Beware the dog), claiming its keeping for the ship cruising the world in defense of the British interests (Prichard & Michell, 2020:

Fig 6. the British bulldog 95-97).

3.4 Figureheads with Royal Family background

As early as in the 9th century, the British King Alfred the Great established a navy to participate in combats, and the royal family has since become the undisputed commander of the British navy. The title of “the Royal Navy” and the abbreviation “HMS” (His/Her Majesty's Ship) all demonstrate the Royal Navy’s tradition of serving the royal family and Britain. Members of the royal family are the primary choices for the ship carvings of the British Navy, such as Alfred the Great, George III, etc., among which the most exquisite and delicate is the figurehead of “*Queen Charlotte*”, shadowing both the prior ones and those after it, even that of the latest British royal yacht of 1953, the "*Britannia*".

3.5 Figureheads with Political background

Many prominent political figures have also been favored by British ancient vessels as their figureheads, such as the former prime ministers Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) and William Gladstone (1809-1998), the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry (1780-1845), and 1st Duke of Marlborough, John Churchill (1650-1722, the famous ancestor of Winston Churchill), Tipu Sultan of India (1750-1799), etc.

3.6 Other Human Images

In addition to the above five types, there are other choices for British ship carvings, such as family members of the ship owners, clowns, warriors, sailors, nurses and other professionals, as well as personified images of British cities, rivers, wars, etc., which are quite traditional adoptions of the Royal Navy.

4. Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and British Maritime Culture and Spirit

Ship ornaments not only play the role of decorating and protecting the hull, but also serve as mute navigational spokespersons, expressing the beliefs and distinctive navigational spirit of different regions, and conveying the various and profound marine culture. The close examinations of ancient Chinese and British vessel decorations

have exhibited similarities and their own features, which can be summarized into the following three aspects.

4.1 Advocate of Navigational Spirit of Enterprise, Courage and Loyalty

The sea, though full of mystery and danger, also inspires the spirit of enterprise, courage, and fearless exploration in the ocean-adventurers and seafarers. The spirit has long been respected and admired in Chinese and British shipping culture. Many mythological characters daring power and embracing danger are adopted in Chinese hull carvings and paintings, such as Monkey King, Nezha and the Eight Immortals, and many other Chinese patriotic heroes such as the generals of Yue Fei, Guan Yu, Zhao Yun and Warrior Wu Song, also represent the seafarers' moral pursuit.

Similar to that, among the British figureheads, the witch Nannie symbolizes mystery, danger and excitement of the sea; Warrior Ajax embodies adventure-seeking and perseverance; Admiral Nelson exhibits bravery in battles and loyalty to his country, never hesitating to sacrifice his life; the prison-reformer Elizabeth Fry fully illustrates the spirit of innovation and enterprise.

4.2 Different Philosophies on the Relationship between Human and the Ocean

The practical activities of exploring the ocean have intrigued the philosophical thinking in the East and the West. Chinese nautical philosophy prioritizes the unity of man and the nature(including the ocean), and advocates the harmonious coexistence of the two, which can be expressed as: **confronting to cohabit**. On the one hand, humans learn and imitate the things in the natural world. By carving and painting animals, plants and natural scenes on ships, ancient Chinese expressed their hope of obtaining resources and wealth from the ocean with the least disturbance, and could coexist peacefully with the ocean and the spirits. The design of the Niao Ship conveyed the wish that the vessel could sail as freely and fast as a bird; the traditional Chinese boat ornaments all demonstrate people's respect to the power of the ocean and their desire of living in harmony with it. On the other hand, the ancient Chinese contested to survive. The ancient Chinese navigators also believed that things counter-balanced each other and so they employed strategies to keep the dangers at bay, such as fixing the vessel eyes to identify the course and avoid getting lost, carving eagles, tigers and lions to quell ghosts and exorcise disasters, and painting the sea loach (the nephew of Dragon King) , and the yin-and-yang fish (with the mana of water, fire, wood, gold, and earth) to confuse the spirits in the sea, so as to survive the danger. These all reflected the ancient Chinese nautical philosophy: all things have spirit, and wisdom and modesty can help achieve the peaceful coexistence with the sea.

The ancient British nautical philosophy firmly believes that human beings have the power to conquer the ocean, emphasizing the importance for human beings to constantly reflect on themselves, overcome their own weaknesses, and make themselves even stronger. The relationship between man and the sea is: **to conquer or to**

be conquered. Human beings are undoubtedly the prevailing theme of British figureheads. No matter legendary, or historical figures, or the nature, they all adopted the form of human beings. Even lions, bulldogs, and fish had been endowed with human spirit. Nannie reminded the sailors to stay away from the danger of alcohol and woman; the three Greek Furies symbolized rationality and justice, holding a torch in one hand (symbolizing suspicion and evidence, as well as revealing evil in the light) and a dagger in the other (symbolizing the punishment for the wrongdoers) (Zhong, 2018: 237); Ajax the warrior is a warning for arrogance and recklessness, who once fought with Odysseus for the Achilles' magical armor but failed. In burning rage, Ajax slaughtered livestock in bunches, and later killed himself when realizing his own brutality. The tragical Ajax dawned on the navigators of self-reflecting and rationality. The city of London and the river of Thames incarnated as emotional male and female, and the bulldog personified the British, all of which conveyed the British nautical philosophy and belief that men are the masters of the nature.

4.3 Varied Ocean Development Awareness

Chen & Xue (2006: 87) pointed out that from the perspective of ocean awareness and the maritime history, China's marine culture is a circular near-coastline one (emphasizing more on self-sufficiency and focusing less on outward expansion), while the Western marine culture, represented by the U. K., tends to be a linear offshore culture (advocating outward expansion by constantly pushing sea frontiers afar, and seeking new marine resources and wealth).

As an agriculture-dominant country, the ocean was mainly the farming land of fishery resources and the channel for maritime trades and cultural exchanges to the ancient Chinese. China had always been advocating the rational exploitation of the ocean to avoid "drying up the sea and fishing resources". The innovation of shipping technology is more for ensuring the safety of navigation and fishing. In line with it, the primary appeal of ship decorations is for safe sailing, fishing harvest and commercial prosperity. Furthermore, those renowned overseas voyages in China's history aimed mostly at peaceful cultural and religious exchanges rather than at territorial expansion, such as Monk Jianzhen's six attempts to visit Japan in the Tang Dynasty from 742 to 754 to promote Buddhism, and General Zheng He's seven voyages to the East Asia and Africa in the Ming Dynasty between 1405 and 1433.

Because of its unique geographical location, Britain had developed a strong sense of ocean exploitation in early years. After the great geographical discoveries in the 15th and 16th centuries, Western Europe began to explore and colonize the New World, and the process of its ocean development was also integrated with competing and plundering, bearing the spirit of Mars, the Greek God of War. Marshal Colin Campbell, "the hero of colonialism", the figurehead of the British sailing barque "Lord Clyde", embodied the spirit of colonial expansion;

Poseidon, God of the Sea, was aggressive and powerful, having fought with other gods frequently over the territories (Ma, 2019: 171); the lion symbolized the power and majesty of the British royal family, as well as the British ambitions for overseas expansion.

5 Conclusion

The ancient ship decorations, silent but eloquent, have recorded the nautical culture, beliefs and spirit of different eras and regions, reflecting the evolution in navigational aesthetics and decorative skills. This paper compared the most distinctive vessel decorations on the ancient Chinese and British ships: boat eyes, the carved and painted ornaments at the bow and the stern, and the figureheads, and analyzed their development and profound connotations. Through the interpretation of the navigational spirit, the philosophical thinking on the relationship between man and the ocean, and the different ocean-development awareness, the findings provided new perspectives for contrastive studies of Chinese and British navigational beliefs and cultures.

Those decorations' transition from the ship fixture to art work, inspire and intrigue generations of scholars, writers and artists. A systematic study of them, which roll shipping history, philosophy, art and literature into one, has far-reaching significance in promoting the exchange and mutual understanding of shipping cultures in various countries. At present, the studies in this field is still quite limited, calling for more attention to this field. So more audiences could learn and appreciate the stories and glories in the Eastern and the Western maritime world.

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