

# Archaeological discoveries unveil Maritime Silk Road

By JIANG BO

Shipwrecks, ports and commodities have been the key to research on the Maritime Silk Road (MSR). Since the 1950s, underwater archaeology has made remarkable progress, shocking the public with incessant discoveries, particularly those that arose from shipwrecks. Archaeological discoveries from well-known shipwrecks such as the Nanhai One (Northern Song Dynasty), the Shinan (Yuan Dynasty) and the Belitung (Late Tang Dynasty) have given a new insight into this ancient trade route between China and the rest of the world.

The shipwrecks along the MSR in the China Seas are represented by the Quanzhou shipwreck, the Nanhai One wreck and the Huaguangjiao One wreck. These shipwrecks date to the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, periods when maritime trading carried out by ancient China reached its peak. Archaeologists found that the Nanhai One wreck and the Huaguangjiao One wreck were fully loaded merchant ships that sank after they departed from China, while the Quanzhou was a seagoing sailing junk that sank on its way back to Quanzhou (in present-day Fujian Province) from Southeast Asia. These finds are telling evidence of how the MSR looked during the Song and Yuan eras.

## The Nanhai One wreck

The discovery of the Nanhai One shipwreck was one of the most significant underwater archaeological discoveries along the MSR. This shipwreck was found off the coast of the Shangchuan and Xiachuan islands of Southern China in 1987 and later removed from the water in 2007. Now it is preserved in a pool-type container called the “Crystal Palace” in the purpose-built Maritime Silk Road Museum at Guangdong Province. The use of a water tank for holding the whole body of the ship in the salvage of the Nanhai One wreck is a pioneering approach in underwater archaeology. Follow-up excavations of the shipwreck and



A dish produced in Changsha kilns found in the Belitung shipwreck  
Photo: FILE

its artifacts are in process.

Research findings suggest that the well-preserved vessel might have been a fully loaded merchant ship leaving a domestic port for a foreign country. The remaining body of the vessel is about 22 meters long, 10 meters wide, with 14 cabins. Various artifacts were stored in an orderly fashion in cabins. A lot of personal belongings were also found in the cabins, including pieces of gold jewelry such as rings, bangles and necklaces, as well as gold leaves, jade-ware, *yin ting* (a type of silver coin mainly used during the Tang, Song and Jin dynasties) and lacquerware. A wooden jewelry box found from the port side of the vessel was a big surprise, containing over 70 items of gold manufacture. The Nanhai One wreck, reported to have over 140 thousand artifacts on board according to the latest study, is almost like an underwater museum.

## The Huaguangjiao One wreck

Different from the Nanhai One wreck and the Quanzhou shipwreck, the Huaguangjiao One wreck discovered off the coast of the Xisha islands was a Chinese merchant ship that sank on an ocean route.

This wreck, built during the Southern Song Dynasty, was discovered in 1996 about three meters below the surface near the Huaguang Reef. It was the first time that China conducted high-seas excavation work. More than 10,000 artifacts were collected at the site, pieces that ranged from porcelain and ironware to bronze mirrors and copper coins. Among the items recovered were some exquisite porcelain yielded from the Jingdezhen kilns in Jiangxi Province and kilns in Fujian Province. The archaeological findings from the Huaguangjiao One wreck provide important evidence of an already established direct maritime route between China and Southeast Asian countries that passed by the Xisha islands during the Song and Yuan dynasties (before this most of the ships to Southeast Asia had had to sail along the coast due to underdeveloped navigation).

## The Shinan

The Shinan shipwreck discovered in 1975 off the Korean coast has epitomized how maritime trading was carried out over Northeast Asian seas in ancient times. As a result of excavation, approximately

20,000 pieces of ceramic-ware, 2,000 objects of metal, stone and red sandalwood, and over 28 tons of Chinese coins were found from the shipwreck. This Shinan was identified as a vessel departing from the Qingyuan Port (located in present-day Ningbo, Zhejiang Province) by the inscription “Qingyuan” on an excavated bronze weight. The Shinan was generally believed to depart from China to the port of Hakata (now Fukuota) in Japan in 1323 and sank off the coast of Sinan in present-day South Korea.

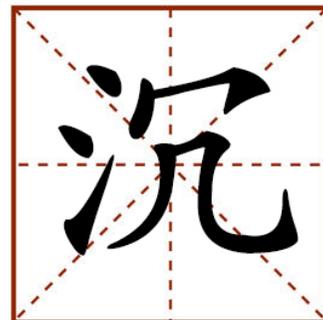
## The Belitung

Java is the crossroads where the Indian Ocean meets the Pacific Ocean. Shipwrecks found around Java have attracted wide attention. The Belitung (literally, black stones) shipwreck was discovered by a German salvage company in 1998 off the coast of Belitung island, Indonesia. The main body of the ship was found under a layer of sediment which preserved the remains of the wooden vessel, a situation which prevented the wreck from being lost to the effects of corrosion and shipworms. Considering the techniques of construction of the vessel, the Belitung was an Arabian dhow, the body of which was stitched together with the fiber of coir-palms rather than iron nails to secure the planks. Among the excavated artifacts, archaeologists found a bowl produced in kilns in Changsha, Hunan Province, inscribed with a date, “The Second Year of the Baoli Reign” (or 826). The ship was thereby identified as having sunk around the early 9th century.

Included in the cargo were items of varying purposes, including 10 gold pieces, 24 pieces of silverware, 18 pieces of *yin ting* and 30 bronze mirrors. There were also special items found, including a 0.1-meter-high octagonal footed gold cup with images of non-Han Chinese dancers on its sides. Each piece of *yin ting* weighed 2 kilos. More than 67,000 pieces of porcelain were discovered in the Belitung, 98% of which were produced in China. The majority of the porcelain, about 56,500 pieces, was produced in Changsha kilns, and the main types of “ware” were in the form of bowls. Three underglaze-blue-and-white dishes found within the wreck are considered to be the earliest known intact blue-and-white porcelain-ware dating to the Tang Dynasty (618–907). Archaeologists believe that they were produced in Gongxian kilns at Luoyang (in present-day Henan Province), and were shipped via the Grand Canal to the port in Yangzhou (in present-day Jiangsu Province), where they were loaded on the Belitung heading towards the Indonesian seas.

The article was edited and translated from Guangming Daily. Jiang Bo is a research fellow from the State Underwater Cultural Heritage Protection Center under the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

## CHINESE WISDOM



chén

This character usually means “sink” when used as a verb. When used as an adjective, it means “deep, heavy or calm.” As an adverb, it means “very or quite.”

沉醉不知归路

chén zuì bù zhī guī lù

*Chen* is an adverb, meaning “very.” *Zui* means “to be drunk.” *Bu zhi* means “do not know” and *gui lu* refers to the way back home. This term means being too drunk to know one’s way home.

This is a line of the *ci* poem, “To the Tune of Ru Meng Ling” by Li Qingzhao (1084–1155), China’s greatest female poet, whose works, though it survives only in fragments, continue to be as highly regarded as it was in her own day. “Often remember the Creek Bower at twilight,/ Too drunk to tell the way home./ Having had our fill,/ Returned at night by boat/ And blundered deep into the lotus blooms./ Hurry through,/ Hurry through,/ Startled a beach of herons and gulls” (trans. Ren Zhiji and Yu Zhengze).

Li was born into a literary family and produced well-regarded poetry while still a teenager. In 1101, she married Zhao Mingcheng, a noted antiquarian, but their marriage was cut short in 1129 by his death during their escape from the Jurchen’s takeover of Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). Li spent the rest of her life in exile and alone. Li’s works, paralleling her life, are intensely personal. Her earlier works dealt with joy and the later pieces she wrote after her husband’s death and her exile portraying a somber, grief-stricken tone.

“To the Tune of Ru Meng Ling” is a poem of memory, probably composed when Li was just married. In this poem, with unrestrained joy, Li looks back on her past in her hometown when she was a young lady. After a joyful gathering in a brookside pavilion, Li returned home by boat as night fell. She was drunk and couldn’t find her way home, and the boat plunged deep into the thickets of lotus blossoms. Then she recalled the amazing moment when she tried to scull the boat out of the lotus thicket, a flock of herons and gulls resting on the sand were startled and rose to the sky. Li depicted a cheerful moment of a young lady with a striking diction, reflecting on the carefree vitality of her early life.



An octagonal footed gold cup (left) found in the Belitung shipwreck and an exquisite and amazingly well-preserved gold necklace (right) found in the Nanhai One shipwreck  
Photo: FILE