

The Belitung Shipwreck Controversy

Lu Caixia

FOR TWELVE CENTURIES, a historical treasure lay untouched beneath the Gaspar Strait, one of the northern entrances to the Java Sea, unknown even to the inhabitants of a nearby island who ply its turquoise waters. It was not until one August day in 1998 that fishermen searching for sea cucumbers stumbled upon the amazing cache – the largest collection of Tang Dynasty artefacts ever seen, entombed in the oldest Arab vessel found in East Asian waters.

The Belitung shipwreck cargo, as it was later named after the island which lay a mere three kilometres away, has now encountered a fierce storm of another kind after emerging from its watery grave. The precious cargo – some 60,000 glazed bowls, ewers and other ceramics, as well as lead ingots, bronze mirrors and intricate gold and silver vessels – which survived the sea currents for more than 1000 years and even the political turmoil following the fall of Indonesian President Suharto, is now caught in a maelstrom of strong objections, by some American and European archaeologists and museum representatives, to its exhibition in the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery (part of the Smithsonian). These objections were expressed earlier this year to protest the Smithsonian's plans to exhibit the Belitung artefacts in Washington, D.C. They worry that the excavation was not conducted in accordance with the ethics governing underwater heritage and that the artefacts were excavated by a private company without proper recordings being made.

In 2005, Seabed Explorations, engaged by the Indonesian government in 1998 to conduct the excavation, sold the bulk of the cargo to Singapore for US\$32 million. Subsequently, the Singapore Tourism Board, the National Heritage Board of Singapore and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery collaborated to mount the exhibition *Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds*. After it opened in February this year at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore, complaints by archaeologists, both within and outside the Smithsonian as well as museum associations, led to the postponement of the planned exhibition in Washington. They pointed out that the Smithsonian is bound by an ethics statement specifying that members shall “not knowingly acquire or exhibit artefacts which have been stolen, illegally exported from their country of origin, illegally salvaged or removed from commercially exploited archaeological or historic sites.”

Prominent among those who objected to the exhibition was Elizabeth Bartman, president of the Archaeological Institute of America, who issued a strongly worded statement saying that while the excavation and disposition of the materials may be technically “legal”, involvement by the Smithsonian in the exhibition “will serve to blur the distinction between bona fide archaeology and treasure hunting”, putting it “in the indefensible position of aiding those who believe that antiquities are a commodity to be mined for personal or corporate financial gain.”

Echoing her concerns, a group of archaeologists and anthropologists from the National Academy of Sciences wrote to Smithsonian Secretary Wayne G. Clough, cautioning that hosting the exhibition would “severely damage the stature and reputation” of the institution. Among the signatories of the letter was Dr. Robert McC. Adams, former Secretary of the Smithsonian. Some critics cited the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, which outlaws trade in marine heritage. However, others were quick to point out that the Convention only came into force in 2009 and that neither the United States nor Indonesia had ratified the Convention.

Left: In 1998, fishermen hunting for sea cucumbers stumbled upon an astonishing find – the largest collection of Tang dynasty artefacts ever seen. Photo by Dr Michael Flecker.

Not all experts critical of the commercial nature of the Belitung cargo's excavation object to its exhibition. James Delgado, director of the Maritime Heritage Program at the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, is one critic who argues for a thoughtful exhibition that not only highlights the historical value of the exhibits, but also clearly indicates what cannot be learned, interpreted or shared as a result of looting and contrasts what non-commercial excavations have achieved in offering a more scientific approach. “I see such an exhibition as a tremendous opportunity to educate and inspire discussion on the subject,” he said. Nevertheless, Delgado thinks that the debate is not simply about the Belitung. He said: “In many ways the questions have more relevance in terms of discussing what happens with new and important shipwreck discoveries in Indonesia. I believe, as do many of my colleagues, that significant shipwrecks should be excavated scientifically, with adequate funding to recover all artefacts and to preserve, study, and interpret them.”

Seabed Explorations founder Tilman Walterfang defended the company's work on the Belitung, arguing that immense pressure to save the shipwreck in the face of heavy looting and a volatile political climate dictated the pace and manner in which the artefacts were retrieved. When first approached by the Indonesian government for help, commercial benefit was the last thing on his mind; it became an emergency operation to save as much of the cargo as possible before it fell prey to looters.

Paul Johnston, curator of Maritime History at the Smithsonian questions the reasoning that political, legal or cultural conditions in Southeast Asian countries justify a less than professional approach. He asked those who raised this argument: “Do they suggest that international professional ethics, or the principles of scientific archaeological investigation, should not apply, because somehow things in Southeast Asia relating to culture or money are different?” He also feels that circumstances differed from country to country and case to case, pointing out that Cambodia has signed the UNESCO Convention, and that problems in conducting proper underwater archaeology do not apply to the region as a whole.

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Twentieth Annual World History Association Conference in Beijing

THE WORLD HISTORY ASSOCIATION (WHA) held its Twentieth Annual Conference at the Global History Center of Capital Normal University (CNU), Beijing, 7-11 July 2011. The conference drew 600 conferees from 36 nations, including 200 scholars and teachers from the PRC. To underscore its global reach, the conference is held outside the USA every third year, with the last three international venues being London (UK), Ifrane (Morocco), and Seoul (Korea).

China was selected not only for always having been a major force in the dynamics of world history, but also because of a rising interest in global history at a number of universities in the country. Capital Normal University was chosen for its location in the historically and culturally important city Beijing. Also, its Global History Center is the single most important institution for advanced global history studies in the PRC, and the conference organizers obtained enthusiastic and generous support from its president, Dr. Liu Xincheng. The conference's two themes, “China in World History,” and “World History from the Center and the Periphery”, were also chosen for their relevance to the host nation.

English and Chinese were the official languages of the conference, with English translations of Chinese papers, and simultaneous translation services provided for the three plenary sessions. The opening ceremony consisted of addresses by Professor Emeritus of History Qi Shirong, past-president of CNU and founder of CNU's Global History Center; the Honorable Hao Ping, the PRC's Deputy Minister of Education; and Dr. Alfred J. Andrea, president of the WHA.

President Liu offered the first of two keynote addresses on the “Global History in China”, which focused on the manner in which global history is becoming part of the educational curriculum in China, while Dr. Craig Benjamin of Grand Valley State University in Michigan, USA, presented the second keynote address “Considerable Hordes of Nomads Were Approaching: The Conquest of Greco-Bactria – The First ‘Event’ in World History.”

A total of 103 panels were held, with contributions by more than 500 people. A sample of just five panels suggests the range of topics discussed: “The Internationalization of Chinese Art”; “China and the World Trade System in Historical

Perspective”; “Using Primary Sources to Teach China in the Twentieth Century”; “Silver, Silk and Things: Connecting Commodities beyond Centers and Peripheries”; and “Beyond the Edge of Empires: Locating Edges and Centres in Eastern Eurasia.”

Three topics that generated an especially high level of exchange were: the relevance of the Silk Roads in the history of Afro-Eurasia down to circa 1500 CE; the usefulness of the “center and periphery” model to the histories of Afro-Eurasia and the Americas over the past six millennia; and the manner in which global history is taught in the schools of China and the USA.

The WHA recognized two “Pioneers of World History” for their long-standing contributions to world history scholarship and pedagogy. Dr. Liu Xincheng was honored for his pioneering work in promoting and serving as an exemplar of first-rate global history studies in China, while Dr. Jerry Bentley was recognized for his 21 years as editor of the *Journal of World History*, the WHA's flagship academic publication, which has, under his direction, become known as the leading journal in the field.

The WHA, founded in 1982, with its headquarters in the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, is dedicated to promoting research in and the teaching of a macro-history that transcends single cultures, regions, and polities. It currently enrolls approximately 1200 members, representing 36 nations. Also known as *global* history in many nations outside of the USA, world history focuses on, but is not limited to, such phenomena as contact and exchange on a significant scale between cultures, the analytical comparison of two or more civilizations or cultures, and the study in a macro-historical manner of a phenomenon that had a trans-regional or global impact. The next Annual WHA Conference will be held in Albuquerque, New Mexico from 27-30 June 2012. Its dual themes will be “Frontiers and Borders in World History” and “Indigenous Peoples in World History.” Further information regarding the upcoming conference, as well as the entire program and paper abstracts of the 2011 conference, are available from the WHA's website.

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Projections of Paradise

Ideal Elsewheres in Postcolonial Migrant Literature

Edited by
Helga Ramsey-Kurz with
Geetha Ganapathy-Doré



Paradise is commonly imagined as a place of departure or arrival, beginning and closure, permanent inhabitation of which, however much desired, is illusory. This makes it the dream of the traveller, the explorer, the migrant – hence, a trope recurrent in postcolonial writing, which is so centrally concerned with questions of displacement and belonging.

Projections of Paradise documents this concern and demonstrates the indebtedness of writers as diverse as Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Cyril Dabydeen, Bernardine Evaristo, Amitav Ghosh, James Goonewardene, Ramesh Gunasekera, Abdulrazak Gurnah, Janette Turner

Hospital, Penelope Lively, Fatima Mernissi, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, M.G. Vassanji, and Rudy Wiebe to strikingly similar myths of fulfillment. In writing, directly or indirectly, about the experience of migration, all project paradises as places of origin or destination, as homes left or not yet found, as objects of nostalgic recollection or hopeful anticipation. Yet in locating such places, quite specifically, in Egypt, Zanzibar, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, the Sundarbans, Canada, the Caribbean, Queensland, Morocco, Tuscany, Russia, the Arctic, the USA, and England, they also subvert received fantasies of paradise as a pleasurable land rich with natural beauty.

Projections of Paradise explores what happens to these fantasies and what remains of them as postcolonial writings call them into question and expose the often hellish realities from which popular dreams of ideal elsewhere are commonly meant to provide an escape.

Contributors: Vera Alexander, Gerd Bayer, Derek Coyle, Geetha Ganapathy-Doré, Evelyne Hanquart-Turner, Ursula Klumick, Janne Korikka, Marta Mamei-Michalkiewicz, Sofia Muñoz-Yaldies, Susanne Pichler, Helga Ramsey-Kurz, Ulla Rathscher, Petra Tournay-Theodotou.

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Excavation of the Cargo

An information kit produced by UNESCO noted that “the cargo of the *Geldermalsen* was looted for the commercial value of its artefacts and with little regard for its archaeological, historical and scientific importance.” The same can hardly be said of the Belitung excavation. Unlike the cases of the *Geldermalsen* wreck in the 1980s and the *Tek Sing* wreck in 1999, where the artefacts were auctioned off and dispersed, research conducted during the excavation of the Belitung culminated in published catalogues and made possible the accurate reconstruction of a ninth century dhow, the *Jewel of Muscat*, which sailed from Oman to Singapore.

Excavation of the Belitung began in September 1998 and was conducted over two seasons, disrupted by the monsoon. It was said that the Indonesian Navy patrolled the site during the monsoon break but was unable to stop looters entirely. During the second season, which began in April 1999, Dr Michael Flecker, a marine archaeologist with two decades of experience in Southeast Asia, came on board to supervise the operation and detailed records of the wreck and excavation were kept. Findings were catalogued, photographed *in-situ* and described, while their locations were mapped and plotted. According to an article written by Flecker in *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology*, even during the first season, the site was gridded and records were kept of the ceramics recovered.

Significance of the Belitung Cargo

Apart from the obviously significant vintage of the artefacts, the collection is more importantly a treasure trove of potentially new information on a range of subjects including historic trade on the Maritime Silk Route, ancient ceramic production, shipbuilding and even on the history of tea.

The timbers and style of the ship suggested that it was built somewhere near the Persian Gulf. This provided confirmation of documentary evidence of maritime trade between China and the Arab world from as early as the ninth century, and the vast number of Changsha ceramics also offered major new insights into Tang China’s industrial capability. As Wang Gungwu, a leading expert on Chinese history wrote in an introduction to a catalogue compiled for the exhibition: “There probably is no other find in the Nanhai (South China Sea) that could enlighten us further about Sino-Arab entrepreneurship and China’s industrial productivity.” Or as John Guy, curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art wrote: “This complex cargo, sourced from widely dispersed areas across China, is a barometer of the level of the commercial development that gained momentum during the Tang dynasty (618-907), when industrial-scale production emerged for the first time.”

Several high quality pieces were also found, including three very rare dishes decorated with cobalt blue, which are among the oldest complete blue-and-white ceramics made in China ever unearthed. Other astonishing finds include an octagonal cup made of solid gold, the cost of its material alone estimated to be worth ten years’ salary for a low-ranking Chinese official at that time, and a magnificent ewer over a metre tall, with a dragon-head stopper.

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Walterfang argues that not all commercial operators should be tarred with the same brush either. “Everything we did you would not expect from greedy treasure hunters,” he said. He added that the subsequent conservation work took six years to complete, after which a 750-page research report and another 150-page publication dedicated to the Changsha artefacts were commissioned and financed by his company.

Julian Raby, director of the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, found it noteworthy that Walterfang wanted the cargo to be kept as a single entity when scouting for potential buyers. While recognizing the concerns, he dismissed those who simply objected to any commercial involvement and yet were unable to propose feasible alternatives. He said: “I think if nothing had been done, we would have lost a very important historical record. Many archaeologists who complained did not understand the importance of the cargo or the actual circumstances at the location of the shipwreck.”

According to Nia Naelul Hasanah Ridwan, a maritime archaeology researcher with the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries in Indonesia, the National Committee for Salvage and Utilisation of Valuable Objects from Sunken Ships (PANNAS BMKT) was formed in the late 1980s to deal with the issue of salvaging sunken treasures. Due to the rampant looting of unprotected shipwrecks and difficulties at government level to manage the salvaged artefacts, regulations were established to allow private companies to survey, explore and remove shipwreck artefacts. To complicate matters, management of PANNAS BMKT changed hands from the Minister Coordinator of Politics, Law, and Defence to the Minister of Marine Affairs and Fisheries around the same time the Belitung was salvaged, leading to changes in views as to whether the artefacts should in fact have been sold. According to Walterfang, the Indonesian government decided on a onetime payment of US\$2.5 million and the return of the cargo excavated from the *Intan* (another tenth century shipwreck found in the Java Sea), as a final settlement for its share.

However according to Nia, there were also different opinions in Indonesia as to whether private companies should be allowed to survey, salvage, remove and sell anything from shipwrecks found in Indonesian waters. Although a law was passed in 1992 to mandate the protection of cultural heritage objects, earlier regulations allowing private companies to explore shipwrecks remain in force. Looting continues to be a serious problem for Indonesia’s underwater cultural heritage, and culprits are not just private companies, but also local fishermen who hunt for artefacts and even iron from old ships to supplement meagre incomes. “We always try to raise public awareness through workshops, focus group discussions, seminars and training whenever we go to the field ... Our audiences are the local government and local people such as villagers, local representatives, religious figures, divers, fishermen, youths, NGOs etc,” she said.

While seemingly irreconcilable differences remain, some feel that the ongoing debate is nonetheless a positive development and important for the future of maritime archaeology. Former Foreign Minister of Singapore George Yeo, who played a pivotal role in obtaining the Belitung cargo for Singapore, sees it as necessary for the development of greater international supervision of the salvage of old shipwrecks. “Singapore is all in favor of greater international oversight of the excavation of old ships. Even if international agreements cannot be forged or enforced, moral pressure should be brought to bear. It is a good thing that the Tang (Belitung) Cargo should be the subject of discussion about the ethics of maritime archaeology,” he said.

John Miksic, an expert on Southeast Asian archaeology, feels that regional collaboration could help overcome problems of a lack of resources and expertise. He notes that “there is a duplication of effort right now and Southeast Asian countries should cooperate”, suggesting that they could have one coherent policy which takes note of the UNESCO Convention, and possibly joint underwater research teams rather than separate teams for each country.

Pamelia Lee, a former senior consultant of the Singapore Tourism Board who also played a major role in bringing the artefacts to Singapore, feels that all those who believe in the protection of underwater heritage must find more realistic and workable solutions. She asked: “It begs the question: could Tilman Walterfang, the explorer salvager, be following equally high conservation and documentation standards, but carrying out the operation in accordance with the circumstances?” One suggestion she made is to grade commercial companies for professionalism, which separates treasure hunters merely in the game for profit from those who are more responsible and who fulfil the objectives of UNESCO and the scientific community. She said: “In my view, it is not the ‘hat’ that is worn, UNESCO or non-UNESCO, that is important. What is important is the integrity of the individuals leading the excavation as well as the depth of thinking and patience of the financial backers.”

The realities of Southeast Asia are harsh. With a dearth of public funds available for maritime archaeology, wrecks discovered have either to be left to looters or excavated in conjunction with commercial interests. There seems to be no other option at the present. However, the degree to which a scientific element is stressed during the excavation can distinguish what is desirable from what should be condemned.

The excavation of the Belitung has been acknowledged as an admirable example of what can be achieved under difficult conditions in Southeast Asia. What distinguished the company that carried out the Belitung project from some other commercial operators is that the ship structure itself was properly recorded, the cargo was kept together rather than dispersed, and the finds were well conserved, studied, catalogued, and published. A global exhibition was created and a reconstructed dhow based on information gleaned from the excavation sailed across the Indian Ocean. Few non-commercial excavations have achieved comparable results with a project of this scale and complexity. It is difficult to imagine how this particular project could have been financed or organized without commercial involvement.

Dr Michael Flecker, maritime archaeologist and supervisor on the Belitung excavation, sums up the situation thus: “In an environment where most wreck-sites are threatened with looting or outright destruction, the priority must be to document those sites and the artefacts recovered from them before too much information is lost. The disposition of the artefacts after thorough documentation, while of great importance, should not dictate policy, for if commercial transactions are banned outright, the finders will be driven underground, and there will be no hope of archaeological intervention. Archaeologists, governments and salvors must co-operate. Archaeologists must be more tolerant, more flexible, for there is so much to lose. Governments and salvors must be made aware of the importance of good archaeological documentation. From a purely pragmatic viewpoint, the cargo from a properly documented wreck-site is worth more financially than the cargo from a looted site. Until cultural awareness gains the upper hand over profits and politics, this may be the best argument to ensure that irreparable damage is not done to the non-renewable resource of historic shipwrecks in Southeast Asia.”

The Belitung Tea Bowl in the Eyes of an American Scholar

(by Professor Victor H. Mair from the University of Pennsylvania)

The educational and historical value of the collection is simply enormous, and those who have called for the cancellation of the exhibition are, in effect and in fact, denying access to the wealth of information embodied in the Belitung shipwreck. As a remarkable case in point, the Belitung *chazhanzi* (“tea bowl”) constitutes the single most important and solid datum for the history of tea in the Tang period and arguably for the history of tea in general. So vital is this unique object from the Belitung shipwreck that it became the thematic logo for our entire book (*The True History of Tea*, written by myself and Erling Hoh), yet it is only one out of roughly 60,000 artefacts preserved and conserved by the excavators. I shudder to think that, were it not for their swift, yet rigorous and careful actions, this inestimably precious artefact might well have been lost forever to the depredations of callous looting and the vagaries of ocean currents. When we multiply the significance of this one bowl several thousand-fold, we can get a sense of the diminution that would have resulted if the Belitung shipwreck had not been rescued by the decisive actions of the excavators. Consequently, it should be obvious that the detriment to human understanding of the past would be of incalculably tragic proportions.

Future of the Cargo

Those who have worked on preserving, studying and exhibiting the cargo generally remain optimistic that its significance will not be diminished whatever the outcome of the debate on its display.

In spite of the uncertainties, risks and doubts surrounding the decision to acquire the cargo for Singapore, Pamelia Lee believes that it was a worthwhile effort because of the vast potential that this held for historical research and public education. She said: “While there is a wealth of information on the Overland Silk Route, there is far less information on the Maritime Silk Route. I hope the collection will change this imbalance in future.”

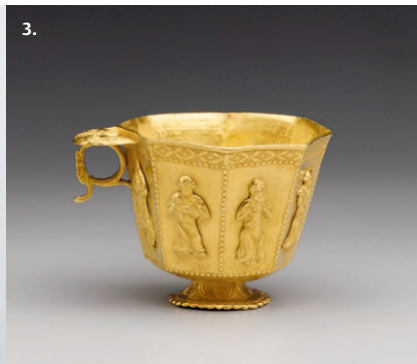
Meanwhile, in spite of the Smithsonian postponement, the Singapore Tourism Board said that planning for the world tour is ongoing, yet declined to reveal possible venues. As for the question of a permanent home for the Belitung artefacts, the National Heritage Board of Singapore confirmed that part of the collection is to be permanently exhibited in Singapore at a national museum.



1.



2.



3.



4.

1: This magnificent ewer draws on older metalwork examples, while the incised design originated in West Asia.

2: One of the three earliest known intact examples of blue-and-white ware, all found in the Belitung shipwreck.

3: An octagonal gold cup, adorned with Central Asian figures.

4: A Changsha bowl with the Chinese characters for “tea bowl” inscribed.

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