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## Role of Chinese Junks in Maritime Trade Relations between India and China (AD.1200-1500)

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**Abstract:** This paper highlights the role of Chinese junks in maritime trade relations between India and China, from thirteenth to fifteenth century. Chinese junks, the most advanced and spacious vessel played a vital role in facilitating the maritime trade relations between India and China during these centuries. None of the trader or merchant thought of sailing to and from China in any vessel other than junks. The technological advancement and dramatic increase in size of junks took place under Sung dynasty of South China (1127-1279). This subsequently led to transportation of all goods and commodities, exchanged between India and China, mostly through them. The role of Chinese junks became the main factor behind the brisk trade relations between India and China during this period.

**Index Terms:** India, China, Junks, Maritime trade

### I. Introduction

Ship building technology forms the backbone of maritime trade and naval power. Throughout history, it has been seen that every country who wanted to participate in maritime trade paid much attention in developing its science of navigation and shipbuilding. The commercial relations between India and China in ancient times were primarily carried through caravan routes in absence of any good navigational technology. Traders and merchants used to face lot of difficulty while going through lands and deserts where they were more vulnerable to robbery and nomadic tribal attacks who were either looting their wealth or levying toll on them. However, by the thirteenth century with the construction of technologically advanced junks, the external trade between India and China was primarily being conducted through sea-routes.

## II. Material and Methods:

For the study of role of Chinese junks in maritime trade between India and China, analytical approach has been adopted. This study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources are used in the form of European, Chinese, Persian and Arabic texts. Most of these primary sources are travelogues and court chronicles. Secondary sources are used in the form of modern texts and research articles published in different journals.

## III. Discussion:

While tracing the history of junks we find that these were used as sea-going vessels as early as the second century AD in China. But at that time they were not much spacious or technological advanced. Junks underwent major transformations under Sung dynasty of South China (1127-1279) who initiated the process of constructing big junks which were well equipped and more technologically efficient. It was from this period that China started directly participating in the Indian oceanic trade and Chinese junks started sailing to the Indian shores. Hence, it marks the beginning of intense commercial relations between the two nations and continued up to mid-fifteenth century. Earlier, China's seaborne trade was dominated by the merchants of the Middle East who used to supply the commodities of the east to western countries in their own vessels.<sup>1</sup> [Jung-Pang, 1955] The reason for these changes under Sung was that when they were driven out from the northern China by the Jurchen Jin dynasty (1115-1234 AD) in 1127 AD, they were left out with reduced domain of southern China, which included the littoral from the mouth of the Yangtze to the border of Tongking.<sup>2</sup> [Hudson, 1970] Therefore, they began to pay attention towards developing their alternate resources and showed extreme concern in encouraging and regulating the overseas trade of China by sponsoring the massive ship-building and harbour improvement projects. The changes which occurred during this period in China have been referred to as the 'medieval economic revolution'.<sup>3</sup> [Wade, 2009] They made their port cities open to all foreign countries and accordingly, many ships and merchants belonging to different lands visited these places.<sup>4</sup> [Rockhill, 1914] They furthered the publication of treatises on tides and currents and maps of foreign countries, which subsequently made the travels across the Indian Ocean less perilous and more profitable.<sup>5</sup> [Jung-Pang, 1955] At the same time in 1119 AD, we find the first mention of compass in the Chinese history of navigation. Since this period witnessed frequent wars fought at the coast of the Yangtze River between the Sung and Jurchen Jin dynasty at first and then between Sung and Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 AD), the Sung for the protection of left out provinces of southern China established first imperial navy in the history of China and started constructing big technologically advanced junks for conducting foreign trade.

Eventually, by the thirteenth century, two types of vessels that dominated the Indian Ocean were 'junks' and '*dhows*'. Junks dominated the eastern side of the Indian Ocean and *dhows*, the western side. But junks were technologically more advanced than *dhows*. Such was the reputation of these junks that no traveller thought of sailing to and from China in any vessel other than junks.<sup>6</sup> [Digby, 1982] There is unanimity among scholars regarding the views on the size of junks as almost all travellers

mentioned junk as the most spacious and large ship. Wassaf, the fourteenth-century Persian writer, while mentioning the vastness of junks, says, “They sail like mountains with the wings of the winds on the surface of water”.<sup>7</sup> [Elliot and Dowson, 2001] Fir timber or spruce was being used in the construction of these ships.<sup>8</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] While the European ships were single-masted and Arabian or Indian ships (*dhow*) had a mainmast and a mizzen mast, on the other hand Chinese junks had four or five masts and additional two masts, if they were dismantled in stormy weather then these additional masts could be set up.<sup>9</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Unlike Arab and Europeans shipping of the period, junks had a single central rudder.<sup>10</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Four decks were being constructed on the ship which contains apartments, cabins and rooms for the use of the merchants. Cabin in the ship contained apartments and lavatories<sup>11</sup> and had a door which could be bolted by the occupant who may take with him his female slaves and women.<sup>12</sup> [Battuta, 1976] The sailors let their children live in these quarters and they would sow greenery, vegetables and ginger in wooden tubs.<sup>13</sup> [Battuta, 1976] Marco Polo states, “Junks had 50 or 60 cabins, wherein the merchants abide greatly at their ease, every man having one to himself.”<sup>14</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903]

Chinese junks played an unparalleled role in maritime trade relations between India and China. The Sino-Indian commercial relations were primarily conducted through sea-routes with the construction of technologically advanced junks from thirteenth century. Therefore, all the commodities and rarities that were exchanged between India and China were transported through these vessels. At that time China was the big consumer of Indian spices and rarities. In fact, during this period, India’s spice trade with east was more brisk than its trade with the west. We are being informed by Marco Polo that the ships going towards western countries from Malabar were not one-tenth of those going towards the eastward direction.<sup>15</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] China was importing huge quantity of pepper from Malabar ports through these junks. Each Chinese junk was indeed of great size that they were capable of carrying 5,000 or 6,000 baskets of pepper, with smaller ships attached to them, carrying 1,000 baskets each.<sup>16</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Usually three smaller types of ships used to accompany big junks, which were called as *nisfi*, *sulsi* and *rubi* by Ibn Battuta.<sup>17</sup> [Battuta, 1976] Marco Polo states that one of the Kublai Khan’s custom officer told him that the quantity of pepper introduced daily for consumption into the city of Hang-chow (Kinsay of Marco Polo) amounted to 43 loads, each load being equal to 223 lbs.<sup>18</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903]

Chinese began making trade ceramics in the ninth century and their export to overseas greatly increased from the thirteenth century due to the construction of junks.<sup>19</sup> [Karashima, 2009] Owing to the fragile nature of ceramics, their transportation through caravan routes might have been difficult and hence they were primarily transported through junks from thirteenth century. It remained major Chinese export to India during this period and were much valued in India. It was being used in the kitchens of Delhi Sultans.<sup>20</sup> [Digby, 1982] It was from the ports of Bengal that porcelain used to enter the markets of Delhi.<sup>21</sup> [Tansen, 2003] Archeological evidence shows the spread of porcelain fragments from coastal Bengal to as far as Fatehpur Sikri.<sup>22</sup> [Tansen, 2003] There was a widespread belief in Asia that the pale sea green celadon ware of China could reveal the presence of poison in food, so kings and nobles mostly preferred to use these utensils.<sup>23</sup> [Chaudhuri, 1985] Chau Ju-kua, while referring to the junks leaving

China, says, “Greater part of commodities consists of ceramics, the small pieces packed in the larger, till there is not a crevice left”.<sup>24</sup> [Chau Ju-Kua, 1911] Annually, a large number of porcelain selling merchants used to visit India. Chau Ju-Kua mentions that they used to divide the space of ships among themselves and store goods therein.<sup>25</sup> [Chau Ju-Kua, 1911] Each man was getting several feet of space for storing his goods and at night, he used to sleep on top of them.<sup>26</sup> [Chau Ju-Kua, 1911] Porcelain wares were mainly manufactured in the cities of Zayton and Canton as Battuta says, “Porcelain is made in China nowhere except in the cities of Zaitun and Sin-Kalan”.<sup>27</sup> [Battuta, 1916] Battuta, The remains of these wares are found everywhere, even as far as Morocco.<sup>28</sup> [Hudson, 1970] In India, many sherds of Chinese porcelain of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have been found. Concentration of findings was more at ports, acting as centres of transshipment or distribution and at the points of consumption, such as, palaces, forts and temples.<sup>29</sup> [Guy, 1993] At first, the celadon’s of Tang and Sung China and later the characteristic blue and white pottery of the Ming dynasty dominated the market.<sup>30</sup> [Hudson, 1970]

Although, silk was being supplied to India through caravan routes even before the construction of junks but its quantity must have increased with the coming of junks to the Indian shores. Marco Polo informs us, cloths of silk with gold embroidery were being supplied to India through junks.<sup>31</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Marco Polo, Travellers like Wang Ta-Yuan, Fei-Hsin, Ma Huan, also mentions about the export of silk to India through junks.<sup>32</sup> [Rockhill, 1915] Chinese cocks which were extremely big and look like ostriches were also exported to India through these vessels and Battuta saw them at Quilon.<sup>33</sup> [Battuta, 1976] The beautiful bamboo plates, a specialty of Hang-chow (Khansa), were imported to India by these ships.<sup>34</sup> [Battuta, 1976] It seems that horses which India used to import from Western Yunnan (Tali fu of Carajan i.e Yunnan), a province of China, were also being supplied through these ships.<sup>35</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Copper was also being exported from China through these ships.<sup>36</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Marco Polo informs us that it was exported in such quantities as to be used as ship’s ballast.<sup>37</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903]

Junks usually used to sail from three ports of China viz Canton, Zyton and Hang-chau to Indian ports. Zyton was considered as one of the greatest ports in the world of commerce.<sup>38</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] At this harbour Marco Polo says, “I assure you that for one shipload of pepper that goes to Alexandria, or elsewhere, destined for Christendom, there came a hundred such and more too”.<sup>39</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Here junk’s charge for freight was 30% on small wares, 44% on pepper, 40% on sandalwood and other bulky goods.<sup>40</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] On seeing the large number of *junks* at Zayton, Battuta says, “I have seen there about one hundred first-class *junks* together; as for small ones, they were past counting”.<sup>41</sup> [Battuta, 1916] Canton (Sin-ul-Sin or *Sin-i-kalan* of Battuta) was also an important port city of China. While seeing the junks so vast and large in number at Canton, Odoric, the Christian missionary to China, says “Indeed all the Italy hath not the amount of craft that this one city hath”.<sup>42</sup> [Odoric, 1866] It had finest bazaars and one of the largest was the porcelain bazaar, and from it China-ware was being exported to the other cities of China, India, and Yemen by means of Junks.<sup>43</sup> [Battuta, 1916] We are informed by Ibn Battuta that junks were built mostly in Canton and Zyton.<sup>44</sup> [Battuta, 1976]

The western Indian ports where Chinese junks and merchants used to visit mostly were Quilon, Calicut and Eli (Mount Deli). These were the chief ports of Malabar. Battuta at the time of his visit to Calicut saw thirteen Chinese junks anchoring there and in one of them he travelled to China.<sup>45</sup> [Battuta, 1976] He attests the presence of Chinese merchants at Calicut by saying that they had already booked their return ticket in a junk, in which he was interested to go to China.<sup>46</sup> [Battuta, 1916] Eli was an imposing city which had been well built and was situated on a large bay where Chinese ships enter.<sup>47</sup> [Battuta, 1976] There was no proper harbour in this city, but there were many great rivers with good estuaries, wide and deep.<sup>48</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Chinese junks and ships of other countries that were coming here in summer used to depart as soon as possible because of having only roadsteads and sandbanks.<sup>49</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Quilon or Kollam was the most important trading centre for trade with China. Battuta says, “On the whole Malabar, this city lies nearest to China and to it travels the Chinese for the most part”.<sup>50</sup> [Battuta, 1976] It was in fact the first port at which the Chinese junks used to touch on reaching India and most of the Chinese merchants were visiting it.<sup>51</sup> [Battuta, 1916] The merchants from China, Arabia, and Levant were coming here with their ships and merchandise and would make great profits both by what they used to import or export.<sup>52</sup> [Marco Polo, 1903] Battuta mentions another port of Malabar where Chinese ships used to come is Pantalayini Kollam (Fandarina).<sup>53</sup> He says, “It is a port where Chinese used to moor their ships for the winter (rainy season)”.<sup>54</sup> [Battuta, 1976] Wassaf also adds Mabar to the list of ports where Chinese junks laden with the rarities used to come.<sup>55</sup> [Elliot & Dowson, 2001] Sonargoan, was also being visited by Chinese *junks* and Battuta boarded in one of them when he left for Java from Sonargoan.<sup>56</sup> [Battuta, 1976]

The first half of the fifteenth century was very important in terms of commercial relations between India and China. It was the period when the use of Junks for trade and commerce reached its zenith. It was right after the accession of Yung-lo, the third Ming emperor, in 1405 that the trade missions exploring the shores of the Indian Ocean were being sent. Yung-lo displacing his nephew was in great need of enhancing the prestige of his empire by bringing back “tribute of rarities” from foreign lands.<sup>57</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] The tributary trade was more common to Chinese statecraft and was part of Confucius's ideology. The Confucian ideal of the Chinese Emperor as “the rightful supreme ruler of the world, the unique bearer of the *Mandate of heaven*,” meant that he should not only govern directly the central land of China, but also receive a formal homage and payment of tribute from the kingdoms of the “outer barbarians” in recognition of his supremacy.<sup>58</sup> [Hudson, 1970] Therefore, Yung-lo initiated these expeditions and Cheng ho, was an imperial admiral of these voyages and Ma Huan was his secretary who collected the commercial and geographical information in his book *Ying-yai-sheng-lan*. Extensive preparations were needed for these large scale naval expeditions, and the main prerequisite was the efficient junks. Indeed, it was only because of junks that such large naval expeditions became possible. Fleets were made up of fifty or even hundred ships of different sizes belonging to different classes to suit the requirements in hand.<sup>59</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] The first fleet of 62 junks carrying 28,000 men set out in 1405 and sailed as far as India. Two further voyages in 1407 and 1409 also reached India. The fourth, in 1413, went as far as Hormuz and Aden.<sup>60</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] These naval expeditions gave a strong impetus to maritime trade relations between India and China, and the volume of trade presumably reached a new high level.<sup>61</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] To quote K.S Latourette, “There was uninterrupted

going to and fro and the volume of trade presumably reached a new high point".<sup>62</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] Large number of commodities and rarities were exchanged in the form of tributes during these voyages. Hence the junks used for these naval campaigns were known as "*treasure ships*", because they brought back 'unnamed treasures of untold quantities'.<sup>63</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970]

In these missions, gifts and embassies were exchanged between China and the countries visited by the Chinese fleet. The principal objective behind the first expedition (1405-7) was to visit Calicut and carry out protracted trade negotiations with the local Chettis and *Shahbandar*, who was of Arab origin.<sup>64</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] They stayed at Calicut for about four months.<sup>65</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] In the second expedition (1407-9), the commander of the Chinese fleet erected an inscription at Calicut, to commemorate the intercourse between India and China.<sup>66</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] Other Indian states visited by Cheng Ho's fleet during these seven voyages were Quilon, Kayal, Cochin, Bengal, Nagapattinam, Cannanore, Nicobar islands and envoys were sent to many other Indian states like Jaunpur and Delhi etc.<sup>67</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] Presents of silks with gold decoration, brocades and gauzes were given to the princes and chiefs of the countries visited.<sup>68</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] Presents of coloured silk cloths and paper money was sent to the king of Jaunpur, Ibrahim Sharqi (1402-1440 AD).<sup>69</sup> [Bagchi, 1945] Envoys from these states also accompanied Cheng Ho to Ming Emperor's court with the products from their countries as tribute. Among the return gifts, the African giraffe (*Ki-Lin*), sent by the Sultan of Bengal to the Chinese Emperor Yonglo in 1414, was the most remarkable.<sup>70</sup> [Bagchi, 1945] It was held in great esteem at the Emperor's court, where it created an unforeseen sensation and poems were written on it.<sup>71</sup> [Bagchi, 1945] It has been considered a significant motive in the dispatch of the fifth great Chinese maritime expeditions (1417-1419 AD), which reached the shores of Africa for the first time.<sup>72</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970] To quote Janet Abu-Lughod, "The impressive show of force that paraded around the Indian Ocean during the first three decades of the fifteenth century was intended to signal the barbarian nations that China had reassumed her rightful place in the firmament of nations-had once again become the 'Middle Kingdom' of the world."<sup>73</sup> [Lughod, 1989]

These voyages continued till 1433, then Ming government suddenly abandoned the great naval enterprise, and Chinese junks began to appear less frequently at Indian ports until the arrival of Portuguese who shut out their voyages altogether. In 1436, when the Ming Emperor Cheng-t'ung came to throne, he issued an edict that not only forbade the building of junks for oversea voyages but also cut down the construction of warships and armaments.<sup>74</sup> [Jung-Pang, 1958] Consequently, every naval unit suffered curtailment and some ships were diverted to the non-military uses such as grain conveyance. <sup>75</sup> [Jung-Pang, 1958] Its reason was the rise of the Oirat Mongol power in Central Asia, which was a new challenge to China's inner land frontier.<sup>76</sup> [Hudson, 1970] Therefore, the centre of power of Ming Emperors shifted from south to north. In 1449, they defeated the Chinese in the decisive battle of *T'u-mu* and Emperor Cheng-t'ung was taken as a prisoner.<sup>77</sup> [Jung-Pang, 1958] Hence, the resources which were earlier spent on the maritime trade missions were now reallocated for defending the northern frontiers of China against these invaders.<sup>78</sup> [Hudson, 1970] *Ming shih* (official history of Mings') states that in "Che (Kiang) and in Min (Fukien), the sea defenses

deteriorated to the extent that out of ten warships and patrol boats, only one or two were left”.<sup>79</sup> [Jung-Pang, 1958] Confined to the harbours and rarely used, the junks rotted and were not displaced.<sup>80</sup> [Jung-Pang, 1958] Now the Chinese Junks on the Indian coast was a thing of past, hardly even remembered. The Chinese junks still continued to sail from Canton and Amoy to the south as far as Java and Sumatra. Then gradually Chinese trade was carried on by European ships in Chinese ports-and ultimately in the single port of Canton, where it was confined by Chinese law.<sup>81</sup> [Hudson, 1970]

It seems that Chinese junks influenced the domestic ship building industry of India and junks were also constructed in Bengal in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. These were mostly constructed in Chittagong as Barbosa informs us that some merchants of this place possessed “great ships after the fashion of Meca” (*dhow*), and some others had big junks “which are of great size and carry great cargoes”.<sup>82</sup> [Barbosa, 1921] This was because of the long-term interactions between Bengal and China.<sup>83</sup> [Digby, 1982] Ma Huan also mentions about the ship-building industry of Bengal and says, “Wealthy individuals who build ships and go to the various foreign countries to trade are quite numerous”.<sup>84</sup> [Ma Huan, 1970]

#### IV. Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that junks dominated the eastern half of Indian Oceanic trade from thirteenth to first half of fifteenth century. Chinese junks represented one of the most successful ship designs in history. Junk was technologically the most advanced and seaworthy vessel of its period. China began to directly participate into Indian Oceanic trade only after constructing these big junks and for the first time we hear of presence of large number of Chinese’s ships in Indian shores. Maritime trade remained the dominant form of commerce from thirteenth to fifteenth century primarily because of junks. Owing to the usual difficulties and hazards of long distance land routes that went through mountains and deserts, the use of junks was the best option before the merchants and traders. Junks played a vital role in satisfying the demands and needs of people by supplying commodities in huge quantities. The intense commercial relations between India and China started with the construction of the junks in the thirteenth century and halted with the ban on their construction in mid-fifteenth century under the Ming Emperors.

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- <sup>62</sup> Latourette, K.S, *A Short History of Far East*, Cf. *Ying-yai sheng lan*, J.V.G Mills, (Intro.),p.3
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.27
- <sup>64</sup> *Ying-yai sheng-lan*, J.V.G Mills, p.10; see also Ray, Haraprasad, "Indo-Chinese Diplomatic Relations in Historical Perspective-The South Indian Chapter", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol.61, Part two; Millennium (2000-2001), pp.1093-1103

- <sup>65</sup> *Ying-yai sheng-lan*, J.V.G Mills,p.10
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*,p.11
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*,pp.10-21
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, see also Ray, Haraprasad, *PIHC*, pp.1093-1103
- <sup>69</sup> *Ming she*, (ed.) P.C Bagchi, “Political Relations between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period”, *Vishva Bharati Annals*, Vol.I, Calcutta, 1945, p.104
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-4, Huang, Sheng-ts’eng, *Hsi yang ch’ao kung tien lu*, Portion related to Bengal tr. and ed. by P.C Bagchi, “Political Relations between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period”, *Vishva-Bharati Annals*, Vol.I, Calcutta, 1945, pp.127; Yen, Ts’ong-kien, *Shu yu chou tseu lu*, Portion related to Bengal tr. and ed. by P.C Bagchi, “Political Relations between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period”, *Vishva-Bharati Annals*, Vol.I, Calcutta, 1945, p.130
- <sup>71</sup> Bagchi, P.C, *Visva-Bharti Annals*, p.116
- <sup>72</sup> *Ying-yai sheng-lang*, J.V.G Mills, p.13; see also Digby, Simon, “The Maritime Trade of India”, *CEHI*, p.136. For the first time Chinese fleet reached Aden, Mogadishu, Brava and Malindi.
- <sup>73</sup> Abu-Lughod, Janet, “*Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250-1350*”, New York, 1989, pp.340-345
- <sup>74</sup> Lo, Jung-Pang, “The Decline of the Early Ming Navy”, *Oriens Extremus*, Vol.5, No.2, 1958, pp.149-168
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>76</sup> Hudson,p.166; Lo, Jung-Pang, *OE*, pp.149-168; Digby, Simon, “The Maritime Trade of India”, *CEHI*, p.136
- <sup>77</sup> Lo, Jung-Pang, *OE*, pp.149-168
- <sup>78</sup> Hudson,p.166; Digby, Simon, “The Maritime Trade of India”, *CEHI*, p.138
- <sup>79</sup> *Ming-she*, quoted in Lo, Jung-Pang, *OE*, pp.149-168
- <sup>80</sup> Lo, Jung-Pang, *OE*, pp.149-168
- <sup>81</sup> Hudson,p.167
- <sup>82</sup> Barbosa, Duarte, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa; An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants*, tr. Manuel Longworth Dames, Vol.II, London, 1921, pp.141-145
- <sup>83</sup> For more information, see Digby, Simon, “The Maritime Trade of India”,*CEHI*,p.131
- <sup>84</sup> *Yeng-yai sheng -lan*, J.V.G Mills, p.160