



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# 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 m<sup>2</sup>), 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

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