

Made in China

(400 years ago)

FOUR CENTURIES AGO A TRADING SHIP WAS SUNK OFF THE TERENGGANU COAST BUT ITS CARGO OF BLUE AND WHITE PORCELAIN HAS RESURFACED AND IS NOW THE COOL CHRISTMAS GIFT WITH A TALE TO TELL WRITES DOUGLAS WILLIAMS



The 'Wan Li' was sailing between Guangzhou and Melaka laden with goods when she was attacked and sunk by a Dutch vessel in the South China Sea off Terengganu. The year was around 1625. The 'Wan Li's' Portuguese owners enjoyed preferential trading with the Chinese in the late Ming Dynasty, 1368-1644, and this wrangled with the Dutch not a little.

At the time it was commonly commented that the worst that the Portuguese got from China was still better than the best that the Dutch got. A carrack built for the Portuguese in India by Chinese ship builders, using timber from the Philippines the 'Wan Li' was carrying furniture, fabric, spices and porcelain from across China. These products were to be sold in Melaka and thereafter taken on to Lisbon and the European markets.

In the nearly four centuries since the 'Wan Li' was sunk in 40 meters of water all of the cargo aboard has perished except the blue and white porcelain from ceramics capital Jingdezhen in Jiangxi Province.

In 2000 the Malaysia-based, Swedish marine archaeologist Sten Sjostrand was approached by a local Terengganu fisherman who had found a blue and white ceramic pot in his nets. A veteran of some 10 earlier ship-wreck discoveries in the South China Sea, Sten was familiar with the waters fished by this particular fisherman and he knew what the pot meant. There ensued a three-year-long, painstaking trawl of the sea floor in search of the ship.

"We finally found the 'Wan Li' in an area that we'd scoured twice before," recalls Sten. "Unfortunately the ship had been blown to pieces by



her attacker and her remains now cover an area the size of a football pitch." His immediate reaction was not one of joy but more one of foreboding. "I knew that it meant the beginning of a lot of hard work, books to write and mountains of further research to conduct, it's a huge responsibility."

The previous shipwrecks Sten had worked on spanned each significant period between the 11th century and the 19th century but the important 17th and 18th were absent.

The 'Wan Li' allowed him to complete the jigsaw of the last millennium of South China Sea shipping. "From one piece of porcelain from the 'Wan Li' we can tell a great deal about the whole global economics and dynamics of that time," says the historian who has been in and around Malaysia for 30 years. "Globalization was alive and well back then, trade agreements and protectionism flourished."

Ben Rongen has been working with Sten for many years now. The tall Dutchman is one of the directors of Tradewind Treasures the company tasked with resurrecting

these porcelain paeans to the past. The other director is Ben's wife Jennifer Rodrigo who, in a spookily symmetrical coincidence, happens to be Malaysian but of Portuguese descent. They were first switched on to Sten and his work among the wrecks of the South China Sea while filming a documentary about the "History Hunter" Swede.

Pretty soon the whole business had got under their skin and it began to take over their lives. They gave up their production company and decided to concentrate solely on the blue and white.

"For much of the Ming Dynasty China was closed off from the rest of the world, it was only toward the end, when the 'Wan Li' was sailing, that the west could access Chinese goods again," says the engaging Aussie raised Dutchman. After the 'Wan Li' (named after one of the Ming Dynasty emperors) the Ming Dynasty lasted only another 19 years.

This was the last Chinese dynasty to be controlled by the ethnic Han. China made enormous advances during this age with the completion of the Great Wall, the restoration of the Grand





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Canal (the 1,770 kilometer canal linking Beijing in the north with Hangzhou in the south) and the establishment of the Forbidden City.

With their discovery of how to make porcelain themselves in the early 18th century the European infatuation with Chinese blue and white porcelain began to wane. Subsequently there is a limited amount of Ming Dynasty blue and white porcelain in circulation. Much of the 'Wan Li's' porcelain was further damaged after being sunk by fishermen's dragnets. Sten has donated 30 percent of the intact material from the 'Wan Li' to the Museum Negara here in KL.

Tradewind Treasures sell some complete porcelain artefacts, bowls, plates etc and pieces that feature particular images taken from parts. These include love birds, or the symbol for 'double happiness' or the auspicious lotus. The porcelain is laden with the imagery, meaning and symbolism of the Ming Dynasty.

All Tradewind Treasure pieces are certified as authentic and from the 'Wan Li'. Some are set in silver to create necklaces,

bangles, ear rings and cuff links and most are reassuringly inexpensive. "These pieces of porcelain are beautiful works of art in their own right but they are also a fascinating glimpse into the past," says Ben, formerly a cameraman. Ben and Jennifer, formerly a writer, had no real business experience and no real model to follow. "We just had a passion for the story and the blue and white porcelain, it's been a steep learning curve," says Jennifer.

"I just love to think of the apprentice artist painting each of the panels on a plate, for example, sitting in a studio in Jiangxi Province in Ming Dynasty China," says Jennifer. "Some people say that bringing these things back to life is bad chi but I disagree, I think it's good chi." Jennifer is particularly proud that the Ashmolean Museum shop in Oxford University is among her Tradewind Treasure stockists.

Resurrected from their watery graves these treasures combine a host of elements that make them both endearing and enthralling. They are a blast from the past, a rich talking point and this beautiful 400-year-old blue and white porcelain embodies a tall tale of international trade and adventure on the high seas.

