

SHIPWRECKED

Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds

An edited transcript of Minister George Yeo's opening speech at the launch of "Shipwrecked – Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds" at the Marina Bay Sands ArtScience Museum on 18 February 2011.



Dear friends, and I see so many here, ladies and gentlemen.

Many Chinese believe that if it is intended that you should own something, then you will own it. But if it is not intended that you should own it, then however hard you try, you will never achieve it. Looking back, maybe it is intended that Singapore should own the Tang cargo. Not as a material possession, but as a responsibility.

How it all began

About 8 to 9 years ago, a young German salvager Nicolai Baron von Uexkull wrote me a letter. I was at that time the Minister for Trade and Industry. I looked at it; it did not seem relevant to me, and it went to the out tray. Then I pulled it back and read it again.

He made two arguments that arrested my attention. One, he said that this is a very important wreck, and that it should not be broken up. And two, Singapore is a natural home for the collection. I thought, well maybe he's right. At that time we were about so many free trade negotiations. I reflected that this (Tang Shipwreck) is about trade, in an earlier era of globalization. In fact it was a glorious era, of the Tang, of the Abbasid, of the Srivijaya, or of the Nalanda.

So I asked to see him. He dropped by with pictures. I leafed through them, and I said "Okay

how much?" He gave me some fantastic number. I said I didn't have the money. Because I was Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts for many years, I knew how difficult it was to get money. We never had enough to build museums or galleries, let alone to acquire things. Maybe tourism could provide a peg, because we have got to spend money in order to draw visitors in.

So I passed the idea on to Sentosa, which had small reserves, and to the Singapore Tourism Board, which had some reserves. Sentosa had a maritime museum, but it was not successful. It had to be either closed down or refurbished, but we needed interesting things. Anyway I just left it, because I knew it was going to be a long shot.

Then one day, Ong Beng Seng dropped by my office to discuss some matters. I asked him if he has heard about this wreck, and he said no. I told him to look at it, and I said "Find me a donor". And he did!

Because the Khoo family was establishing a foundation, and they wanted a worthy cause to support. They came back and said they were prepared to stump up half the money. The Singapore Tourism Board could provide the other half from its reserves, and maybe Sentosa could house it temporarily. I did not go to the museums, because I knew they could not bear this burden. Not yet. But they would eventually, because the natural home for this collection is in the museums.

Where was the ship heading to?

Just researching into the objects, the ship, the construction of the ship, the economy of the day, would take years, even decades of research. Even now, after almost 10 years, we still understand so little.

"Where was the ship headed to?" At that time, South-East Asia was Buddhist, Hindu, but many of the pieces were Islamic with Islamic

motifs, so it was probably intended for the Middle East.

“From where did the ship originate? And who were the risk takers?” We know that onboard, there were instruments of a Chinese scribe – Brushes, ink stones, ink. We also know that at that time, the Abbasids having defeated the Tang army in Talas, had acquired papermaking technology from the Chinese. And from there, a huge renaissance took place in the Islamic world, which eventually seeped and “leeches” its way into Europe. But that’s a story for another exhibition.

Singapore’s Collection

So anyway, one of the last things I did before I left the Ministry of Trade and Industry for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was to sign off a little deal that we made with the salvage company. They had run short of cash. They said “Look, we agree to certain terms and you lend us a million bucks, secured against the core items of the collection.” I could not pass this on to my successor, because he would be new to the job, and there would be so many things to worry about, and this would be right at the bottom of his stack. So I signed off and scooted off to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Awhile later, I was told we got the price down to an amount which we thought was not unreasonable. We have quite a collection, but I knew it would be a long time before we could display it adequately.

The Gift

As chance would have it, I was making a bilateral visit to Oman. When I was in Muscat, the Deputy Foreign Minister who accompanied me said, “This is the Sinbad ship which we built.” (It was a) Small ship at the road intersection. I said “You know, we have this Tang cargo. Can you build a replica (of the ship) for us? The wreck is still intact, in shallow waters. We could do some research, and maybe you could build it for us.” I didn’t have the money, but I thought there was no harm asking. It was just important file knowledge. And he said “Yeah, I’m sure we can do it.”

A few months later, he said Sultan Qaboos will build and donate the ship, which in itself is quite a commitment, because this is an ancient ship. How can you be sure that you will be able to reconstruct it? And that is a separate story.

Just to go back, we constructed the design, and did a DNA testing on the wood. We found out that except for the teak, which came from the Malabar Coast, the wood came from Africa. And then when they analyzed the stitching pattern, the seams’ square stitching pattern was still being used for dhow construction in Sohar. So I thought, “Bingo! That must have been roughly the place where the ship was built”.

The Real Value of a Shipwreck

Of course, dhow construction in the Arabian Sea must have gone back a very long time. Apostle Thomas went to India, which we all know. Thomas went there because there was a Jewish community there. And at that time, around Yemen, there was a great civilization built around the Marib Dam, which only collapsed around the 6th century. So there was obviously seaborne traffic which connected the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, to India, to South-East Asia and to China. This is a fact of geography that South-East Asia is between two oceans.

The civilizations of the Great Plains were centered in China, India, Mesopotamia and Egypt. They were the high civilizations, with finely tuned division of labor, hierarchies, rituals, religions and many products and cultural produce. They traded over land, mostly borne on camels, but much more by sea, because ships and boats could carry much more. In those days, the sea was the internet. The moment you touch the water, you’re connected to the far end. And therefore there was a coastal civilization.

So when we look at this wreck, and study the pieces and look at the technology, we construct a hypothesis. Little by little, we learn more. Not only from this wreck, but also from many other wrecks.

Today with technology at our disposal, our ability to map the seabed will become almost perfect. This is crucial, so that the many ship wrecks on the sea bed can be respected, researched into and conserved as if they were imperial tombs in China, in India, in the Middle East, or in Egypt.

There should be international laws against tomb robbery. Every salvage should be done carefully because the value is not in the pieces. The value is in the context. Through the context, we will recover and rediscover the history of

previous eras. And therefore understand more about ourselves.

Singapore: Between two Oceans

Thus I say Singapore owning this, is perhaps not an accident. We are in between the two oceans. We are where the trade winds turn. And all ships from the beginning of time have had to pass through this southern corner of the Eurasian landmass. Here they came, and here they waited till the winds change direction, before sailing in the other direction. It has always been a dangerous journey in the past.

When the Jewel of Muscat left Muscat in February last year, it had no escort; it had no refrigerators, no electricity. It was a dangerous journey. That morning, when I received news that it had launched off, I suddenly felt a chill down my spine. I said "What if that dhow were to sink? And lives were lost?" This would be no small matter. We had taken some precautions, but there were cost constraints. The Navy provided some surveillance for a stretch of the journey, but there was no escort ship.

They arrived safely in Cochin. Then to Sri Lanka where they found the main mast cracked. They had to scurry into the forest to find two tall teak trees, chopped them down and built new masts. And then they sailed across the Bay of Bengal, where they came quite close to a hurricane and almost sank. The crew told me how much they prayed for safety.

When they arrived in Penang, I felt a great flood of relief through me because down the Straits of Malacca, it ought to be quite safe. And so it arrived, in July. Then I thought, when we had that wonderful celebration at Empress Place,

"Why don't we sail to China?" At which point I was shot down by everybody.

Links between the Past and the Future

If you think about it, in those days when a ship launched off, whether it was a Bugis Prahau, a Chinese ship or an Arab dhow, the chances of it returning were not high. Because of that, the coastal communities which produced the sailors had rituals. They learnt to give thanks. When sailors arrived back safely, there was a way to

welcome them and to honor them. A little ceremony like that was organized when the Jewel of Muscat arrived in Singapore. We were so happy too, that the captain's own son was brought here. He had such an emotional reunion with his father.

A project like this has linked, or rather re-linked Singapore to China, to Indonesia, to India, to Oman and to the Middle East. As we research into the different aspects of the cargo, many things will be discovered. Many new links will be created, and what we gain is not just knowledge. What we gain is something profoundly useful for the future.

Above all, (we see) how it is possible, not to tolerate diversity as if the ideal is that we should all be the same. But (we can) see in diversity, the opportunity for exchange, a sort of creativity for wealth. In that cargo, sitting side by side, were Buddhist pieces and Islamic pieces. The mirror, which was an ancient mirror from the Han Dynasty, had the Ying-Yang, and the Taoist hexagram, the Ba Gua. They were all there. It was an age when different religions and different cultures met, and people rejoiced in trade. Those who invested in it, those who were a part of it, derived great wealth.

So in a strange way, though the cargo is about the 9th century, it is also about the 21st century. And therefore I commend it to the world.

Thank you.

Shipwrecked: Tang Treasures and Monsoon Winds

The *Shipwrecked* exhibition relates the story of an astonishing cargo of some 60,000 objects carried from China by a ninth-century Arab dhow, presenting a dynamic tale of trade between China and West Asia along the maritime silk route. The cargo had lain undisturbed on the ocean floor for more than 1,000 years before its discovery near Indonesia's Belitung Island in 1998.

Visit www.shipwreckedtangtreasures.com for more details.