

DISCOVERIES FROM THE SINAN SHIPWRECK

Sinan haejösön esö ch'ajanaen köttül: palgul 40-chunyön kinyöm t'ükpyölchön 신안 해저선에서 찾아낸 것들: 발굴 40주년 기념 특별전 / *Discoveries from the Sinan Shipwreck: Special Exhibition on the 40th Anniversary of the Excavation*. Seoul: Kungnip Chungang Pangmulgwan/National Museum of Korea, 2016. 366 pp. ISBN: 978-89-92788-82-3. [The catalogue includes captions in English, but its text otherwise is entirely in Korean.]

Lee Myong Ok

National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage, Daejeon

The Special Exhibition of “Discoveries from the Sinan Shipwreck” was held from 26 July to 4 September 2016. The exhibition was organized by the National Museum of Korea in commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the discovery of the Sinan shipwreck 新安船. Excavated objects from the shipwreck had been shown previously on permanent and/or special exhibitions held in various museums. However, these objects merely accounted for only 1,000-some pieces out of 26,000-some pieces retrieved in total. In organizing the Special Exhibition, the National Museum aimed to re-illuminate the significance of the Sinan shipwreck excavation by showing all displayable objects in their entirety.

The discovery and excavation of the Sinan shipwreck

The Sinan ship is identified as a Yuan Chinese trade vessel that departed from Ningbo 寧波 (known today as Qingyuan 慶元) in 1323 and sank in the waters near South Jeolla Province on its way to Japan. The excavation of the shipwreck began when a Korean fisherman found six ceramic pieces caught in his fishing net in August 1975, near the coastal area of Sinan, Bangchuk-ri, Jeungdo Island of South Jeolla Province. The finds were reported to the Sinan County Office in 1976 and the excavation commenced in October of the same year by the Cultural Properties Administration (today's Cultural Heritage Administration). More than 26,000 objects were retrieved from the excavation, which continued for 9 years until 1984. The objects include more than 20,000 pieces of Chinese ceramic, coins, metal wares, lacquerware, herbs, and aromatic

wood. The excavation of the Sinan shipwreck marked the first underwater excavation project ever conducted in Korea and paved the foundation of underwater archaeology in Korea.

Contents of the exhibition and the catalogue

The Special Exhibition catalogue from the exhibition records the massive quantity of export goods that were on board on the Sinan vessel that was one of the biggest of its kind from its time. The catalogue also explains what we can learn from the excavated objects such as the ship's ports of embarkment and destination; its structure and origin; traces of sailors' lives on board; and the ship's condition from the time of its sinking to the day of its discovery. The Sinan cargo contained over 20,000 pieces of ceramic; over 1,000 pieces of metal objects; over 1,000 pieces of red sandalwood 紫檀木 from southern China; and spices and medicinal herbs such as pepper, cinnamon, ginkgo nuts, and cloves. Ceramic cargo included a variety of Chinese ceramics produced in various regions such as Longquan 龍泉 celadons from Zhejiang Province 浙江省; porcelain and Qingbai ware from Jingdezhen 景德鎮; black-glazed stoneware, celadons, and porcelains from Jianyao 建窯, Fujian Province 福建省; and other varieties produced in Hebei, Guangdong, Jiangsu Provinces. Among the ceramic pieces, over 12,000 pieces of Longquan celadons accounted for the majority, comprising more than sixty-percent of the total ceramic findings, indicating the scale of demands for such ware from China. Metal objects from the Sinan cargo included tableware, incense burners, Buddhist ceremonial objects, cosmetic goods, kitchen utensils, weaponry, and tin spirit. 28 tons or 8

million pieces of silver coins were also found, most of which were Song Chinese coins. Seven pieces of Goryeo celadon and two Japanese Seto-yaki 瀬戸焼 meipings revealed another aspect of ceramic trade in East Asia. Once favored in China for their fine quality, Goryeo celadons found in the wreckage evinced the inflow of fine Goryeo celadons into China, as it could be speculated that they were loaded on board at the Chinese port of Qingyuan. Chinese objects, on the other hand, revealed cultural practices and trends among the Japanese nobility and Buddhist monasteries at the time that involved tea ceremony, incense burning, and flower offering. They also reflected the Japanese appreciation for art as well as their admiration and desire for Chinese culture and China-made goods.

Significance of the exhibition and the publication

During the last four decades since the discovery, only a small portion of the Sinan objects has been disclosed to the public. The recent Special Exhibition made most of the objects available for public access, providing scholars with abundant new, authentic source materials. One such example is Chinese carved lacquerware put on exhibition for the first time. The carved lacquerware displays a distinctive technique developed in China which required repetitive coating and drying of expensive lacquer before carving lacquer layers off into delicate patterns. The Chinese lacquerware found in the Sinan shipwreck is valuable evidence which allow us to better understand lacquer-carving techniques and styles of the Song and Yuan dynasties.

The Special Exhibition catalogue also introduced new research findings from the arduous scholarly investigation. For example, the catalogue included an analysis on the origins of the types of the Chinese ceramics found in the shipwreck which suggests that some of the objects on board included antique objects made during the Southern Song and Jin dynastic periods.

The display section from the exhibition that drew my attention most was the thematic section entitled “The Treasure Chest is Now Open” which presented all types of objects that were loaded on the ship in a single space. The catalogue, with its detailed descriptions on each object, is a paper version of this display that will provide readers with the sense that they are walking inside the ship loaded with colossal amount of export cargo.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Myong Ok is a curatorial researcher specializing in Goryeo-dynasty ceramic trade. Currently, she is working for the Research Division of Artistic Heritage at the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage in South Korea. She has also worked for the Jungwon National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage. Her publications include “A Study on Chinese Ceramics Excavated from the Seabed of Tae-an Mado II District” [in Korean] (MA diss., Chungbuk University, 2013); *Chinese Ceramics Excavated from Waters off the Tae-an-Mado Area* [in Korean] (National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage, 2013).

— translated by Ji-Hyun Lee and Boram Shin

From the Sinan Shipwreck Exhibition catalog



The mounted remains of the ship's timbers (p. 144).



Black glazed jars contained cloves (Inv. no. sin 6090 etc., p. 271; the cargo also included peppercorns (Inv. no. sin 7229, p. 272 and cinnamon (not shown here).



Display of recovered artifacts with the original packing boxes that contained the ceramics (p. 213).

A Yuan period celadon dish with chrysanthemum, cloud and phoenix design. Inv. no. sin 20811 (p. 167).



Yuan period brass bottle. Inv. no. sin 7319 (p. 56).



Yuan period Longquan celadon vase. Inv. no. sin 6558 (p. 62).