

The protection of underwater heritage in Taiwan: recent initiatives and major issues

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Abstract

As acknowledged in the 2001 *UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage*, the underwater cultural heritage is an integral part of the cultural heritage of humanity and a particularly important element in the history of peoples, countries, and their relations with each other in terms of their common heritage. The responsibility of protecting and preserving the underwater cultural heritage therefore rests with all countries. Taiwan shares the same concerns over the protection of underwater heritage with the rest of the world. In 1994, a pilot project for discovering the maritime heritage of the Penghu Archipelago (the Pescadores) was initiated. The first ever cross-strait conference on underwater heritage was held in October 2000. Starting in 2003, an international workshop on the protection of underwater heritage has also been held annually. The aims of this workshop are to provide a forum for sharing information and experiences on the development of underwater archaeology in the Asia-Pacific region. It also aims to explore the possibility for multilateral cooperation in underwater archaeology in the region, particularly in the coastal waters of Taiwan and its islands in the South China Sea. Additionally, an action plan on marine affairs, which includes facilitating underwater heritage research, is being drafted by the Council for the Promotion of Marine Affairs and will be adopted in early 2005. However, the issue of underwater heritage is still new in Taiwan and more research is clearly essential. Therefore, this paper introduces a pilot study in Penghu, discusses recent initiatives on the issue, explores the major issues of existing institutions (e.g., policies, laws, and administrative jurisdiction), and proposes a direction for future efforts for the protection of maritime heritage.

Keywords: underwater cultural heritage, Taiwan, Penghu, South China Sea.



1 Introduction

It seems that the discovery of the sunken cruise ship, the “*Titanic*”, raised worldwide enthusiasm for the salvage of shipwrecks in the seas. Hundreds and thousands of pieces of ceramics, art work, and personal belongings have been found in shipwrecks in the seas and have been put on lists for sale on the Web [1]. Many salvage activities, for example the 17th century shipwreck of European design, the *Wanli*, found in Malaysian waters in November 2003, are particularly attractive to countries around the South China Sea [2]. Although the trade of salvaged items is still found to be popular in the world, more and more people are becoming concerned about the value of ancient sunken ships and the dignity of those unfortunate victims. Shipwrecks are invaluable in reconstructing life-styles which no longer exist and represent a buried treasure in terms of knowledge about life on board, boat construction, and trade routes. A shipwreck is a time capsule waiting to be unlocked since time stops when a vessel founders [3]. Shipwrecks, therefore, should be deemed an important part of the heritage of humanity and deserve the priority of adequate protection.

As acknowledged in the 2001 *UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage*, underwater cultural heritage is an integral part of the cultural heritage of humanity and is a particularly important element in the history of peoples, countries, and their relations with each other in terms of their common heritage [3]. The responsibility for protecting and preserving the underwater cultural heritage therefore rests with all countries. With its strategic location along the path of the ancient “maritime silk route”, Taiwan shares the same concerns over the protection of underwater heritage with the rest of the world.

2 Pilot project for discovering the *General No. 1*

Taiwan is located in East Asia; to the southwest and west the Taiwan Strait separates Taiwan from China. To the south, the Bashi Channel separates Taiwan from the Philippines, and acts as a natural conduit to the rest of Asia from the Pacific. During the 150 years in which port authorities of the Ching (also translated as the Qing) Dynasty recorded shipping disasters, French, Japanese, Chinese, German, Norwegian, and British vessels are all known to have succumbed to the inclement weather and rocky coastlines in the Taiwan area. The most costly of these early disasters was that of the British steamship, *New Taiwan*. Records on display tell how on Feb. 14, 1879, the ship went down with its entire complement of 270 crew and passengers. There were no survivors. The Penghu Archipelago (also known as the Pescadores in the West) of Taiwan is in the middle of the Taiwan Strait, the most favorable trade route between China and Taiwan. In addition, many maritime wars were recorded in the history of Taiwan during the past four centuries. For instance, there are quite a few World War II vessels which went down in this area and there might possibly be Japanese aircraft carriers. Therefore, it is certain that the seabed around the



islands is littered with hundreds of wrecks. Some older wrecks are believed to be more of a mystery in terms of their origins [4].

On September 8, 1995, the shipwreck *General No. 1* was found at 119°32'22.26"E and 23°21'2.64"N at a depth of 19 m in the sea. While the discovery of the bulwark of a Ching dynasty cargo ship by a crab fisherman off the coast of Penghu in 1994 was a far cry from that of the headline-making discovery of the *Titanic*, the accidental find did not go totally unnoticed. The handful of members of the National Museum of History, Taichung, Taiwan posthumously named the *General No. 1* after Penghu's General Islet, where the scattered remains of the vessel were found; the ship is the first such wreck discovered in Taiwan's territorial waters to be officially surveyed by a recognized academic institute. Thanks to the discovery of roofing slates endemic to Penghu, Taiwan and Chuanzhou, Fujian Province, China and pottery manufactured in southern Taiwan, experts believe that the *General's* place of embarkation was southern Taiwan and her final destination Chuanzhou. It was not until 1997, however, that the team was able to date the vessel [4, 5].

Although initial dives retrieved over 110 objects from among the debris on the seabed adjacent to the wreck, which covered an area of roughly 21 m², the pottery, porcelain, lumber, and even charcoal that was brought to the surface gave no clue as to the ship's age. In 1997 another team of divers took to the ocean floor in search of treasures from the *General*. After 247 dives totaling more than 400 hours underwater, the divers had retrieved another 92 household objects and, most importantly, a stash of Ching currency. Scattered across the seabed, the currency dated back to the Qianlong period (1736–1796), thus narrowing down the date of the ships' floundering to the mid-1700s [4, 5].

The survey team made its last dive in 1999 and once again retrieved large numbers of pots, vases, bowls, and plates. Since the first dive in 1995, over 300 artifacts have been retrieved from the ocean bed around the wreck. Of these, 176 are now under glass at the National Museum of History.

Although no one single sensational discovery was made at the site of the *General*, the artifacts retrieved from the debris of the ship have proven to be of sufficient historical value to warrant the museum's continued funding of underwater archeological surveys in the seas off Penghu. Since the discovery and salvage of the *General* represent the first ever case in Taiwan, the experts of the Museum hope that the new model which involved both civilian and military underwater survey teams will be used to conduct further research in the future, and that they will continue to be able to search for more wrecks in Taiwanese waters.

3 Related organizations

As mentioned above, the issues of underwater technology and cultural heritage are still new in Taiwan. In spite of the discovery of the *General No. 1*, only limited initiatives have been adopted and promoted in recent years. One of the most important events was the first ever Cross-Strait Conference on Underwater Archaeology held in October 2000. The meeting was held to exchange



information and experience with Chinese experts in response to the salvage of the ship, the *General No. 1*.

Currently, there are only a few public agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with underwater issues. The Council for Cultural Affairs (CCA) is the leading agency in charge of culture policies and administration. Although the CCA announced a new cultural policy on December 29, 2004 that mostly intends to enhance Taiwan as a quality cyber society, few initiatives have been adopted for the protection of maritime heritage. It was not until the end of 2004 that the first-ever Dutch Colonial Heritage Exhibition was opened in Makung, the capital of Penghu. During the past two decades, the CCA has focused its attention on archaeological sites, temples, and other historical sites on land as well as the reconstruction of coastal fishing villages rather than on the protection of maritime heritage [6].

Another central agency, the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), may play an important role in underwater heritage in the future. Since Taiwan is establishing a national park in the Dongsha (Pratas) Islands, the MOI has put aside a portion of the budget for research on the underwater archaeology [7]. The pilot project is to contract with the Foundation of Ocean Taiwan and National Sun Yat-sen University to conduct a literature review and a preliminary investigation, which was initiated in January 2005.

At the local governmental level, the Marine Bureau of the Kaohsiung City Government may be the most active agency on the issue of underwater archaeology in Taiwan. In association with the Foundation of Taiwan as well as National Sun Yat-sen University, the Bureau organized two international meetings on the issue in 2003 and 2004, respectively [8]. This represented one of the most important events on maritime heritage in Taiwan after the Cross-Strait Conference on Underwater Archaeology held in October 2000.

Regarding NGOs, the Chinese Ocean and Underwater Technology Association, which was organized by scholars, private salvage companies, and governmental officers, was established in 1991. Its major tasks include ocean weather monitoring, underwater sonar investigations, diving training, and underwater antiquarianism [9]. Another is the Institute of Underwater Archaeology, organized by enthusiastic divers who are interested in the underwater heritage of Taiwan, and it was established in 2003 [10]. However, these two organizations are operating on a voluntary basis without adequate financial support from the government. Clearly, this weakness will limit their ability to deal with large-scale discoveries and salvage activities of shipwrecks.

4 Recent initiatives on underwater heritage

Although institutional barriers are often encountered, some new initiatives on the protection of maritime heritage have recently been promoted. For example, the MOI is establishing Taiwan's first maritime national park at Dongsha (the Pratas Is.) with the aim of preserving underwater heritage. The Kaohsiung City Government also announced the establishment of the Dongsha International



Research Station on November 5, 2004, which will provide facilities and accommodations to international researchers who visit the island.

A recent milestone in marine affairs in Taiwan was the formation of the Council for the Promotion of Marine Affairs (CPMA) of the Executive Yuan (equivalent to the Cabinet). The top-decision-making body on marine affairs was established in January 2004. Currently, some six teams on ocean strategies, maritime security, marine resources, marine culture, ocean industries, and marine science and technology have been formed [11]. Each team has drawn up its own respective action plan. According to the conclusions of its second meeting on October 12, 2004, the overall Action Plan on Marine Affairs has been adopted and serves as one of the most important documents for the protection of marine resources and the direction of marine affairs. For example, the goal of the task team on marine culture is “to conduct investigations on maritime cultural history and maritime archaeology.” In response to this, its relevant actions include:

1. To organize international conferences on maritime history;
2. To amend the *Cultural Heritage Preservation Act*;
3. To encourage research on the relationship of Formosa with the world in the 17th century;
4. To reconstruct a historical image of ancient navigation around Taiwan;
5. To integrate existing museum resources so that they can demonstrate the characteristics of maritime culture; and
6. To promote research on maritime archaeology in the Penghu and Dongsha (Pratas) Archipelagos.

For the first time in related governmental actions, as item number six clearly indicates, research on marine cultural heritage will be conducted in the future.

5 Major issues for the protection of underwater heritage

Although the government of Taiwan has noted the importance of underwater heritage, the issue is still a new topic in this country. Furthermore, there are numerous problems with promoting the protection of underwater heritage. The major issues are described as follows.

5.1 Irrelevant laws

Currently, there is no exclusive law on maritime heritage. The Cultural Heritage Preservation Act serves as the sole legal mechanism for protecting the cultural heritage of Taiwan. Since the law involves three agencies (e.g., the CCA, Ministry of Education, and Council of Agriculture), there is often controversy due to the ambiguity of administrative jurisdiction. The law also regulates all heritage and any items discovered from archaeological sites owned by the country. Thus, there is no incentive or flexibility with the discovery and salvage of shipwrecks.

5.2 Inactive lead agency

The CCA seems to be the lead agency for the protection of cultural heritage. However, the agency focuses on terrestrial affairs (e.g., reconstruction of fishing



villages) and pays greater attention to the construction of buildings (e.g., museums), but often neglects the operational costs of maintenance. The worst is that the CCA has shown little interest in the discovery and protection of maritime heritage due to its complex nature, lengthy processes, and unpredictable costs.

5.3 Limited funding

The research, discovery, and salvage of underwater archaeology represent one of the most expensive investments for developers. With the increasing difficulties of governmental finance, there are only limited resources which can be applied to research. For instance, the MOI and Kaohsiung City Government were only able to put aside a budget of less than NT\$ 1 million (about US\$30,000) for relevant research in each of the fiscal years of 2004 and 2005.

5.4 Weak public-private partnerships

With small budgets, and a lack of incentives and governmental support, it is difficult to establish good public-private partnerships to conduct research activities on underwater archaeology. Although the salvage of the General No. 1 represented the first case to involve governmental agencies, academics, and NGOs, there is still room to facilitate further partnerships in the future.

5.5 Low public awareness

For a significant portion of the general public, the meaning of “underwater archaeology” is similar to “finding treasure.” This is particularly true for some fishermen who usually operate in Taiwanese coastal waters and often unexpectedly find antiques on the seabed. Therefore, it is necessary to enhance public awareness on the importance of protecting underwater heritage. Related training programs offered to divers are also essential.

5.6 Destructive fishing

The Penghu and Dongsha (Pratas) Islands of Taiwan have long experienced illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing. For example, cyanide, dynamite, and trawl fishing methods have destroyed significant areas of coral reefs as well as damaged potential sites for underwater archaeology. This is particularly true in shallow coastal waters.

6 Recommendations for future actions

Although Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations, it still follows international practices. Thus, Taiwan is accountable for protecting its underwater heritage the same as for other countries. Namely, the government of Taiwan is urged to actively respond to the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage. More-substantial efforts are essential. Recommendations for future actions in Taiwan are proposed here:



1. To enhance feasible international connections to relevant forums, institutions, and/or organizations;
2. To develop cooperation and collaboration (e.g., programs on education, training, and exchange of experts and information) between Taiwan and experienced countries;
3. To establish training and educational programs for young archaeologists, conservationists, and NGOs on underwater archaeology;
4. To organize a summer program for an appropriate level of students;
5. To collect data and conduct research on successful stories of discoveries and protection of underwater heritage;
6. To propose a framework and requirements of an exclusive law on underwater heritage;
7. To establish standard operation procedures (SOPs) for relevant affairs (e.g., salvage, licensing, in-situ protection, and long-term management);
8. To organize and become involved in international conferences and workshops; and
9. To conduct a pilot project for discovering shipwrecks in the Dongsha (Pratas) area.

7 Concluding remarks

The *UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage* of 2001 established a framework for the affairs of underwater heritage. Taiwan like all other countries must follow these practices to protect the common property of humanity. Although several initiatives have recently been adopted, the issue of underwater heritage is still new in Taiwan and more research is clearly essential. International cooperation and collaboration in terms of exchange of experts and information as well as offering educational and training programs are essential. In addition, greater involvement in international meetings will benefit Taiwan because it will be a direct way to collect necessary information relevant to the protection of our underwater heritage.

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