

Reflections of my South China trip

By: Catherine Khoo

23 April 2024

Quanzhou: origin of the Maritime Silk Route

When Mr K K Lee first broached the idea of the South China trip, I was one of the very first to sign up. I had visited Xiamen in 2016 with Penang's Khoo Kongsì trustees (all male) and their wives. It turned out to be an eye-opening experience for me and I think, for the trustees as well. What amused me most was that I ended up being translator as the trustees knew no Mandarin (most of them were English-educated). I spoke not-too-fluent Mandarin but it was enough to get by. Brings me to this adage: in the valley of the blind, the one-eyed man is king! *For more of my extraordinary journey, do visit my FB page: 50 Years Ago In Geylang, where I shared about my search for my grandparents whom I never met. 50 years later, I found their tombs on Bukit Brown, thanks to the amazing efforts of the Brownies!*



Khoo clan gathering in Xin Aun village, 2006. Author is pictured standing in the 2nd row, 2nd from left

This South China trip was more a homecoming to Xiamen for me. But it also served another purpose. Some two years ago, when I first explored an idea of three siblings going back on time to the cities along the ancient Maritime Silk Route for my historical fiction series, I stumbled upon Quanzhou, its origin city in China. I was curious about the city. The emporium of the east. What does it mean? What was China like during those times? What were the ships like? What did they trade in? Today, I stood in the Quanzhou Overseas Transportation History Museum and breathed in 2,000 years of its amazing journey.

Ibn Battuta, the famed ancient traveller, claimed, "The harbour of Zayton (Arabic for Quanzhou), is among the biggest in the world, or rather the biggest." Not only that, with trade came religion. I was mesmerised by the relics that spoke of my ancestry. So there are Hindus, Buddhists, Catholics, Muslims, in Quanzhou, going way back some 2,000 years ago. That special exhibit displaying the many tombstones with religious inscriptions revealed more about the way of life of our ancestors than I could ever imagine.



Christian tombstone during the Yuan Dynasty



Hindu statue of Vishnu during the Yuan Dynasty



Author in front of a Chinese junk Grandfather could have sailed to S E Asia

Some 2,000 years later, my grandfather sailed the seven seas the same seas the silk route traders traversed. Quanzhou stirred a sense of camaraderie within me for those who braved the sometimes treacherous waves to search for new lands! I call myself a literary traveller....imagining and travelling along these same routes.

Shimao Maritime Silk Route Museum: Pottery from Ching to Xia

The next museum we visited was The Shimao Maritime Silk Road Museum of Fujian in Shishi. Hmm...I was intrigued. What does it exhibit which was vastly different from the Quanzhou museum which to me was matchless? I was immersed in the Quanzhou Museum's journey, walking through its passage of time, more so when the three major religions interact and converted the villagers to their religion.

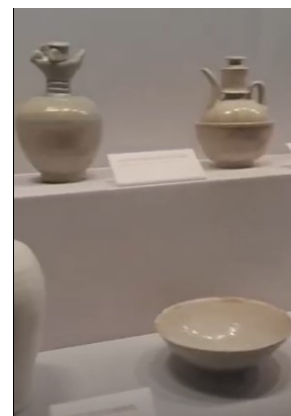


An immersive AR experience of the Caves of 1,000 Buddhas in Dunhuang



AR technology and the ancient city of Samarkand comes alive!

The Shimao Museum, privately funded, wowed me but in a different way. Using the latest AR technology, it gave me a visual experience of the Silk Route. But what made it so different was the display of the crockery unearthed in the various excavation sites. Each was neatly catalogued and was a time-travel through all the Chinese dynasties, from Ching to Xia. The Chinese civilization....makes me wonder what we call progress today can be termed progress. Perhaps we could view it another way....rediscovering our past to better understand ourselves.



Pottery across the dynasties