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Quanzhou - The heart of the Sea Silk Road and Chinese Civilization

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In the forming developing and its world's spread of Chinese civilization, Sea Silk Road has occupied a very important historical place.

In the International Discussion “The Origin and Spread of Civilization Round Pacific Regions” held in Nov. 1992 in Beijing, with the proposition “The Origin and Early Development of East Asian Marine Civilization” we pointed out: in the long process of history of civilizational origin and spread round Pacific regions, east Asian marine civilization has occupied a very prominent and important place with its earliest origin, long history and energetic cultural characteristic rich in Chinese tradition. In the speech at that discussion we expounded and proved scientifically such aspects as the prehistoric cultural achievements in Shandong and the occurrence of Chinese marine civilization, the development of Chinese marine culture in Pre-qin Dynasty and the forming of east Asian marine civilization, the early development and spread of east Asian marine civilization, the early development and spread of east Asian marine civilization and etc.

Making a comprehensive survey of historical culture, We could see quit clear a basic fact: In the 3,000 years before Han Dynasty, Chinese civilization grew out of nothing, from small to large, low to high, to prosperity. Based on the development and prosperity of its agriculture, industry, commerce, fishery, salt industry and shipping China had become the marine and land civilization centre in east Asia and even in eastern world. And what is more, the Chinese traditional marine utilization not only became the important prerequisite of the national economy and the people's livelihood but also turned into the most important and characteristic historical motive force, economical basis and cultural source in spreading and praising Chinese culture, radiating east Asian society, propagating Chinese civilization, pushing eastern marine civilization to develop thrivingly.

In Qin and Han Dynasty, the importance of navigation in national politics, economy, military affairs, diplomacy, culture and so on manifested itself day by day. With the background of astronavigation and monsoon drive, Chinese mariners opened the oceangoing route to Japan Islands and South Asian regions. Hence Chinese ancient navigation joined world's advanced ranks. The forming of the "Sea Silk Road" which connected Europe and Asia continents was the then real reflection of the world navigation level and the high mark.

In the flourishing age of Han and Tang Dynasty, accompanying the tortuous development of Chinese civilization, Quanzhou began to take the place of northern langya and gradually became the centre of Chinese marine culture and the heart of sea Silk Road.

In the Three Kingdoms Period, the Western and Eastern Jin Dynasties and the Northern and Southern Dynasties, compared with the northern confused local separatist rule and military disputes, the southern political situation was rather stable. The south-moving people brought to the backward regions rather advanced scientific knowledge and productive technique, thus to put vitality into economy and culture for those places. The prosperity in economy and the rather settled social environment provided an important historical prerequisite for the oceangoing navigation of south-eastern littoral areas. Now the heart of ancient Chinese sea silk road began to move southward.

In Sui and Tang Dynasties, the Chinese society was cultivated in civilization and prosperous in economy. There had been a rather great development in silk industry, in dyeing, mining and metallurgical industry, ceramic industry in flour-making, paper-making, printing, tea-making, ceramic and ship-building industries. Among those, the productive technology of silk and ceramics was superb and was called "wonderful workmanship". Silk and ceramics had already become the important exported commodities through navigation. They were sold to as many as several tens of countries and regions in Asia and Africa. In the heyday of Tang Dynasty, China had established various navigation contacts with vast Asian and African countries and regions relying on its powerful national strength, rich and prosperous economy, advanced science and technology and brilliant culture. In East Asia, Tang Dynasty established intricate sea contacts which were both conflicting and friendly with several countries in Korean Peninsula. The Dynasty had good-neighbourly relations with Japan Islands through frequent sea contacts and also opened Okhotsk Sea Route to Kamchatka Peninsula in north-east Asia. In Southeast Asia, Tang Dynasty developed traditional navigation trade with many countries. The sea routes almost reached all the coasts and islands. In South Asia, the Dynasty

had close cultural and material exchanges with nowadays India and Sri Lanka. As the result, many monk and priest navigators emerged. In West Asia and East Africa, the ocean-going contacts between the Dynasty and the ancient Arabian countries were even in the ascendant. The emissaries, merchants and religious believers came and went frequently. In the then Arabian capital – Baghdad there was a “China Market” dealing in the commodities from Tang Dynasty. To draw our special attention, in the coastal big harbors of China, there appeared some "foreigners' communities" where many overseas foreign merchants lived together. In Indian Ocean, Chinese and foreign ships shuttled back and forth, a lot merchants gathered on the ships. To meet the increasing demand of diplomacy and trade, the coastal cities in East China such as Dengzhou, Laizhou, yangzhou, Fuzhou, Quanzhou, guangzhou and Jiao-zhou, all became famous shipbuilding bases, all were able to build a great number of merchantmen and warships.

The rise of Quanzhou is a great event in the history of Chinese marine commerce and trade development. Quanzhou is situated on the south-east coast of Fujian Province, it holds a strategic point of Jin River mouth, its harbour is very good for anchoring. In Tang Dynasty, Quanzhou, guangzhou, mingzhou and yangzhou were called “the 4 Big Harbours” by joint name. In the southern song Dynasty, Quanzhou and guangzhou kept pace with each other, leaping to the first place among the country's commercial points, having trade contacts with some 70 countries and regions.

Quanzhou first rose in Tang Dynasty, but its rapid development didn't come until song Dynasty. The reason for that, except its geographical position and conditions of human culture, was closely connected with the situational change in politics and economy caused by the war between song and Jin Dynasties. In the song-Jin war, Jing people marched southward and song people retreated to the south of Changjiang River and made Hangzhou as their temporary capital. Quanzhou once became the rear base for Song Dynasty royal court to take refuge. Under the prerequisite that Song Dynasty developed actively navigation trade to open all avenues for fortune, we could find the deep basic for the rise of Quanzhou Harbor:

(1)Quanzhou didn't suffer the destruction of war flames as (两浙路) its navigation was always normally under way. Even in the years of war-caused chaos, the shipbuilders and ship-owners were still able to make do with their business. It was impossible for the northern ports to follow. So Quanzhou port was lucky to have the stability in those turbulent days.

Since the navigation trade trended from northern ports toward Quanzhou in large quantities, Quanzhou Port thrived rapidly.

(2) After the south-move of Song Dynasty, Quanzhou soon ascended to the outpost position of the capital. The imported (香药), exported silk and ceramics could be transported by land. (In Song Dynasty, land transportation was also flourishing. In Quanzhou, lots of bridges were built. There were altogether 215 stone bridges there, the longest Being 2,070 meters) by river or by sea. The imported commodities were easily transported to the capital Hangzhou. The two stone towers built in Quanzhou City (the east one-Renshou Tower, 44.06 meters high; the west one-Zhenguo Tower, 48.24 meters high) were both taken as the navigation signs for the ships going into Quanzhou Harbour. They are also taken as the historical relic witness that Song Dynasty attached importance to Quanzhou Harbour.

(3) Quanzhou is situated in the middle of coast line administered by the then Song Dynasty, and also on the juncture of East Sea Route and South Sea Route. From this port, ships could sail directly to South Sea, eastward to Japan, northward to Korea, along the coast southward to Guangzhou, northward to Ningbo (the then Mingzhou) so Quanzhou was favoured by the geographical advantages at that time. It was both the market for transit goods in south-east coastal region and the main port for going abroad. And what is more, Quanzhou got solid productive base for such exported goods as the beautiful ceramics made from Jian Kiln, Dehua Kiln of Fujian and Longquan Kiln of Zhejiang; the gorgeous silk and handicraft articles from the south of Changjiang River. Those goods provided source of commodities which sold well in great number for Quanzhou's exportation. These were of course the very important ground for Quanzhou Harbour's prosperity.

Since the establishment of Quanzhou in 718 A.D. (Tang Dynasty), 1,200 years have passed. And since (五代节度使) Liu Cong-xiao expanded the city wall and planted Tung trees all around the city, Quanzhou was once called "the City of Tung Trees". The expansion of the inner and outer walls of Quanzhou in Yuan Dynasty made the city look like a carp, so Quanzhou got another name "Carp City". Obviously Quanzhou city's establishment and expansion was closely related with the economical development, marine trade and cultural exchange. In the war chaos happened in the Central Plains of Huanghe River, the northern Han people moved to Quanzhou in great number, bringing with them the advanced productive technology, art and culture. It had improved the prosperity of Quanzhou's economy and culture.

In Yuan Dynasty, Quanzhou entered another more prosperous golden age of sea trade. According to “The History of Quanzhou prefecture”, in Quanzhou Harbour at that time there were “a forest of masts and merchants from the 4 seas”. From Quanzhou Harbour, east to Japan, south to some south-east countries, west to Persia, Arabian Peninsula and East Africa, the trading countries and regions with China were more than 100. The major exported goods of China were ceramics, silk, tea, copper and iron; and the country mainly imported fragrant materials, pepper, medicinal materials, pearls and jewels and so on. The well-known Italian traveler Marco Polo, who sailed back home from Quanzhou Harbour in 1292 A.D., wrote in his travel notes: “A lot of merchants gathered here, the goods piled up like hills, it is really hard to imagine”, “The pepper transported to Alexandria to supply the west world, I am afraid, is only about one hundredth of it”. He still wrote, “Quanzhou is famous for the shutting ships...., and it is one of the biggest ports in the world”. Just from Quanzhou Harbour, Marco Polo escorted the princess of Yuan Dynasty Kuo kuo-zhen to marry in Persia. In 1342 A.D., the famous Moroccan traveler Ibn Batuta (伊本·巴图塔) came to Quanzhou and saw with his own eyes the grand occasion of “more than hundred big ships and countless small boats”. He so praised Quanzhou for being the very big port in the world. In fact, in Yuan Dynasty, Quanzhou and Alexandria were both the two “biggest trade ports in the world”, according to “The History of Yuan Dynasty”, Quanzhou in the heyday had 15,000 ocean-going ships. Marco Polo also pointed out: “Among the ships coming and going on Persian Gulf and China Sea, the Chinese ships are the biggest and many of them were made in Quanzhou and Quanzhou”. On Quanzhou gulf, shipyards were thickly located. And it was found in 1974 that the Song Dynasty ocean-going ship displayed in the Museum of Marine Transportation History was the typical proof of historical relic.

In Song and Yuan Dynasties, Quanzhou’s economy and marine trade were booming. Merchants, travelers and missionaries from various countries arrived in a continuous stream “The merchants and sages from abroad were all over the city”. This occasion was unprecedentedly-grand. It greatly promoted the economic and cultural exchange between Quanzhou and other Chinese places and a lot of overseas countries. The foreigners inhabiting Quanzhou from Asia and Africa were as many as several tens of thousands. Some even held posts in the place. For example, the family of Arabian merchant Pushgan (蒲寿庚) lived in China for several generations, and Pushgan himself was in Quanzhou Customs Office as long as 30 years.

History enlightens future. After Zheng he's Sailing west in the early Ming Dynasty, the Chinese feudal rulers carried out a sea-banning policy of closing the country to international trade and intercourse. It gravely strangled the overseas development ability of Chinese nation. And it caused the big historic fall back of Chinese civilization from the height.

The nature of marine civilization is opening outside, opening up and developing. The nowadays Chinese reformation has given the best opportunity and the great social environment to the Chinese Nation. We should know how to exert ourselves as soon as possible. We'd like to march forward hand in hand with personalities of all circles and friends of all sides both at home and abroad to make epochal contribution to the forming and development of the great Chinese cultural and economic community. In the past, several foreign religions such as Islamic, Indian, (摩尼教) ancient Catholic...coming into Quanzhou so to make it a home for various foreign cultures and a "religious museum".

Today, we believe profoundly that the epochal thesis "The Contribution of Islamic Culture to Sea Silk Road" which is assisted and directed by O.E.S.C. will surely promote the development of world civilization. Hence it will have held a successful foundation laying ceremony for the vigorous growth and rejuvenation of our national marine cultural, commercial and trade course.