

## The Southern Song Shipwreck

*Cachalot Roy Martin recounts the frustrations and difficulties of trying to do business and work with the Chinese authorities in the matter of an historic wreck and a treasure trove of artefacts..*



**After signing the contract**



**Setting up one of the survey stations on an island in the Pearl River delta. In the background can be seen some ruins which appeared to be very European. The Chinese seemed to have no idea of their history, nor any interest in them.**

When I returned from Singapore in August 1986 I needed to think about earning a living; so three of us started a company, with the rather grand name of Maritime Exploration & Recoveries PLC. We selected the Dutch East Indiaman (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) ship *Rhynsburg*, which had sunk in a typhoon in 1772, as our target. The *Rhynsburg* was a 'Country Ship', on a voyage from Batavia to Canton; her cargo included tin and silver. Our researcher had found the survivors reports and the log of the English East Indiaman *London*, which survived the storm and logged the sinking of the *Rhynsburg*.

In 1987 I obtained a licence from the Chinese government to search for, and recover from, the VOC ship. The licence was granted on the condition that we entered into a joint venture with a Chinese (government) salvage company. We used their ship, but provided all of the information and expertise ourselves. The survey equipment came from a firm in Hong Kong.

Lyle Craigie-Halkett, then headed up the operational team, which included Kevin Smith as Hydrographer and Danny MacDonald our Bosun. We searched a fairly large area; finding one wreck and very small object, which our surveyor described as 'significant'. The wreck was of no interest, so we put the Chinese divers on the small object. For several dives they reported that the object was a small coral head. As the seabed in the delta was of fine silt our Project Director, himself a former diver, insisted that they repeated the dive. The report was that the object was indeed a coral head, but it was surrounded by shards of porcelain!

After a delay of several weeks, while the Guangzhou people found a barge with a grab that we could use, our team started work and were recovering white porcelain and corroded metal. At that time we thought that we had the VOC wreck. Then in quick succession we found Chinese coins, more sophisticated porcelain and, finally a long gold chain (which did not look Chinese to us). We were told to stop work and this we did.

**Right: The gold waist chain**



**Below: some of the cargo we landed**



Little information came out of China, but we were told that the Guangzhou Museum had described the gold chain as being of 'gold plated brass chain' and about 5% of the porcelain was dated to the Song dynasty. There was no mention of the other two hundred, or so, items. The copper coins dated from the Southern Song Dynasty: the Chinese concluded that the wreck was Chinese and from that dynasty. All that could be said for sure was that it did not pre-date the Song Dynasty and the cargo was of Chinese-made porcelain. The presence of silver ingots could indicate that it was an early Yuan wreck; which, though probably Chinese, could have been Malay, Persian or Arab. The loss was about the time that Marco Polo was at the Yuan court. Then along came a group of Australian archaeologists, who knew nothing about us; they apparently warned the Chinese not to deal with big rough salvors, without university education.

We made a number of attempts to find out more about the wreck, to no avail. Then several years later we heard that a team of Chinese archaeologists had, with difficulty, relocated the wreck and were working on it. Had they asked we would have given them the position! We have not received a cent in compensation, even though the whole exercise cost us a great deal of money. We later heard that the cargo which we had recovered had been 'smashed'; the inference being that we had done the deed!

In 2007 the Chinese recovered the complete wreck in a steel caisson and moved it to a purpose built museum on Hainan Island. It is now known as Nan Hai (South Sea) One and is probably the most significant Asian ship wreck that has ever been found from that period. There is a great deal of information online.



**The wreck with the silt removed**

Google: Nan Hai (South One) wreck

or click on the link below

<http://english.cntv.cn/2014/12/31/VI/DE1419956638483588.shtml>