



Remembering an ancient Chinese city's connections to distant shores

NG YI-SHENG tells us about Quanzhou, where people from many lands and cultures met some 1,000 years ago.



Anping Bridge, one of Quanzhou's important transport links.

[Photo: Quanzhou Maritime Silk Road World Heritage Nomination Center]

In the year 1292, the Italian explorer Marco Polo visited Quanzhou, a city in the province of Fujian on the southern coast of China. He was amazed by what he saw. “The land is overflowing with everything needed to nourish the human body,” he wrote. He described its five great bridges, its beautiful blue porcelain bowls, and its extremely skilled tattoo artists.

What impressed him the most, however, was the port. From the 900s to the 1300s, the city was one of the world's most important centres of trade. According to Mr Polo, a hundred times more pepper was sold there than in any port in the West. This was a big deal because, in **medieval** times, pepper was only grown in India and Southeast Asia, and was very expensive elsewhere.

As a port city, Quanzhou was a meeting place for people from many lands and cultures. Merchants from India, the islands of Indonesia and the Philippines, Brunei, Myanmar, Japan, Arabia, Iran, and Turkey all came to the port to do business. They brought goods that Chinese people wanted, such as iron, spices, cotton, gemstones, and perfumes. In return, they bought Chinese products such as pottery, tea, and silk.

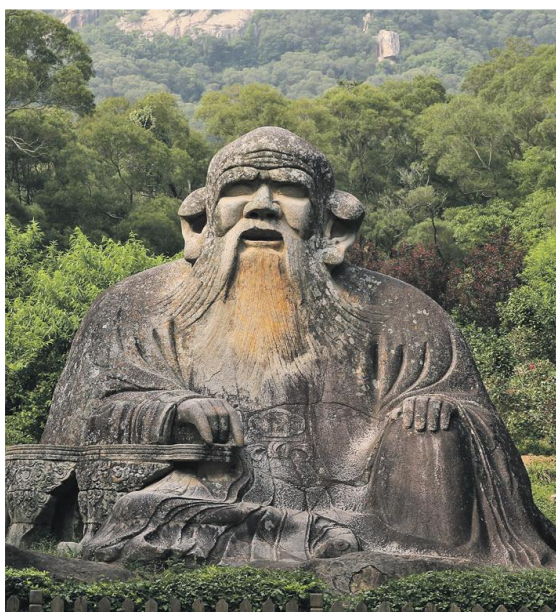
Trade and more

Over centuries, these traders created a network of sailing routes across the sea, connecting China with the rest of Asia. Today, historians call this “The Maritime Silk Road”. Interestingly, the English word “satin”, meaning a shiny kind of silk cloth, actually comes from the Arabic name for Quanzhou, “Zaytun”.

People did not just bring goods to the city. Some of them brought their religions too. They built many different houses of worship, including Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu temples, Islamic mosques, Christian churches, and even a shrine for a religion called Manichaeism, which has now disappeared. Some traders settled down, starting families in China and becoming highly respected members of the community.

Last year, the United Nations decided to honour the rich history of this city. On 25 July, they recognised Quanzhou as a **UNESCO** World Heritage Site. This means that it is part of an official list of over 1,000 landmarks across the globe which are seen as important for all humanity.

The government has chosen 22 spots in Quanzhou that it will preserve under the UN programme. These include the old docks, the Kaiyuan Buddhist Temple, the Qingjing Mosque, a group of Islamic tombs on the side of a mountain, and three of the five bridges that Mr Polo saw on his journey.



This statue of Chinese philosopher Lao Tze was carved out of rock on Qingyuan Mountain near Quanzhou during the Song Dynasty.

[Photo: Quanzhou Maritime Silk Road World Heritage Nomination Center]

Inter-racial harmony

Residents of the city were delighted by the news. “It is not only a joyful event for about 8.78 million people of Quanzhou but also a great occasion for all Chinese,” said Wang Yongli, the Party Chief of the city. “We will shoulder more responsibility and make a stronger commitment to protect, inherit, and make good use of our precious heritage.”

The announcement also has great importance for people beyond China. The city shows us a wonderful example of racial and religious harmony. A thousand years ago, people from very different backgrounds were already able to live and cooperate with each other.

Doudou Diène, a United Nations official from Senegal, hopes that everyone can learn from the city’s history. “May Quanzhou be now better known to the world... for peace and intercultural dialogue,” he said.

SINGAPORE’S QUANZHOU CONNECTION

After the Yuan Dynasty fell in 1368, the Emperors of China mostly discouraged foreign trade. As a result, Quanzhou was no longer a key port in the Maritime Silk Road. However, people in this part of China continued to have a strong connection with the sea. From the 1500s, Europeans began doing business with China at the port city of Xiamen, close to Quanzhou. As a result, Chinese people from the province of Fujian, or Hokkiens, began to migrate to the European colonies of Southeast Asia. Today, Hokkiens are the largest Chinese dialect group in Singapore, making up about one third of all Singapore citizens. If any of your relatives are Hokkien, it is very possible that some of your ancestors came from the great port of Quanzhou.

VOCAB BUILDER

medieval (say “meh-dee-vul”; adjective) = relating to the Middle Ages, between years 500 to 1500 AD.

UNESCO (say “yu-nes-ko”; acronym) = United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It promotes world peace through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences, and culture.

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