No account of the various means of transport indigenous to China could be considered complete without at least a short description of the various native craft, from the largest ocean-going junk down to the smallest sampan or punt used on the streams and side creeks of the inland waterways, and since the present issue of the China Journal is being devoted to the subject of transportation in China, the following short discussion of her ships and boats is included.

At the outset it must be made clear that only the briefest survey of the subject is possible. The reader who wishes to go more fully into its details may be referred to Ivon A. Donelly’s delightful book “Chinese Junks and Other Native Craft,” published by the enterprising firm of Kelly & Walsh, Ltd., a few years ago. This book deals with a selection of some twenty-seven different types of native vessel, which, the author considers, will serve to give the reader a fair idea of the subject, although, as he says in the introduction, “every port, every inlet and
lake has its own peculiar vessel best suited to its particular waters, currents and needs. Literally their name is legion.” This might suggest that there is no such thing as standardization in native craft construction in China; but this is hardly a true indication of the case. While there are a very large number of different types of river and sea-going craft in this country, and each district has its own series of types, the builders conform very closely to those types which by long usage have become practically standardized. Another point to be made is that certain principles of form and construction are practically universal, notably the flat bottom. With the exception of the lorchas, a vessel admittedly built on Western lines, every Chinese boat and ship is without a keel, leeboards alone being used where necessary, while in all those with masts there are no stays of any kind. The type of sail almost universally used is a balanced lug usually with bamboo battens. Allowing for these main features, every conceivable shape and size of craft has been evolved, from light, narrow and shallow punts or canoes capable of carrying but a single person, to sea-going junks of three to four hundred tons draught. The largest are the great Pechili trading junks, which are fitted with five masts, carry four to six thousand catties of cargo, and are from 140 to 180 feet in length, with a 20 to 30-foot beam.

All up and down the China coast, and well into the southern seas and the Indian Ocean, Chinese junks may be seen, their picturesque shapes and brown sails fascinating reminders of the days before steam revolutionized transport on the high seas.

The Chinese are excellent sailors, and handle their junks with consummate skill, braving all conditions of wind and weather, riding out even the terrible typhoons for which these seas are notorious. It is no uncommon thing during the typhoon season, from July to September, and when coastal steamers have sought refuge under the lee of the many islands that fringe the China coast, to see Chinese junks apparently unconcernedly going about their business, or skilfully making for some port of refuge. Of course, as is only to be expected of craft of their size and without any machine motor power, terrible havoc is wrought at times along the coasts by unusually severe storms, but on the whole there is surprisingly little loss, and the Chinese sailor must be accorded a place second to none amongst those that sail the seas. Indeed, such excellent mariners are they, there is no hesitation on their part when occasion arises of setting out boldly across the ocean, and there are not wanting instances of their having reached far-distant parts. In 1848 a Foochow pole junk actually reached London, having hazarded the dangerous journey round the Cape of Good Hope, while, much more recently, another of these junks reached Sydney in 1908, while a third made its way to San Francisco in 1912.

The Foochow pole junk, so-called because it is usually employed carrying the famous Foochow pine (Cunninghamia lanceolata) to various ports up and down the coast, may be taken as the type of all the junks from about the mouth of the Yangtze southward, while the Pechili trader, already mentioned, typifies the northern junks. That is to say, the former has a narrow bow with two wing-like flares, one on either
side, while the latter has a square bow. The Foochow pole junk is further characterized by a very high, beautifully painted and decorated stern. The poles which form its cargo are fastened over the side in enormous bales, so to speak, giving the junk when loaded and at sea a very peculiar appearance. The holds of all these junks are divided into water-tight compartments, which adds greatly to their safety at sea.

Smaller than the trading junks are the deep-sea fishing junks, there being almost as many types as ports along the coast, while smaller still are the innumerable longshore fishing boats. Some of these are like miniature junks, others belonging more to the class called sampan.

Sampan, meaning “three boards,” is a name universally used for small boats that cannot be classed as junks, barges, houseboats or rapids boats. These, again, vary very extensively in their general appearance and details of structure. The longshore, heavily-built boat used all along the Shantung and Chihli coasts, is called a sampan, as also is the small, light, high-stered, brightly painted boat that plies for fares along the Bund at Shanghai, Foochow, Hongkong or any other port south of the Yangtze. One even hears the smaller types of native houseboat called sampan, so universally has the name become applied. Generally speaking, any small native craft is designated a sampan, and with that the average Westerner is satisfied. But even the most cursory observations will reveal the fact that just as there is an almost unlimited variety amongst the sea-going and coastal craft of China, so there is an unbelievable number of types of craft plying upon the rivers, lakes and canals of the interior.

On the Min River, for instance, in Fukien, there are what are called “rice boats” and “sparrow boats.” These are specially constructed with narrow bows and stern, for going up and down rapids, the former with cargo, the latter with passengers.

Throughout the creek-intersected areas of Kiangsu and Chekiang a long, narrow, almost canoe-like craft is used expressly for fast passenger services. These may be propelled by a man in the stern working two oars, one with his hands and another with his feet, something altogether unique in the art of rowing, or by as many as three yuloh or stern sweeps worked from right to left. They travel at great speed, for native craft, and are used to carry passengers from the villages to the towns and markets and back again. Early in the morning their owners may be heard blowing their conches as they signal to the villagers that they are ready to start, and in the evening they may be seen bringing the same villagers and country-folk back to their homesteads.

The yuloh, be it mentioned, may be considered the supreme invention of the Chinese in regard to inland water shipping, for it is the most efficient man-power method of propelling a boat. It may be described as a long, heavy oar composed of two parts, the blade and the handle, spliced together in such a way that they form a very wide angle. About half-way up the blade is a socket which fits on to a knobbled iron peg in the stern of the boat, the blade dipping into the water behind the boat, and the end of the handle being looped or hooked to a rope which is fastened to the side of the boat. By moving this oar to and fro from right
and left, and imparting a certain twist at each stroke, a single coolie can drive a heavily laden sampan through the water that would take several men to row or paddle in the ordinary way, while a crew of three or four can manipulate the largest barge fully loaded. The yuloh is a marvel of efficiency, and the only wonder is that it has not become universally adopted outside of China. In China it is everywhere used, except in swift rivers. Its only drawback is that it is not fast, which, of course, renders it useless against swift strong currents. Other methods extensively used by the Chinese are tracking and poling. They are past masters at the latter.

Longer journeys are usually taken in native houseboats, which are really very comfortable and comparatively fast, especially if there is a wind and sailing is possible, for they are all fitted with tall masts and big lug sails. These craft range in size from a little more than a sampan up to boats of 50 feet or more, some capable of carrying cargo as well as passengers, and, plying on the large rivers, almost equal junks in size.

Then, of course, there are all the numerous cargo-carrying river boats that may be designated as barges, and these are the main carriers of produce wherever water transit is to be had. Even amongst these there is a great variety of form and structure, far too great to be described here. Donelly’s book describes some of these, but only a comparatively few.

In out-of-the-way districts various peculiar and unusual types of craft are used. For instance, throughout Manchuria a dug-out canoe is used. This has been introduced by the Koreans, who have settled extensively in this part of the country. Manchurian rivers are als navigated by a kind of craft in many ways differing from those of China Proper, and called wei-ho, while on the Yellow River, from about Ninghsia in Kansu to the point where it debouches from the mountainous and hilly regions of South Shansi on to the plains of East China, a very roughly-built scow is used. This type of craft is built at various spots on the northern loop of the Yellow River, and can only be used to carry cargo down stream, the river being too swift and full of shoals to allow navigation by ordinary boats upstream. They are built of narrow boards cut from the small and crooked willows that alone will grow in these desolate regions, and show an extraordinary amount of ingenuity on the part of the builders in the piecing together and rivetting of the crooked planks. At the end of their journey down river these barges are sold and broken up for firewood. There is one place on this river, where it runs between Shan and Shensi, where some formidable rapids and a very considerable waterfall occur, and here these scows are unloaded, and lowered empty by means of stout ropes down a series of rapids that mark a small détour of the main stream, the cargo being carried on land to a point below, where it is placed on board again.

In places in the vicinity of Hangchow the canals are at different levels, and to get boats from one level to another an ingenious mud slide is used, the boats being drawn up or lowered by means of a heavy hauser wound on to rough capstains on the bank.
THE JUNKS, SAMPPANS AND INLAND WATERWAYS OF CHINA

Just as there is a great variety of craft that sail the waters of China, so there is a wide diversity amongst the people that use them. It has many times been noted what an immense river and canal population there is in this country, literally millions of individuals being born, living and dying upon their boats. Particularly noticeable is this from Shanghai southward. Indeed, in Fukien Province there is what may almost be called a race of people—certainly more than a class—who literally have no rights on land. They are called the river people, and their women wear a dress distinctive from those of the other women of the province, especially in the matter of pantaloons and the way they do the hair.

On the creeks and canals of Kiangsu and Chekiang there is a class of boat-livers that may almost be called water gypsies, living, as they do, vagrant lives upon their wretched little boats, and earning a precarious living when and how they can, stealing, fishing, occasionally carrying cargo, but mostly acting as scavengers. Hundreds of these people may be seen in the side creeks of the Whangpoo in the vicinity of Shanghai.

China is not lacking in regular marine fishermen, as may be gathered by the number of fishing junks and sampans to be seen along the coasts, while, for all we are living in the 20th century, numerous pirates still infest the China seas. Many a grizzly tragedy is enacted upon the China seas, and there are certain parts of the coast known as pirates’ strongholds. Bias Bay, on the south-east coast, is, perhaps, the most famous of these, by reason of the fact that the pirates from this roost have several times of late years attacked and actually captured steamers, taking them to Bias Bay and there looting them and carrying off passengers for ransom. Other places are Tsung Ming Island, in the Yangtze Estuary, and the sea coast from Taku, at the mouth of the Hai Ho, near Tientsin, northward. In the villages of the hinterland of this latter region it is surprising what valuable commodities, rich silks, clothing and the like, may be purchased at low prices. They are the loot of the sea. The Chinese pirate is not a thing of the past. He is as active as ever, but with the passing of the foreign sailing ship his activities, with certain desperate exceptions already alluded to, became confined to native craft.

The inland waterways of China, as may have been gathered from the foregoing remarks upon the numerous craft that ply upon them, are of extreme importance to the country. There are many great rivers, forming natural water highways for the transport of commerce, the most important being the Yangtzekiang, whose basin occupies about half of China Proper. Other important rivers in this connection are the Pei Ho in Chihli, and the Sikiang, or West River, in the south. These are supplemented with canals, in the construction and maintenance of which the Chinese have in the past shown themselves very apt. Of these canals the most important is, of course, the Grand Canal, one of the wonders of the world. This connects Peking with Hangchow, and is 1,200 miles in length, having been designed mainly for the carrying of tribute rice in the old imperial days. The first part of this canal, between the Yellow River and the Yangtzekiang, was constructed in the Chow Dynasty, about B.C. 485, the section from the Yangtze to Hangchow in the Sung Dynasty, and the final part from the Yellow River to Peking
by Kublai Khan. The most important system of canals occurs in what may really be looked upon as the Yangtze Delta, the flat alluvial area of Kiangsu and North Chekiang that lies to either side of the Yangtze mouth and extends as far south as the estuary of the Chientang River at Hangchow. This whole area is cut up to a perfectly astounding degree by canals, creeks and ditches, is mainly tidal, and carries an enormous boat traffic. Every village and hamlet in this whole area can be reached by water, it being merely a question of the size of the boat. There must be a total of many tens of thousands of miles of waterway in this area. The Whangpoo River, upon which Shanghai is situated, runs through this vast system of canals and creeks, and is the main source of supply of the water that fills them. The tide, rushing up at great speed, is felt well over a hundred miles up its course, the waters coming down from the hilly country of North-west Chekiang and South-west Kiangsu, backing up for a considerable distance further inland.

The Whangpoo is actually a tributary of the Yangtze, which, in turn, is China’s chief water highway, being navigable for ocean-going steamers as far as Hankow, 600 miles up its course, while other steamer traffic can go as far as Suifu, in Szechuan, 1,630 miles from the mouth.

The Huang Ho as a navigable river is not worthy of consideration, being shallow and full of shoals and sandbanks from its mouth up to the point where it emerges from the mountains of the interior, and swift and treacherous from there up to its source. A certain amount of boat traffic occurs over limited sections, but nothing of very great importance.

The Pei Ho,* on which Tientsin is situated, may be considered a poor replica of the Whangpoo, the inland shipping of Chihli being very similar to that of the hinterland of Shanghai. But, owing to the excessive amount of silt carried by the Yung-ting Ho, one of the tributaries of the Pei Ho, the latter has been giving an enormous amount of trouble lately by becoming silted up and too shallow for the usual steamer traffic.

The Chientang, Min and other rivers of South-eastern China are important as commerce and produce carriers, while the Sikiang, or West River, in the south does what the Yangtze does for the central areas, tapping the rich provinces of Kwangtung, Kwangsi, and neighbouring parts of Hunan and Kweichow, bringing their produce down to Canton and the important harbour of Hongkong. The importance of rivers and other inland waterways to China will be realized when we note that from Canton northward to Shanghai all the treaty ports are fed as to trade from the interior by rivers—Swatow, Foochow, Wenchow, Ningpo and Hangchow—while the most important treaty port in the north, Tientsin, is similarly fed by a river system. Newchwang and Antung, important ports in South Manchuria, are also fed by large rivers, the former by the Liao and the latter by the Yalu. The greater part of Manchuria is drained by the Sungari River, an important tributary of the Amur, and its tributaries. This river is navigable for light-draught steamers from its mouth as far as Kirin city, and from there a further hundred miles or so by Chinese craft. It carries a very considerable traffic, which is steadily increasing as the country develops.

* The lower part of this river, from Tientsin to the mouth, which alone is navigable for steamers, is called the Hai Ho.