

Session 9: History and Current Trends of Underwater Archaeology around East Asia

An interview with Session Chair, Akifumi Iwabuchi,

1. Why did you choose to organize this session?

In 2011 Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology, to which Session 9 organizers belong, organized an independent session by the same title as session 9 (“History and Current Trends of Underwater Archaeology around East Asia”) at the first Asia-Pacific Regional Conference on Underwater Cultural Heritage in Manila. At that time, Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology had the session, together with the Asian Research Institute of Underwater Archaeology in Fukuoka, Japan. However, Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology has decided to organize one session by itself alone in Hawaii. I am extremely happy to have eleven presenters at Session 9, not only from Japan, but also from China, Korea, and the U.S.

2. What did you hope to gain from it?

Since the 1950's, the Mediterranean Sea in Europe has been, in a sense, the centre of underwater archaeology. Because of some political reasons, indeed, underwater archaeology in Asian region has been underdeveloped, but in terms of maritime history, as we all know, Asian waters are as important as the Mediterranean Sea. Recently some scholars have named Asian waters between East and Southeast Asia the “Asian Mediterranean.” In the very near future, presumably, this area also will be another world-centre of underwater archaeology. I hope that this Session 9 will trigger off the new era of maritime archaeology in Asia.

3. How does your session fit into the overall theme of the conference?

As far as I understand, this conference treats the management and protection strategies of underwater cultural heritage, the regional cooperation, and the technical and ethical issues related to underwater archaeology in the Asia-Pacific region. As we see, papers and presentations at Session 9 well succeeded in widely covering these themes concerning East Asia.

4. What do you hope to see accomplished in your research area (as represented by the papers in this session) over the next ten or more years?

Because of some political reasons, as I told, underwater archaeology has been underdeveloped in East Asia. Perhaps even still it is so owing to territorial disputes over the sea in Asian waters. On the other hand, however, to study underwater cultural heritage has no national boundaries. Fortunately in Japan, Tokyo University of Marine Science and Technology has just become a member university of UNESCO Underwater Archaeology Unitwin Network. It is the only one member university from the Asian region. For example, if the National Research Institute of Maritime Cultural Heritage in Korea, the National Center of Underwater Cultural Heritage in China, and my university in Japan could work together in the field of underwater archaeology, the famous quote “the pen is mightier than the sword” will be materialized in this region.

5. What are some of the greatest challenges that your research area (as represented by the papers in this session) faces at this time?

Among East Asian and Southeast Asian countries, still only Cambodia has ratified the UNESCO 2001 convention. In contrast, nearly 50 other nations worldwide have already ratified this convention. Even in Asia, including Japan, underwater archaeologists cannot work without referring to the UNESCO convention. I am not a politician, but hopefully every Asian government will start considering ratification for future international cooperation.

6. Are there any areas (geographic, thematic, or otherwise) within your topic (as represented by the papers in this session) that you feel are underrepresented?

In Japan, we have just started to discuss how to deal with Japanese shipwrecks during the First and the Second World Wars and human remains therein. According to the UNESCO convention, all shipwrecks from World War II are not considered underwater cultural heritage until 2045, but many underwater archaeologists have already worked

them in the Pacific region. I think it is high time that underwater archaeologists in countries concerned including Japan could establish an international research body or organization for studying the shipwrecks as underwater cultural heritage.

7. What do you suggest to draw more attention to those areas?

In particular, at such an international gathering we will have to discuss how to treat human remains from war shipwrecks. As for them, Christianity is completely different from Japanese philosophy. According to the traditional Japanese belief, human remains will never become underwater cultural heritage.

8. Any other comments you would like to make.

Although this conference is titled “Asia-Pacific Regional Conference”, unfortunately, there are no Chinese, Koreans, or Japanese belonging to their home academic institutions on the organizing committee of APCONF 2014. Furthermore, Pacific island nations such as Federated States of Micronesia or Tonga are also underrepresented. Hopefully, the organizing committee of APCONF 2017 will have some East Asian or Pacific representation within the structure.