



The Infamous Ningpo

BY DON H. KENNEDY

FEW ships can have had a history longer or more varied than that of the junk *Ningpo*. Built as a coastal merchantman of the Foochow pole-junk type, she was at times (reputedly) a smuggler, a pirate, a slaver, a prison ship, a rebel vessel in two revolutions, and a prize taken by 'Chinese' Gordon who renamed her *Ningpo* after the treaty port. In California she was successively a tourist attraction, a cafe, a movie set, and a lure for yachtsmen of two generations.

In reporting the first sighting of *Ningpo* in western waters, the master of the Matson steamer *Honolulu* dispatched a terse radiogram, giving the position of a large Chinese junk about 370 miles west of Point Arguello, California. That was on 10 February 1913.¹

One week later the steam schooner *Avalon* reported in more detail. Off Santa Barbara Light the night of 17 February, Captain Christensen had observed a three-masted vessel with a high stern, apparently a very large Chinese junk.² She was large for a junk; actually 138 feet in length, with a thirty-one-foot beam and a fifteen-foot draft. But instead of the customary battened lug sails of a junk she carried the gaff-headed canvas of a typical schooner.

About twenty-four hours later, the night of 18 February, *Ningpo* anchored for quarantine in the outer harbor of San Pedro, completing a 7,000-mile passage from the Orient in fifty-eight days.³ 'The customs officers are more than ordinarily curious,' commented the *Los Angeles Times*, 'because the *Ningpo* has a world-wide reputation as a bad actor.' The *Times* also observed she had 'more past than a chorus lady.'

She came without documents other than bills of health and a clearance permit, both issued by Japanese customs, and measured out at 291 gross tons, but, being intended only for exhibition, was not documented; her

¹ San Pedro Daily News, 14 February 1913.

² Los Angeles Times, 19 February 1913.

³ Daily News, op. cit.