



## Revolution Offshore, Capitalism Onshore

Ships and the Changing  
Relationship between China  
and the World

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*This essay tells a backstory of the Belt and Road Initiative by tracing the voyages of the Minghua and two other ships managed by the China Ocean Shipping Bureau—both as mobile vessels at sea and as a permanent presence on land. When mobile at sea in the Mao period, these ships functioned as vessels not only for passengers and commodities, but also for Maoist ideology. The Minghua’s retirement to Shenzhen then coincided with China’s transition from the Mao to the Deng era. Having bid farewell to the sea, the ship became part of the city’s landscape and was turned into a dynamic experiment field for the market economy and a medium through which ideas travel and identities shift*

The *Minghua* ship in 1989.  
PC: Zhang Xinmin (in Di  
2018: 72).

I grew up in a migrant family in Shenzhen, so the *Sea World* (海上世界) had a special place in my childhood memories. The iconic *Minghua* (明华轮, which means ‘to enlighten China’)—a cruise ship transformed into a hotel, bars, and restaurants all in one—was a ‘must-see’ tourist destination for visiting relatives and a popular backdrop for family photos. The spacious plaza adjacent to the *Minghua* was a frequented spot for weekend strolls. Following the trend among ‘the cool kids’ of the early 1990s, I had birthday parties at the *Sea World* McDonald’s—one of the fast food chain’s first restaurants in China.



The author and visiting cousins at the *Minghua* Ship, 1996. PC: Taomo Zhou.



The author and parents at the *Sea World* McDonalds, Shekou, 1994. PC: Taomo Zhou.

Little did I realise at that time that the *Minghua*, like my parents and millions of other citizens in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, was itself a migrant that in China's not-so-distant socialist past had a completely different identity. Purchased by the China Ocean Shipping Bureau (中国远洋运输局) from France in 1973, the ship transported materials and engineers from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to East Africa for the construction of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway in 1973–76 and facilitated the repatriation of ethnic Chinese refugees from Vietnam and Chinese aid workers from Cambodia in the aftermath of the Third Indochina War, before docking permanently in Shenzhen in 1983. In 1984, Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China's reform, boarded the *Minghua* and gifted the ship with a calligraphy inscription of its new name, the '*Sea World*'—a significant political gesture that affirmed the place of market-oriented practices in Shenzhen.

A global connector, ships are one of the oldest transport technologies and have linked different parts of the world 'through trade, colonialism, migration and tourism' (Anim-Addo et al. 2014: 338). Before the COVID-19 crisis, modern ships serving different purposes—from warships to oil tankers, from floating campuses of the Semester-at-Sea program to hospital ships—traversed the maritime world (Reyes 2018; Khalili 2020). Even though the cruise industry was hard hit by the pandemic, the importance of merchant vessels

only increased. Many of us anxiously monitored the recent blockage of the Suez Canal, worrying about the potential delays of our online orders. Yet beyond the Ming Dynasty junks that played an important role in the South China Sea trade but probably did not 'discover the world', we know surprisingly little about modern Chinese ships (Wang 1998; Menzies 2002).

Ships like the *Minghua* symbolise China's transformation and its changing position in the world. If contemporary maritime trade flows under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) illustrate China's engagement with global capitalism, the early history of the *Minghua* reminds us of China's past commitment to revolutionary internationalism. This essay is a preliminary attempt to understand Chinese ships as social spaces remotely serving but temporarily disconnected from the PRC state. It tells a backstory of the BRI by tracing the voyages of the *Minghua* and two other ships managed by the China Ocean Shipping Bureau—both as mobile vessels at sea and as a permanent presence on land.

## Socialist Spaces at Sea

In 1958, the PRC's Ministry of Transportation established an office in Guangzhou in the hope of developing maritime trade and circumventing a US-led embargo. In its early years, the Guangzhou

Office of the China Ocean Shipping Bureau assembled a fleet comprising ships such as *Heping* (和平轮, 'peace'), which was transferred from Shanghai, and *Guanghua* (光华轮, 'to revive China'), which was purchased from Britain. In the early 1960s, the *Heping* and *Guanghua* made regular trips to major Southeast Asian ports, including Jakarta, Medan, Rangoon, Singapore, and Surabaya, carrying passengers as well as goods such as rice, pepper, and rubber—the last of which had been placed high on the international embargo list by the United States. Besides trade, the ships also carried out political missions. The *Guanghua* facilitated the repatriation of ethnic Chinese from Indonesia during the 1959–60 anti-Chinese movement and the 1965–66 mass political violence; it was also in charge of the transportation of Chinese, Vietnamese, and North Korean athletes to Indonesia to attend the 1963 Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF), an international sporting event held among the radically anti-imperialist countries in opposition to the Olympic Games (Zhou 2019: 132–33).

Crossing the South China Sea during the Cold War, the *Heping* and *Guanghua*—cut off from the broader Chinese society and exposed to encounters with capitalist vessels and port workers—were isolated and vulnerable socialist spaces. When entering the Port of Tanjung Priok in Jakarta in 1962, the *Heping's* captain noted the 'arrogant' gaze from an American captain perched on the deck of his ship with arms folded over his bare chest (GPA, 291-1-105). When unloading goods in Singapore, the *Guanghua's* captain recorded that some local Chinese Singaporean porters scribbled 'bad slogans' inside the cabins—such as 'down with the People's Commune' and 'there is no rice, no clothes, no bicycle and no watch in China'—and told the PRC sailors lurid tales about prostitutes (GPA, 291-1-112-23-36). Besides the lure of 'corrosive capitalist thinking', the crew's loyalty to the Party-State was also weakened by labour disputes. For instance, sailors on the *Guanghua* who had worked as People's Liberation Army (PLA) navy officers were dissatisfied with the decrease in their income and passively resisted the captain's orders by foot-dragging (GPA, 291-1-112-102-112).

Sociologist Victoria Reyes characterises the ship as a 'transient total institution' because the personnel's clothing, movements, sleeping schedules, food consumption, morality, and sexuality are often strictly regulated (Reyes 2018: 1100, 1103). On the socialist ships *Heping* and *Guanghua*, 'thought work' (思想工作) was rigorously conducted to protect the crew from 'provocations from imperialists and international counterrevolutionaries' (GPA, 291-1-112-102-112). During one of *Guanghua's* journeys in 1964 between China and Indonesia, the crew had to spend a mandatory 4.5 hours per week on collective political study sessions, with a focus on the three important essays (老三篇) written by Mao Zedong: 'Serve the People', 'Commemorating Norman Bethune', and 'The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains'. In addition, everyone was required to write a 'study diary' (学习日记), which was inspected by the study group leaders on board (GPA, 291-1-112-102-112).

For the Chinese overseas in Southeast Asia, *Heping* and *Guanghua* symbolised the 'new socialist China' and served as vehicles for the PRC's international propaganda. On summer evenings in Rangoon in 1961, the captain of *Heping* felt 'deeply touched' when seeing crowds gathering on top of the Sule Pagoda, trying to catch a glimpse of the gigantic red star on the ship's chimney. An 'elderly Chinese granny who had lived many years in Burma' hired a sampan boat to take her around *Heping*. She 'caressed the ship's gangway ladder' and was 'reluctant to leave' (GPA, 291-1-105). When transporting diasporic Chinese affected by Indonesia's nationalist economic legislation in 1959–60, *Guanghua* organised intensive ideological indoctrination programs for the passengers during their time at sea. Political messages about the glorious progress of New China were presented through newsletters on the noticeboards, the screening of movies and documentaries, and even makeshift theatrical shows. One passenger recalled attending revolutionary music lessons every day at 8 am on the deck, learning songs such as 'Socialism Is Good'. Yet the crew on the *Guanghua* avoided talking about the economic difficulties caused by the Great Leap Forward, leading to heartbreaking disillusionment among the migrants after their arrival in the PRC (Zhou 2019: 200).



'Sportsmen from Foreign Countries to the First Game of New Emerging Forces Warmly Welcomed at Djakarta's Tandang Priok.' *China Pictorial*, Special Supplement, December 1963.

Ironically, the *Guanghua* and *Heping* also facilitated public diplomacy in non-socialist ways. At most of the harbours these ships visited, cocktail parties were hosted with assistance from the PRC embassies and consulates as well as business leaders from the Chinese diasporic communities. The guests at these occasions were mostly officials from foreign immigration and customs offices, ministries of trade and commerce, and the navy. The captains would usually give gifts in exchange for favourable treatment through customs clearance and other procedures (Zhou 2019: 200). In June 1961, on arrival at the Port of Tanjung Priok, the *Heping's* captain invited Indonesian officials onboard for a fancy dinner and presented them with Chungwa cigarettes—a premium brand produced in Shanghai—and bottles of brandy. The next day, he 'did not know whether he should laugh or cry' when reading the local newspaper,

which reported that the hospitable Indonesians had welcomed the visiting Chinese ship by organising a banquet in its honour (GPA, 291-1-105).

## A Capitalist Experiment Field on Land

The *Minghua's* last journeys before its retirement reflected a reorientation of the PRC's diplomacy in the late 1970s. In June 1978, on its way home from Africa, the *Minghua* received instructions to prepare for a trip to Vietnam to evacuate local ethnic Chinese who were being persecuted due to the escalating geopolitical rivalry between the once 'brothers plus comrades' Hanoi and Beijing (Zhang 2015: 1; FBIS, 7 June 1978). Before its departure, the *Minghua's* crewmen held rallies at the Huangpu port of Guangzhou, expressing 'great indignation' at the Vietnamese authorities for 'returning good with evil' considering past Chinese aid to Vietnam's anticolonial, anti-imperialist struggles (FBIS, 11 June 1978). Despite the publicity it received, the evacuation operation failed and the *Minghua* returned with 'no victimized Chinese national' onboard (FBIS, 2 August 1978). Bilateral relations continued to deteriorate and reached their lowest point when Deng Xiaoping launched an attack 'to teach Vietnam a lesson' in 1979 (Ang 2018: 179). Under Deng, economic growth gained priority over ideological campaigns. In his calculation, military actions against Vietnam and its Soviet backers would help China in its approaches to the capitalist world for investment and technology transfers (Zhang 2015: 6–9).

The *Minghua* bore witness to the collapse of Beijing's partnership with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam as well as the deepening of Beijing's ties with capitalist Japan. In October 1978, Deng made a historic trip to Japan—a country he believed had important lessons the PRC should learn to realise its Four Modernisations (Vogel 2011: 294). In the summer of 1979, the *Minghua* sailed around Japan as a 'Sino-Japanese friendship ship'. Tokyo-born Liao Chengzhi, the director of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office under the PRC State Council, headed a delegation of 600 'friendship



The Minghua ship in 2009. PC: (CC) @Flickrmarcus.

emissaries', including the wife and daughter of the deceased PLA general and vice-premier He Long (FBIS, 12 July 1979; Tu 2008: 391). Diplomacy between China and Japan continued on the *Minghua* after it made Shenzhen its home. In 1986, a Sino-Japanese 'Go' tournament was held in the renovated captain's lounge on the *Sea World*, attracting the attention of board game enthusiasts and high-profile spectators such as the top representative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Hong Kong, Xu Jiatur (STB, 25 June; 10 July: 186).

The Go tournament sparked public curiosity in Japan about China's Reform and Opening-Up. Japan's most prestigious newspaper, *The Asahi Shimbun*, published a series of reports on Shenzhen, China's first special economic zone, and the Shekou Industrial Zone, 'a special zone within a special zone' (STB, 10 July 1986). This 2.14-square-kilometre enclave on the west coast of Shenzhen was managed by the Hong Kong office of China Merchants Group (CMG), an important modern shipping enterprise originally established by Qing Dynasty official Li Hongzhang, which in the 1970s came under the leadership of Yuan Geng.

Yuan, a guerilla fighter and military commander during the Second Sino-Japanese War, had worked in Southeast Asia as an intelligence agent in the 1950s and 1960s (Du 2020: 125). He named his children—both born in Indonesia—Zhongyin (中印, 'China-Indonesia') and Niya (尼亚, a transliteration of '-nesia' from 'Indonesia') (Tu 2008: 394). With his rich overseas experiences and familiarity with the commercial culture in the Asia-Pacific, Yuan was well positioned to supervise China's first 'test tube' that accepted foreign investment. Yet in the early 1980s, Shekou lacked the tourism facilities to accommodate the increasing number of investors from Hong Kong and beyond. Yuan, who escorted the Chinese Indonesian refugees on the *Guanghua* in the 1960s, came up with the idea of repurposing its 'sister ship', the *Minghua*. With 263 guest rooms as well as swimming pools, restaurants, and bars, all meeting international hospitality standards, the *Minghua* was a ready-made five-star hotel. In August 1983, the CMG purchased the retired cruiser and, within four months, transformed it into a one-stop entertainment centre (Tu 2008: 366–67).

The first general manager of the reincarnated *Minghua* was Wang Chaoliang, a reinvented ‘red engineer’ trained in aerodynamics who had worked in a military industrial complex in the northern Chinese hinterland. To make up for his lack of knowledge in the hospitality industry, Wang hired an experienced hotel manager from Hong Kong at more than 30 times his own monthly salary. The first batch of housekeepers, waiters, and bartenders was recruited from across Guangdong Province via hypercompetitive examinations and interviews (Chen 2009). Around Christmas 1983, Wang received orders to prepare for the visit of a VIP who loved spicy food. Deng Xiaoping’s visit to the *Minghua* reaffirmed his conviction for China to continue economic reform. Three days later, he wrote: ‘The development and experience of Shenzhen has proven that our policy to establish the special economic zone is correct’ (Di 2018: 70). At the PRC’s National Day parade in 1984, a scaled-down float in the shape of the *Minghua* bearing Yuan Geng’s famous slogan ‘Time is money, efficiency is life’ (时间就是金钱, 效率就是生命) appeared on Tiananmen Square, making the *Sea World* a household name in China (He 2018: 290).

Although immobile, the retired *Minghua* became a lively public space for cultural exchanges, social interaction, and conviviality. The managers of the Shekou Industrial Zone organised a ‘city flower exhibition’ and a ‘folk culture exhibition’, both of which became nationally famous, with the latter attracting more than two million tourists and becoming the prototype for the hugely successful tourist site Splendid China Folk Village (*STB*, 25 September 1986; 1 October 1990). Catering to the needs of the large number of young migrant workers in the Shekou Industrial Zone, the *Minghua* provided low-cost, high-quality leisure activities, from waltz and samba lessons to Sichuan-flavour late-night snacks (*STB*, 11 September 1989; 26 November 1990). Interestingly, the ballroom and restaurants onboard offered special discounts to Communist Youth League members (*STB*, 25 March 1986).

## Voyages from Mao to Deng

As Paul Gilroy (1993: 4) shows in his study of the ‘Black Atlantic’, the ship should be understood as a ‘living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion’. The PRC’s ships functioned as a distinctive type of state space in international waters, contributing to the geostrategic and economic goals of the Chinese Government. When mobile at sea, these ships functioned as vessels not only for passengers and commodities, but also for Maoist ideology; upon arrival in foreign ports, the ships became floating venues for public diplomacy where local officials, PRC diplomats, and Chinese diasporic communities mingled. The *Minghua*’s retirement coincided with China’s transition from the Mao to the Deng era. Having bid farewell to the sea and become part of the city’s landscape, the ship was turned into a dynamic experiment field (试验场) for the market economy and a medium through which ideas travel and identities shift.

The *Minghua* lives on after more than two decades at sea and almost four decades on land. Having weathered land reclamation and the closure of the adjacent bathing beach due to pollution, the *Minghua* narrowly escaped being dismantled several times in the 1990s (Di 2018: 73). After the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis, the local authorities successfully restructured Shekou with the *Sea World* at its centre (Di 2018: 75). Today’s *Sea World* still offers a free public square and urban green spaces, but the Brazilian barbecue, German bar, and boutique coffee shops cater largely to expats and upper-middle-class consumers. In the supersonic-speed urban development in Shenzhen, *Minghua* is a legend. But compared with the 1980s, it is no longer a leisure-oriented public space for young workers and provides few opportunities for upward social mobility to migrants. The ship has witnessed the decline of Mao-era revolutionary diplomacy, the rise of the Deng-era market economy, and the wealth and inequality it created. ■