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THE 'PRESENCE' OF ABSENT SEAFARERS: PREDICAMENTS OF CHINESE SEAFARER-PARTNERS

Lijun Tang

Abstract

This paper examines the difficulties experienced by a group of relatively young seafarer-partners. Drawing upon online observation and interview data, it suggests that these seafarer-partners suffer emotional loneliness, stigmatization and social isolation associated with the relatively long-term absences of seafarers. These experiences may have implications for seafarers' morale at work and the retention of seafarers.

Introduction

Seafaring is a special career. It often causes predicaments for seafaring families, such as loneliness, isolation and role displacement (Thomas, 2003; Thomas and Bailey, 2006; Thomas, Sampson and Zhao, 2003), although it can also positively impact upon seafarer partners in terms of income and independence (Sampson, 2005; Thomas, 2003). Families, however, play an important role for male seafarers, since when at home they depend heavily on their wives for social networks and emotional warmth (Thomas, 2003; Thomas and Bailey, 2006). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that family stability has an influence on seafarers' morale at work. Additionally, the desire for a happy family may play a significant part in determining whether a seafarer remains at sea or not. Given that the shortage of officers has become a priority at the top of many companies' agendas in the shipping industry (BIMCO/ISF, 2005), the retention of qualified seafarers is arguably more important, today, than ever before.

This paper is based upon the experiences of young Chinese seafarer-partners, who are computer literate and participating in online discussions on a website called the *Home of Chinese Seafarers*. While the informants of past studies were seafarers' wives across the whole age range, most of the seafarer-partners in this study have not been married yet and can be considered to represent more closely the partners of future seafarers. With the largest population and relatively adequate Maritime Education and

Training facilities, China is regarded as an important seafarer supply country that has the potential to help bridge the officer shortage gap in the near future. In this context, young Chinese seafarer-partners' experiences are worthy of particular attention.

Methods

This research focuses on the *Home of Chinese Seafarers*, which was established on May 1st in 2003 by a fairly new seafarer. It is a Bulletin Board System (BBS) website containing a number of forums and covering the following discussion areas:

- Information exchange for seafarers and future seafarers
- Careers advice for future seafarers
- Job information for seafarers
- Experiences of seafarers and seafarer-partners

Besides postings, the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* also provides a diary space for its participants to record, and to open up to others, their everyday experiences. By October 15th 2005, some 19 months or so after its start, the website had 11,532 registered members, including Chinese seafarers, students of Chinese Maritime Education and Training institutes, partners of seafarers and seafaring students, Chinese shipping companies, crewing agencies, and others in the seafaring community. In the autumn of 2005, it was estimated that the number of participants online simultaneously was on average around fifty over any given 24-hour period. Besides registered members, non-members are allowed to visit this website and read postings as guests. As in many of other BBS websites, the number of registered members does not represent the participating population. It seems that only a few hundred members (including seafarer-partners, seafarers and others from the seafaring community) are active at a given time. The others remain inactive for long time periods or disappear completely after a few 'visits'.

One research method employed in this study was online observation. From August 2005, I started 'observing' seafarer-partners' activities online in the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* regularly. My attention was paid mainly to the open diary space and one forum called 'Communication between Seafarers and Seafarer-Partners' where

seafarer-partners were likely to make postings. Occasionally, I also browsed other forums. During the two-year observation period, the following kinds of writings were gathered:

- Revealing problems that seafarer-partners face due to the absence of seafarers
- Indicating relationships between seafarer-partner participants in this website
- Disclosing seafarer-partners' feelings towards participating in the website
- Reflecting how the website is managed
- Showing the reasons for coming to and leaving the website

This paper focuses on the first point.

Unlike interview transcripts, data from online observation is not obtained via the gathering of responses to the researchers' questions. Rather, in the case of this research, postings and open diaries in the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* were produced for their own sake. In this sense, these fieldnotes are more natural and spontaneous than interview data. If the range and scope of interview questions pose restrictions on what informants can answer, observation allows flexibility. The observed, of course, write what they want to reveal, and they have no intention to note down what the researcher needs. Some postings and diaries, however, are related to seafarer-partners' everyday lives and thus reveal some of their dilemmas caused by separation. A long period of observation (over one and half years for this project) of many seafarer-partner participants' writings arguably allows the researcher to draw a relatively detailed picture of their day to day concerns.

One may wonder whether the postings or diary entries in the website are authentic. The 30 interviewees also included in the study, however, believed that those postings reflected real experiences. Moreover, some informants stated that the anonymity in 'online space' encouraged them to reveal their innermost feelings and thoughts which they would not do in their 'offline' daily lives.

The other research method was interviewing. Between February and April 2006, I interviewed fifteen seafarer-partner participants of the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* in three places of China: Shanghai, Nanjing and Shandong province. Thirteen interviews were undertaken face-to-face, while the other two were by telephone. In addition to

these, another fifteen interviews were undertaken using email during 2005. Altogether thirty seafarer-partners from various parts of China took part in interviews. As mentioned earlier, the informants were relatively young, well educated, lived in cities, and had access to the internet. Twenty-nine of them had received, or were receiving, higher education; twenty five were below thirty in age; and only eleven were married at the time of interviewing.

Emotional loneliness

The painful experience that seafarer-partners are most likely to suffer certainly is emotional loneliness. The latter, according to Weiss (1973), is the subjective response to a long-term separation from, or loss of, the person to whom one is emotionally attached. Seafaring entails seafarers being away from home for long periods. For Chinese seafarers absence may be for around one year, since they are likely to sign one-year contracts. This inevitably involves the long-term separation of seafaring couples, which may cause, among others things, emotional isolation for seafarer-partners. The latter can present itself in several forms: longing, feeling of emptiness, complaining of seafarers' inability to provide emotional support, and worrying.

Longing was the most visible theme in the postings and diary entries on the website. 'It is not lonely to be one person alone; it is lonely to be longing for a person.' This poignant remark was one seafarer-partner's signature in the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* website. It reveals the major cause of loneliness – longing, which seafarer-partners have to face when seafarers are absent. Due to the nature of seafaring careers, seafarer-partners are alone most of the time. Thus though they are in relationships they are also rendered effectively single by their partners' absences. A seafarer-partner described this ambivalent situation as such:

A single person can live as others and lead a beautiful life. But I am in a predicament: behind the appearance of being single, you [the partner away at sea] are in my mind. Therefore, I cannot live as a single person. But the reality is that nor can I enjoy the shared life of a couple. I fall in between. [Fieldnote, 18/12/05]

When seafarers leave home for ships, seafarer-partners lose their intimate companions. This loss makes seafarer-partners feel that their lives suddenly become empty. For some new seafarer-partners this emptiness seems to be felt strongly. Two interviewees who were 'new' seafarer-partners reported:

[M]y boyfriend had been with me for a while and then he suddenly went onboard. I suddenly felt that my life had become empty. [Tulip]

My husband went onboard the ship shortly after we established our relationship. I suddenly felt empty. [Rebecca]

Many seafarer-partners also complained on the website of seafarers' inability to provide emotional support. Modern heterosexual relationships have been regarded to be the most important source for emotional intimacy (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992). Seafarers' long-term intermittent absence, however, renders this problematic. Two seafarer-partners complained:

When I feel bad and want to talk to you, your mobile has no signal; when I know from news that accidents happened at sea, it is an ordeal to hear nothing from you; when something happens home and needs your opinions, you are not here...[Fieldnote, 30/11/2005]

I feel so bad these days that I hope that you can give me some consolation. But what I face is always silence ... [Fieldnote, 10/01/2006]

Being attached to seafarers, seafarer-partners are concerned about their safety. Working and living on ships, seafarers are at the mercy of the sea. The sea, however, is perceived as mysterious, volatile and dangerous. Thus, seafaring careers are regarded as inherently risky. No matter whether this perception is correct or not, it can fill seafarer-partners with concerns for their partners' safety. One seafarer-partner wrote:

It is true that modern technology and safety standards enable ships to outride storms at sea. However, out on the vast ocean and being left high and dry, who can guarantee 100% safety of ships? [I am] worrying and fearing for his safety everyday. [I am] checking the situation of his ship everyday. Without exaggeration, this is an unbearable ordeal! [Fieldnote, 26/11/2005]

For the partners of new seafarers, worrying manifested itself even more strongly, because they had not previously experienced separations and were thus ill-prepared for their fears. Further, seafaring is a 'secluded' career in the sense that it takes place on the oceans and in enclosed ports, which are invisible to the wider population. Inexperienced seafarer-partners thus may know very little about seafaring. The sudden 'disappearance' of seafarers for the first time into an unknown and unreachable world makes their young partners worried. Two seafarer-partners recounted their experiences:

[H]e went to the sea for the first time. I could not get any of his information and was worried. [Dianna]

After he left, I did not get any of his information for two months. I was very anxious. [Snow]

The feeling of loneliness makes seafarer-partners treasure every trace of information they receive about their beloved seafarers. In the diary space, some seafarer-partners expressed their excitement after receiving a long-distance phone-call or a letter or an email. For example, one wrote after she had received a phone-call from her boyfriend:

He phoned me a moment ago, really!Oh, I cannot believe it. It was him.

It's really beyond my dream. How excited I was. [Fieldnote, 11-08-2005]

It has been noted, however, that there is no convenient and cheap communication means between ships and home (Thomas, et al., 2003). More often than not, therefore, seafarer-partners were complaining that they had not received any phone-calls for a long time. The following example illustrates the worries of seafarer-partners when they fail to make contact with seafarers:

One seafarer-partner: Why has my partner not made a phone-call? ... Having waited for dozens of days, I am worried.

Another seafarer-partner: Me too! I have not received a call for more than forty days. [Fieldnote, 12/12/2005]

As a result, a phone-call from the seafarers is important and being looked forward to; and seafarer-partners take every possible measure to make sure that they do not miss any contact from their partners. Many seafarer-partners disclosed that they dared not switch off their mobiles or to forget to take mobiles with them. One wrote:

Actually I know that the radiation from the mobile is not good for health. But when he is away, I am afraid of missing his phone-calls and therefore I keep it close to me around the clock. [Fieldnote, 19/03/2006]

Stigmatized by others

Of course, seafarer-partners do not live in a one- or two-person world. In every day lives, they interact with people around them. Sometimes, such interactions make seafarer-partners feel stigmatized.

The most common occasion when seafarer-partners felt victimized was when others gossiped about seafarers' infidelity. Most people know that seafarers leave home for a long time for the job; and that during this time, seafarers have no sexual contact with their partners and that they may go to foreign ports. This knowledge leads to a common perception about seafarers – seafarers are promiscuous and they have girls in every port. The presence of a seafarer-partner may invoke other people's discussion of or even joking about this. One seafarer-partner complained in one of her diary entries:

At lunch time, my colleagues talked about relationships. They said that the relationship would meet problems if two persons are separated for a long time. I knew that they were insinuating me and my seafarer boyfriend... They said that seafarers were not reliable. I have not seen him [her boyfriend] for eleven months and have been feeling bad for that. Their words made me feel worse... [Fieldnote, 06/01/2006]

It seemed that another seafarer-partner had encountered similar problems quite often. She was furious about this and wrote:

There are lots of curious people around. [They keep asking:] what is your husband job? I told them: a seafarer. Then they would look at me in a strange way. I do not mind how they think of me since they do not know much of seafaring ...But one thing makes me angry. I have been working in this company for three years ... and said good-bye to many colleagues. But the fact that my partner is a seafarer has never failed to evoke their curiosity and discussions about seafarers' infidelity... [Fieldnote 28/04/2006]

Though people do not know much about seafarers, they tend to associate seafarers with high incomes. When seafarer-partners told others that their partners were seafarers, the common response from others was said to be that seafarers earn lots of money. For example, one interviewee said:

For many people, once they know that we are married to seafarers, their first response would be saying that seafarers earn lots of money. [Forever]

From this common response, some seafarer-partners perceived a connotation: marry for money. One seafarer-partner complained:

When others ask me about my partner's career, I say that he is a seafarer. They would immediately respond that you are rich ... If our aim were really their money, why would we suffer the agony of separation, after all there are lot of rich men ashore. [Fieldnote, 19/05/2006]

This seafarer-partner clearly felt very bad at others' responses. The latter, in her view, insulted her and her sacrifice for love. She accepted that she could not, however, change others' perceptions.

Further, some seafarer-partners felt that others pitied them. Being alone most of the time, seafarer-partners had to cope with many tasks single-handedly, while other women had their husbands' or boyfriends' help. This sometimes attracted others' sympathetic eyes and such sympathy was not always welcome.. One seafarer-partner explained:

It is the end of the year. Our company provides each of us lots of things to celebrate the New Year¹. My colleagues rang their husbands to come to give them a hand, while I could not. They looked at me with pity when I was loading and lashing these things on my bike alone and with great difficulties... This was hard to bear. I do not want others to pity me! [Fieldnote, 25/01/2006]

Finally, people around were said to occasionally misinterpret seafarer-partners' motivations when communicating with the opposite sex. One seafarer's wife complained:

I am a seafarer's wife. Because my husband is not home most of the time, many people think that I cannot bear the loneliness. This brings me lots of pressure in

¹ It is a common practice in China for companies to buy for and distribute to their employees some goods, such as food and drinks, to celebrate New Year.

the work. As a leader, I have to talk to and discuss with colleagues quite often. This makes others suspicious of my motivation, which is awkward for me... [Fieldnote, 01/10/2006]

These words suggest that this seafarer-partner felt humiliated by others' inaccurate perceptions of her motivation when talking with colleagues. Thomas' (2003) study shows that the temporarily 'single status' of British seafarer-partners had double effects on them. On the one hand, they might fear unwanted attention from men who perceived them as single; on the other, they felt they were being regarded as a 'sexual predator' by coupled women. Similarly, it appears that the above seafarer-partner's discussions with colleagues were interpreted by others to be out of loneliness. Lotus, who had been married for twelve years, gave another account:

There are more things that I need to pay attention to, especially interactions with the other sex. Once they know that you are a seafarer's wife, they would ... they would be more likely to think in that way. In order to maintain a seafarer's partner's reputation, I have to be more careful. [Lotus]

Again, it seems that seafarer-partners' behaviours towards the opposite sex can easily be misinterpreted by others. For this, seafarer-partners felt stigmatized but helpless.

The four elements discussed so far can combine together. Separation, loneliness, money and promiscuous partners, may stir up people's imagination and curiosity when there is a seafarer-partner around. Others may not enquire or discuss seafarer-partners' lifestyle directly in front of a seafarer-partner. They can, however, do it indirectly. Another married seafarer-partner seems to have experienced various kinds of attention from others:

As a special group, we always live a different life-style. Around us, people are observing and guessing our lives with various eyes and attitudes: envy, sympathy, suspicion, and even pity! [Breeze]

The seafarer-partner identity thus seems likely to attract others' intrusive attention. Some envy seafarer-partners' having money; some sympathize and feel sorry for seafarer-partners' sufferings; and some suspect seafarer-partners' motivation for entering relationships with seafarers.

The above seafarer-partner's words also suggest that some of them become sensitive towards their surroundings. On the one hand, seafarer-partners may be aware that they

are different; and that as a result their different private lives are likely to attract others' attentions and speculations. On the other hand, knowing this makes seafarer-partners sensitive towards others' attitudes and behaviours towards them. The sensitivity leads some seafarer-partners to feel that the 'small talk' of familiar people about seafarers is intrusive. For example, one seafarer-partner wrote:

I used to be a very social person and liked to join in group activities. Now, I do not like going out after my husband left. No matter where I go, there are always people asking: how long has your husband been away and when will he come back? If I say that he has just left, others would show sympathy: your husband is good in all other respects but too far away from you... Some familiar colleagues and neighbours have never been tired of making such inquiries... [Fieldnote, 08/01/2006]

It appears that others' common questions and 'concerns' made this seafarer-partner feel stigmatized. To avoid the awkwardness, she chose self-seclusion. Similarly, another seafarer-partner wished to go to a new place in order to avoid others' intrusive talk:

The women in my office are the kind of people who gloat over others' misfortunes. They make jokes about me, as if my loneliness can remind them of their happiness... I want to go to a new place where people pay attention to their job instead of others' private lives. [Fieldnote, 31/12/2005]

Social loneliness

Apart from emotional loneliness, Weiss (1973) identifies another kind of loneliness – social isolation, which is due to an inadequacy of social networks. Though not uprooted from their everyday social grounds, some seafarer-partners may withdraw from the wider social network into a self-confined world to avoid others' intrusive prying, as I have shown in the last section.

Further, the longing for their absent partners causes seafarer-partners to become sensitive to other couples' togetherness. Seeing others being together or even hearing talk about husbands can easily remind seafarer-partners of their lonely situation. For example, one seafarer-partner wrote:

One day, it was snowing, some couples were sharing an umbrella, clinging together and talking to each other intimately. The feeling of loneliness suddenly rose from deep in my heart. [Fieldnote, 18/01/2006]

This sensitivity equally forces some seafarer-partners to withdraw from social activities. Two seafarer-partners complained in the *Home of Chinese Seafarers*:

In those days when you are away, I do not even want to go out. I fear of going to busy places, where the hurly-burly makes my loneliness and sadness prominent... [Fieldnote, 31/12/2005]

When I go out with other women, their talk always revolves around their husbands I don't have a husband at home. Being with them makes me feel the pain of my loneliness more sharply. So, normally, I do not go out. Instead, I stay home cooking and surfing the Internet... [Fieldnote, 08/01/2006]

Being in an 'in-between' situation, many seafarer-partners tend to set themselves apart from others who are together with their husbands or boyfriends. One seafarer-partner wrote in her diary:

A colleague just invited me to her house for dinner, but I declined. All others are in pairs ... I do not want to join them. [Since] my boyfriend is not around, I do not want to go anywhere but stay home to watch telly. [Fieldnote, 15.01/06]

These words indicate that when alone she did not want to be involved in situations for couples. Besides being reminded of the lonely state, seafarer-partners may feel awkward to have to mix with seemingly happy couples.

While some seafarer-partners have bosom friends, with whom they can share their ups and downs, many seafarer-partners reported feeling that their non-seafaring friends could not empathise with their feelings and situations. Seafarers' long absences created different experiences for seafarer partners compared with those whose partners worked ashore. Many informants in this study reported that conversations with non-seafaring friends could not 'go deep' and 'get close to the heart'. As one seafarer-partner explained:

[T]hey [non-seafarer-partner friends] have little idea about seafarers; they cannot empathize with seafarer-wives' feelings! Even though we talk, the conversations can never go as deep as I wish. Moreover, there are many things

that they do not understand. I have to explain to them over and over again. It is tiresome. I cannot find resonance. [Rose]

Another interviewee, who was a student, was afraid that revealing too much grievance might be regarded as ‘making a fuss over an imaginary illness’ by her friends and therefore make them impatient. She therefore ‘edited’ her expressions and showing of feelings:

My boyfriend is a seafarer and I may feel lonely everyday. But I cannot complain everyday about this. Otherwise, I feel that my friends would feel impatient...Too much grievance gives people the feeling that I am making a fuss over an imaginary illness. [Lily]

In a similar vein, British seafarers’ wives in Thomas’ (2003) research and Australian seafarers’ wives in Foster and Cacioppe’s (1986) study believed that only people with similar experiences could understand their feelings and therefore expressed their desire to meet and socialize with other seafarer-partners. They were, however, geographically separated and could hardly have any contact with each other (Thomas, 2003). In China, there are seafaring families living in ‘Seafaring Villages’ constructed in major port cities by shipping companies. There are also ‘seafarer wife committees’ and ‘seafarer wife stations’ to organize mutual support for China Ocean Shipping Company’s (COSCO) seafaring families (Thomas et al., 2003). These services are diminishing however. The privatization of housing at the end of last century replaced the companies’ house providing function; ‘stations’ and ‘committees’, which are relics of planned economy, are being eroded because a more market orientated economy is prevailing (Thomas et al., 2003). Moreover, these services only target married seafarer-partners and are not for the new generation of Chinese seafarer-partners. It is not surprising then, that among the thirty interviewees only one (who has been married for sixteen years) lives in a ‘Seafaring Village’. It is a tradition for Chinese seafarer-partners to visit ships while they are in Chinese ports. On these occasions, seafarer-partners from different places were able to meet and establish contact with each other, for example, Lotus said:

Normally, I would meet them [other seafarer-partners] on the way visiting the same ship. Then I know that she is the wife of Captain and she is the wife of the Chief. After several times, we would be familiar with each other. Then we

would chat what happened to them on the ship and what she takes with her.

[Lotus]

Geographical separation, nevertheless, constituted a barrier for developing close relationships. Lotus continued:

[But], we do not have time to develop relationship. We only meet on the way to visit the ship and have a little chat. [Lotus]

Another informant who also had opportunities to visit ships and to meet other seafarer-partners expressed the same view. Thus, it seems difficult for the young generation of Chinese seafarer-partners to communicate with each other and to share their experiences.

Conclusion

We have examined the dilemmas that Chinese seafarer-partners have to face in their everyday lives. Seafarers are absent; yet in their absence their presence is strongly felt as a strong shadow cast over a relationship. In the shadow of each seafarer-partner's dilemma, there is the presence of seafarers. Arguably, it is seafarers' absence that makes their presence even more prominent in seafarer-partners' consciousness. Only in the seafarers' long absence, do seafarer-partners experience longing, worrying, and feelings of emptiness. The longer the absence and the longer there is no communication, the more seafarer-partners long for their beloved and become worried. It is the seafarers' absence that makes other people 'concerned' about seafarer-partners, which in turn leads seafarer-partners to feel stigmatized. Moreover, seafarer-partners may become sensitive to others' attention and conscious of their lonely situation. Even others' togetherness and seemingly happy companionship remind seafarer-partners of their absent seafarers. The social interactions and even non-interaction encounters, then, bring to the fore for seafarer-partners the presence of absent seafarers. For this reason, some of them tend to withdraw into their own world, which inevitably causes social isolation. Even worse, seafarer-partners' close non-seafaring friends may not be able to share their ups and downs. On the other hand, although they may wish to communicate with other seafarer-partners, geographic separation nevertheless constitutes a huge barrier.

These experiences are certainly painful. During the interview, several seafarer-partners complained that one year at sea is too long to be humane. Behind the complaint, the practical implications loom. One wrote in the website:

If he does not move ashore, we will not marry. If [the fact that he is a seafarer] cannot be changed, we will have to break up. Before we started the relationship, I have said explicitly that I had no intention to marry a seafarer. That kind of life is not complete. Moreover, it will be sneered and laughed at by others. [Fieldnote, 14/08/2006]

Such a view may not be popular among participants on the website, for many seafarer-partners expressed that they would respect their boyfriends/husbands' choices and decisions. Nevertheless, they kept an eye on information about leaving sea and moving to other careers. Communication is another problem. While some seafarer-partners complained in their diary entries in the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* that they had not received phone-calls from their boyfriends/husbands for a long time, many others wrote postings asking for cheap and reliable means to keep contact with seafarers at sea.

Separation is certainly unavoidable for seafaring couples. This does not mean, however, that nothing can be done to alleviate seafarer-partners' problems. If the duration of separation becomes shorter and if there is more frequent communication, they may experience less emotional loneliness. In line with unavoidable separations, seafarer-partners have to live a different lifestyle and thus attract extra attention. However, if seafarer-partners are able to reunite with their partners more often, they may become less sensitive and more able to ignore others' talk. There are also possibilities for seafarer-partners to communicate with similar others. The *Home of Chinese Seafarers* is a good example. Through it, seafarer-partners are able to overcome geographical barriers and 'meet' others online. In a sense, the *Home of Chinese Seafarers* networks seafarer-partners, and the latter are able to share their experiences with each other and become less socially isolated.

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