Ian Urbina · Nov 14, 2023 · 14 min read

To Project Power Globally, China Has Become the Superpower of Seafood

By Ian Urbina | The Outlaw Ocean Project

MONTEVIDEO, Uruguay – In the early morning hours of March 8, 2021, a small inflatable boat powered by an outboard motor covertly made its way into the port of Montevideo to unload a dying deckhand, and then sped away.

The deckhand, a slight 20-year-old Indonesian named Daniel Aritonang, had been at sea for the previous year and a half, working on a Chinese squid-fishing ship called the *Zhen Fa 7*. Now he was dumped dockside, barely conscious, with two black eyes, bruises along the sides of his torso, and rope marks around his neck. His feet and hands were bloated, the size of melons.

Paramedics put Aritonang in an ambulance and rushed him to a nearby hospital. Jesica Reyes, a local interpreter, was summoned, and when she arrived she found Aritonang in the ambulance bay. He told her that he'd been beaten, choked and deprived of food for days. As doctors took him away to the emergency room, he began crying and shaking. "Please, where are my friends?" he asked her, and then whispered, "I'm scared."

Montevideo, one of the world's busiest fishing ports, is popular among Chinese squid ships, several hundred of which in recent years have been targeting the rich high-seas fishery that lies off South America's southeastern coast. The ships are drawn to Montevideo as an option for refueling, making repairs and restocking, in part because the next best options, in Brazil, Argentina and the Malvinas Islands, are either too expensive or closed to them.

Many of the crew on Chinese ships are Indonesian, and when they arrive in Montevideo dead, injured or sick, port officials contact Reyes, who is among the only interpreters in the city who speaks Bahasa, Indonesia's official language. She gets calls often to manage the families of dead workers. For most of the past decade, one dead body has been dropped off every other month on average in this port, mostly from Chinese squid ships.

In taking the job on the *Zhen Fa 7*, Aritonang had stepped into what may be the largest maritime operation the world has ever known. Fueled by the world's growing and insatiable appetite for seafood, China has dramatically expanded its reach across the high seas, with a distant-water fleet of as many as 6,500 ships, which is more than double its closest global competitor. China also now runs terminals in more than 90 ports around the world and has bought political loyalties, particularly in coastal countries in South America and Western Africa. It has become the world's undisputed seafood superpower.

Credit: Ferdi Arnando, Facebook page, July 7, 2021 - Aritonang on the bridge of the Zhen Fa 7.

But China's pre-eminence on the water has come at a cost. Fishing is ranked as the deadliest job in the world and, by many measures, Chinese squid ships are among the most brutal. Debt bondage, human trafficking, violence, criminal neglect, and death are common in this fleet. When the Environmental Justice Foundation interviewed 116 Indonesian crew members who had worked between September 2020 and August 2021 on Chinese distant-water vessels, roughly 97 percent of them reported having experienced some form of debt bondage or confiscation of guaranteed money and documents, and 58 percent reported having seen or experienced physical violence.

The fleet is also ranked as the largest purveyor of illegal fishing in the world. A 2022 review of illegal fishing incidents that occurred between 1980 and 2019, commissioned by the European Parliament, found that nearly half of the cases where the vessel type was identified were committed by squid ships.

Compared to other countries, China has been not only less responsive to international regulations and media pressure when it comes to labor rights or ocean preservation, but also less transparent about its fishing boats and processing factories, said Sally Yozell, the director of the Environmental Security Program at the Stimson Center, a research organization in Washington, D.C. Since a large proportion of fish consumed in the U.S. is caught or processed by China, she said, it is especially difficult for companies to know whether the products they sell are tainted by illegal fishing or human rights abuses.

When this seafood reaches land, it often goes through processing plants in China using Uyghur labor. In the past decade, the Chinese government has been forcibly relocating tens of thousands of Uyghur workers, loading them onto trains, planes and buses under tight security, and sending them to seafood processing plants on the other side of the country in Shandong province, a fishing hub along the eastern coast. In 2022, the U.N. said that Chinese government documents indicated coercion was used to place Uyghur “surplus laborers” into transfer programs. In the same year, the International Labor Organization expressed “deep concern” over China’s labor policies in Xinjiang, noting that coercion was built-in to the regulatory and policy framework for labor transfers.

By searching company newsletters, annual reports, state media stories, and Chinese social media, the investigation found that in the past five years, more than a thousand Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities have been sent to work in at least ten seafood processing plants.

The Chinese government also bolsters its seafood industry with workers from North Korea, primarily in processing plants in the border province of Liaoning, located in northeast China. The North Korean government has, for the past thirty years, sent citizens to work in factories in Russia and China and made them put up to ninety per cent of their earnings—amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars per year—into accounts controlled by the government. As of November 2022, more than 80,000 North Koreans were employed in Chinese border cities, including hundreds in seafood plants. Videos from the Chinese social media app Douyin show North Korean female workers in seafood factories as recently as November 2022 in Dandong and Donggang.

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The *Zhen Fa 7* began its journey on August 29, 2019, when it left the port of Shidao, in China’s Shandong province, and sailed to the port of Busan, South Korea, to pick up its Indonesian crew.

Zhen Fa 7 at night - Credit: Einar Ollua and Esteban Medina San Martin, March 22, 2022: Like all squidders, the Zhen Fa 7 is festooned with hundreds of bowling-ball-sized light bulbs, which hang on racks on both sides of the vessel and are used to lure squid up from the depths.

It was a festive time. The final week of August marks the start of the autumn fishing season in China and sees more than 20,000 ships launch each year. Amid fireworks and drum-playing, villagers in Shidao hung red flags on fishing boats to celebrate hopes for a hearty haul. Three days after the *Zhen Fa 7* launched, a headline in a provincial newspaper declared, “Open the sea! Let's open our appetite and eat seafood.”

Daniel Aritonang had worked hard to secure himself a position on board. After graduating from high school, in 2018, he had struggled to find work. The rate of unemployment in Indonesia was high: over 5.5 percent nationally, and more than 16 percent for youth. So, when Anhar, a local friend, suggested that the two of them go abroad together on a fishing boat, Aritonang agreed. Friends and family were surprised at his decision, because the demands of the job were so high and the pay so low. But a job was a job, and both he and Anhar desperately needed one. “On land, they ask for my skill.” Anhar said, recalling why he decided to go to sea. “To be honest, I don’t have any.”

In the summer of 2019, Aritonang and Anhar contacted PT Bahtera Agung Samudra, a “manning” agency based in Central Java. In the maritime world, manning agencies recruit and supply workers to fishing ships, handling everything from paychecks, work contracts, and plane tickets to port fees and processing visas. They are poorly regulated, frequently abusive, and have been connected to human trafficking. On July 5, 2019, following the agency’s instructions, Aritonang and Anhar took a boat to Java and then made their way to Tegal. There they took a medical exam and handed over their passports and bank documents, along with several headshots and copies of their birth certificates. (PT Bahtera does not have a license to operate, according to government records, and did not respond to requests for comment.)

For the next two months, they waited in Tegal to hear if they got the job. Money ran short. Through Facebook messenger, Aritonang wrote to his friend Firmandes Nugraha, asking for help to pay for food. Nugraha urged him to return home. “You don’t even know how to swim,” Nugraha reminded him. Eventually assignments came through, and, on Sept. 1, Aritonang appeared in a Facebook photo with other Indonesians waiting in Busan to board their fishing vessels. “Just a bunch of not high ranking people who want to be successful by having a bright future,” said Aritonang.

That day, Aritonang and Anhar boarded the *Zhen Fa 7*, and the ship set sail across the Pacific. They numbered 30 men: 20 from China, and the remaining 10 from Indonesia.

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For most of the 20th century, distant-water fishing was dominated by three countries: the Soviet Union, Japan, and Spain. These fleets shrank in size after the Soviet collapse, and as labor and environmental standards made fishing more costly. But during this period, China invested billions of dollars in its fleet and took advantage of new technologies to muscle in on a very lucrative industry. China has also attempted to fortify its autonomy by building its own processing plants, cold-storage facilities and fishing ports overseas.

Those efforts succeeded beyond any predictions. China has now become the world’s undisputed seafood superpower. In 1988 it caught 198 million pounds of seafood; in 2020, it caught 5 billion. No other country comes close.

For China, the vast armada has great value that extends beyond just maintaining its status as a seafood superpower. It also helps the country create jobs, make money, and feed its population. Abroad, the fleet helps the country forge new trade routes, flex political muscle, press territorial claims, and increase China’s political influence in the developing world.

Political analysts, particularly in the West, say that having just one country controlling a global resource as valuable as seafood creates a precarious power imbalance. Navy analysts and ocean conservationists also fear that China is expanding its maritime reach in ways that are undermining global food security, eroding international law, and heightening military tensions.

“Plenty of countries are engaging in destructive fishing practices but China is distinct because of the size of its fleet and because it uses the fleet for geopolitical ambitions,” said

Ian Ralby, CEO of I.R. Consilium, a global consultancy that concentrates on maritime security. “No one else has the same level of state ownership in this industry, no one else has a law that obligates their fishing ships to actively gather and hand over intelligence to the government and no one else is as actively invading other countries’ waters.”

According to Greg Poling, a senior fellow at Center for Strategic and International Studies, there’s another wrinkle in all of this: Not all Chinese fishing vessels actually fish. Instead, hundreds of them serve as a kind of civilian militia that works to press territorial claims against other nations. Many of those claims concern seafloor oil and gas reserves. Taking ownership of the South China Sea is part of the same project for the Chinese as taking control of Hong Kong and Taiwan. The goal is to reclaim “lost” territory and restore China’s former glory.

China’s dominance has come at a moment when the world’s hunger for products from the sea has never been greater. Seafood is the world’s last major source of wild protein and an existentially important form of sustenance for much of the planet. During the past 50 years, global seafood consumption has risen more than fivefold, and the industry, led by China, has satisfied that appetite through technological advances in refrigeration, engine efficiency, hull strength, and radar. Satellite navigation has also revolutionized how long fishing vessels can stay at sea, and the distances they travel.

Industrial fishing has now advanced technologically so much that it has become less an art than a science, more a harvest than a hunt. To compete requires knowledge and huge reserves of capital, which Japan and European countries have in recent decades been unable to provide. But China has had both, along with a fierce will to compete and win.

China has grown the size of its fleet predominantly through state subsidies, which by 2018 had reached $7 billion annually, making it the world’s largest provider of fishing subsidies. The vast majority of that investment went toward expenses such as fuel and the cost of new boats. Ocean researchers consider these subsidies harmful, because they expand the size or efficiency of fishing fleets, which further deplete already diminished fish stocks.

The Chinese government’s support of its fleet is vital. Enric Sala, the director of National Geographic’s Pristine Seas project, said that more than half of the fishing that occurs on the high seas globally would be unprofitable without these subsidies, and squid jigging is the least profitable of all types of high-seas fishing.

China also bolsters its fleet with logistical, security, and intelligence support. For example, it sends vessels updates on the size and location of the world’s major squid colonies, allowing them to work in a coordinated manner.

In July of 2022, a reporter watched an armada of about 260 Chinese squid ships jigging a patch of sea west of the Galapagos Islands. The group suddenly pulled up anchors, in near simultaneity, and moved a hundred miles to the southeast. “This kind of coordination is atypical,” Ted Schmitt, the director of Skylight, a maritime-monitoring program, told me. “Fishing vessels from most other countries wouldn’t work together on this scale.”

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During the past four years, a team of reporters conducted a broad investigation of working conditions, human-rights abuses, and environmental crimes in the world’s seafood supply chain. Because the Chinese distant-water fishing fleet is so large, so widely dispersed, and so notoriously brutal, the investigation centered on this fleet. The reporters interviewed captains and boarded ships in the South Pacific Ocean, near the Galapagos Islands; in the South Atlantic Ocean, near the Malvinas Islands; in the Atlantic Ocean, near Gambia; and in the Sea of Japan, near Korea.

The visits to these ships revealed in stark detail a broad pattern of human rights and labor abuses, including debt bondage, wage withholding, excessive working hours, beatings of deckhands, passport confiscation, prohibiting timely access to medical care, and deaths from violence. Workdays on many Chinese open-water fishing vessels routinely last 15 hours, six days a week. Crew quarters are cramped. Injuries, malnutrition, illness, and beatings are common.

One of these trips, facilitated in February 2022 by Sea Shepherd, an ocean-conservation group, included an invitation to board a Chinese squid-fishing ship near the Malvinas Islands. The captain of the vessel granted reporters permission to roam freely as long as they did not name his vessel.

Whenever squid ships are fishing, the heaviest labor happens at night. The ships are festooned with hundreds of bowling-ball-sized light bulbs, which hang on racks on both sides of the vessel and are used to lure squid up from the depths.

As squid are hauled in, the scene on deck often looks like a brightly lit auto-body shop where an oil change has gone terribly wrong. When pulled onboard, squid squirt purplish black ink. Warm and viscous, the ink coagulates within minutes and coats all surfaces with a slippery mucus-like ooze. Because deep-sea squid have high levels of ammonia in their tissue, for buoyancy, the air on board smells powerfully like urine.

The mood on board felt like that of a watery purgatory. The ship had about 50 “jigs” hanging off each side, each operated by an automatic reel. Crew members stationed around the deck were responsible for monitoring two or three reels at a time, to ensure that they didn’t jam. The men’s teeth were yellowed from chain smoking, their skin a sickly sallow, their hands torn and spongy from sharp gear and perpetual wetness.

Two Chinese deckhands wearing bright orange life vests stood on deck babysitting the automatic reels. One man was twenty-eight, the other eighteen. It was their first time at sea, and they had signed two-year contracts. They earned about ten thousand dollars a year, but, if they missed a day of work for sickness or injury, they were docked three days’ pay. The older deckhand recounted watching a crew member’s arm get broken by a weight from the jig that swung wildly. The captain stayed on the bridge, but another officer shadowed one of the reporters wherever he went. At one point, the officer was called away, and the younger deckhand ducked into a dark hallway to whisper his plea for help.

“Our passports were taken,” he said to the visiting reporter. “They won’t give them back.”

Instead of speaking more, he began typing on his cell phone, for fear of being overheard. “Can you take us to the embassy in Argentina?”

“I can’t disclose too much right now given I still need to work on the vessel if I give too much information it might potentially create issues onboard,” he wrote. “Please contact my family,” he said, before abruptly ending the conversation when the minder returned.

Stories of deckhands held captive on these vessels continue to surface: More recently, in June 2023, a bottle washed on shore a beach near Maldonado, Uruguay, with a message inside from a distressed deckhand on another Chinese squidder: “Hello, I am a crew member of the ship Lu Qing Yuan Yu 765, and I was locked up by the company. When you see this paper, please help me call the police! S.O.S. S.O.S.” (The owner of the ship, Qingdao Songhai Fishery, said that the claims were fabricated by crewmembers.)

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Aritonang fell severely ill in late January 2021. The whites of his eyes turned yellow, his legs and feet grew swollen and achy, and he lost his appetite and ability to walk. In all likelihood, he was suffering from a disease known as beriberi, caused by a deficiency of vitamin B1, also known as thiamine. Sometimes called “rice disease,” beriberi has historically broken out on ships and in prisons, asylums, and migrant camps—anywhere that diets have consisted mainly of polished or white rice or wheat flour, both poor sources of thiamine. When beriberi happens on ships, it is considered a possible indicator of criminal neglect because it is slow-acting, treatable and reversible, according to forensic pathologists.

The other Indonesians on board begged the captain to get Aritonang onshore medical attention, but the captain refused. Later, when asked to explain the captain’s refusal, Anhar, Aritonang’s friend and fellow crewmate, said, “There was still a lot of squid. We were in the middle of an operation.”

By February, Aritonang could no longer stand. He moaned in pain, slipping in and out of consciousness. Incensed, the Indonesian crew threatened to strike. “We were all against the captain,” Anhar recounted. The captain finally acquiesced on March 2 and had Aritonang transferred to a nearby fuel tanker called the *Marlin*, whose crew six days later dumped him off in Montevideo.

But by then it was too late. For several hours, the emergency room doctors struggled to keep him alive, while Reyes, the Bahasa translator, waited anxiously in the hall. Eventually they emerged from the emergency room to tell her that he had died.

A day later, the local coroner conducted an autopsy. “A situation of physical abuse emerged,” it reads. Nicolas Potrie, who runs the Indonesian consulate in the city, recalls getting a call from Mirta Morales, the prosecutor who investigated Aritonang’s case, who told him, “We need to continue trying to figure out what happened. These marks—everybody saw them.” Morales declined to say whether the investigation was closed but added that, as with most crimes at sea, she had very little information to work with.On April 22, Aritonang’s body was flown from Montevideo to Jakarta, then driven to his family home in the countryside, where a solemn crowd of villagers lined the road to pay their respects. The family opted not to open the coffin.

A funeral was held the next day, and Aritonang was buried a few feet from his father in a cemetery plot not far from his church, near the side of a road. His grave marker consisted of two slats of wood joined to make a cross. That night, an official from Aritonang’s manning agency visited the family at their home to discuss a “peace agreement.” Anhar said that the family ended up accepting a settlement of 200 million rupiah, or roughly $13,000. The family was reluctant to talk about the events on the ship. Aritonang’s brother Beben said that he didn’t want his family to get in trouble, and that talking about the case might cause problems for his mother. “We, Daniel's family,” he said, “have made peace with the ship people and have let him go.”

More than 9,000 miles away, the *Zhen Fa 7* soon began its long journey home. In May 2021, it reached Singapore, where it disembarked its remaining Indonesian crew, who had not stepped on land for nearly two years. The ship then at last returned to Shandong where it unloaded 330 tons of squid, marked in port records as destined for export.

In an email, the *Zhen Fa 7’s* owner, Rongcheng Wangdao Deep-Sea Aquatic Products. declined to comment on Aritonang’s death but said that the company had found no evidence of misconduct on the ship: “There was nothing regarding your alleged appalling incidents about abuse, violation, insults to one’s character, physical violence or withheld salaries.” The company added that it had handed the matter over to the China Overseas Fisheries Association, which regulates the industry. Questions submitted to that agency went unanswered.

On April 10, 2022, a year after Aritonang’s death, his mother, Sihombing, sat on a leopard-print rug in her living room with Leonardo, her other son. Sihombing apologized that it had no furniture, and no place other than the floor to sit. The house underwent repairs, using money from the settlement, according to the village chief; in the end, Aritonang had managed to fix up his parents’ house after all. Asked about Daniel, Sihombing began to weep. “You can see how I am now,” she said.

“Don't be sad,” Leonardo said, patiently trying to console his mother. “It was his time.”

This story was produced by The Outlaw Ocean Project, a nonprofit journalism organization in Washington, D.C. Reporting and writing was contributed by Ian Urbina, Joe Galvin, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan, Daniel Murphy and Austin Brush.

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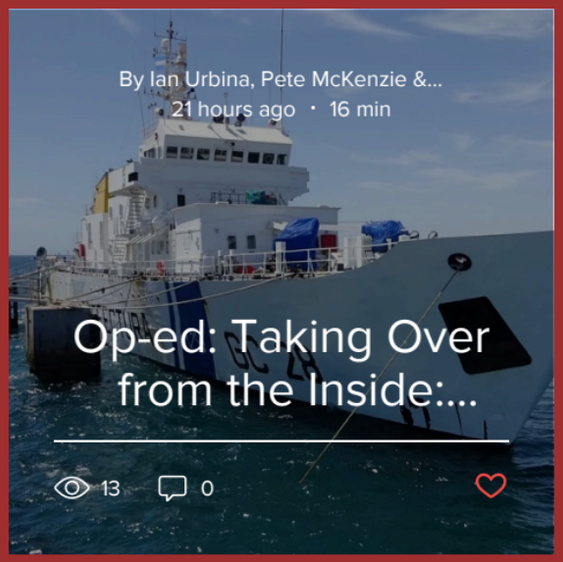

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