

*Practicing the Cold War: What Communism Meant for Xiamen Fishermen/Women in the 1950s and 1960s**

Yongming Chen and Zhiyu Zhang

Abstract

This article challenges the dualistic perspective of power politics in traditional Cold War studies. It focuses on the reshaping of maritime boundaries of contemporary China and the subsequent changes in fishermen/women's everyday lives in the process of the localization of the Cold War. In Xiamen, the geospatial politicization of the Taiwan Strait led to the birth of a distinguished Cold War front, which was both a fishing ground and a battlefield. Using a combination of traditional textual sources and ethnographic-style fieldwork, this research refers to what communism meant to fishing people by focusing on how they strategically constructed and transformed their livelihood, cultural, military, and political identities in the Cold War. This article discovers that the reasons why fishermen/women could cross multiple boundaries stemmed from the control and utilization of their mobility by the socialist state. Meanwhile, fishermen/women were also flexibly using their maritime mobility, ocean experience, and survival logic to adapt

Yongming Chen is Research Associate in the School of Architecture, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Zhiyu Zhang is a PhD candidate in the Department of History, Xiamen University. Correspondence should be sent to hist_zyzhang@hotmail.com.

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to the socialist transformation, internalizing their adherence to the communist camp in daily life. For both the CPC government and ordinary fishermen/women, they not only participated and practiced the Cold War but also redefined the Cold War due to their actual actions, representing rich and diverse meanings of the Cold War across the boundaries of contemporary China.

On New Year's Eve in 1940, Ruan Yaying was born in a poor fishing family in Xiamen harbor, the southeast coast of China.¹ Eight years later, in the deep winter, his father was killed by a Kuomintang (KMT) policeman. The civil war between the KMT and the Communist Party of China (CPC), which gradually spread to Xiamen, further immersed his family into suffering and poverty. However, after the CPC took over Xiamen, Ruan's social identity and economic status underwent earth-shaking changes. Particularly because Ruan's family had been persecuted by the KMT, his hardship and identity as a fisherman became the political resources that were later manipulated by the CPC.² As the KMT evacuated to the Taiwan area in 1949, Xiamen immediately became the front line of the Cold War. In addition to being a fisherman, Ruan has held several positions since 1957, including fishing captain, political team leader, picket at the border police station, cultural literacy officer on a fishing boat, and militia platoon leader. It is clear that Ruan both participated in the struggle against the KMT on the front line of the global Cold War and devoted himself to socialist construction enthusiastically. For his vigorous participation against the KMT, Ruan was recognized and rewarded by Xiamen authorities constantly.³

In the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, there were many active fishers like Ruan Yaying in Xiamen. What transformed these fishermen/women, once at the bottom of the social ladder, into the protagonists in geopolitics and the socialist economy? In October 1949, the KMT army won the Battle of Gunningtou (古寧頭) in the civil war, which temporarily shaped the situation in the Taiwan Strait. The failure of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) at Gunningtou, Kinmen (金門), resulted in the formation of a naval confrontation between the KMT and the CPC. Xiamen is an island located on the southeast coast of Fujian, China. The island is also facing Kinmen, which resulted in the military infiltration into Xiamen. For centuries, fishermen/women, as a group who could move freely in the waters in the Taiwan Strait,⁴ naturally received the attention of the state,