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Defending workers' rights on social media: Chinese seafarers during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Defending workers' rights on social media: Chinese seafarers during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This paper explores the power dynamics in the process of Chinese seafarers' labour rights defence activities on social media during the crew change crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It shows that while exercising symbolic power is at the core of such activities, the effectiveness of symbolic power depends on the networking/distributing power of hub nodes and associational power of the maritime community to help generate visibility. The hub nodes, however, are subject to tight control in China, and as such their ability to deploy networking/distributing power is constrained. This suggests that worker power is conditioned by socio-political factors.

Keywords: associational power; crew change crisis; networking/distributing power; solidarity; structural power; symbolic power

Introduction

This paper examines how Chinese seafarers protect their labour rights on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is often taken for granted that trade unions are at the forefront to protect and promote workers' rights. With the rise of the Internet and social media, whether and how they facilitate and revitalise trade union organisation and mobilisation have been hotly debated. In China, however, although hundreds of millions of workers are unionised under an official umbrella union organisation, namely All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), under the current Chinese political setup, the unions are generally regarded as window-dressing and found to be ineffective in representing workers and fighting for their rights (Metcalf & Li, 2006; Qi, 2010). This is the same for Chinese seafarers, and the Chinese seafaring union is not seen as genuine or democratic (Tang, Llangco, et al., 2016). As such, Chinese seafarers rely on other means to protect their labour rights, and one means is through social media (Tang, Shan, et al., 2016; Tang & Zhang, 2019).

Unlike mobilisations planned and facilitated by unions or social movement organisations which have been the focus of research on social media and workers' rights campaigns, Chinese seafarers' labour rights defence on social media tends to be individually initiated, grassroots bottom-up activities. It presents a different avenue to examine the implications of social media for workers' rights defence. To complement the previous research, this paper pursues this avenue by exploring the power dynamics involved in Chinese seafarers' rights defence on social media and drawing out the associated implications.

Social media and workers' rights protection

According to Castells (1996), new information and communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate new forms of social organization and interaction and give rise to the network society. The development of interactive, horizontal and decentralised networks of communication promotes mass self-communication (Castells, 2007). It is mass communication because it is diffused throughout the Internet and has the potential to reach the whole world. It is self-communication because its content is self-generated, its emission self-directed, and its reception self-selected. Mass self-communication allows sociability building along self-selected communication networks. Consequently, ICTs supported sociability building expands an individual's personal community – all the interpersonal ties one has both online and offline (Wellman, 2001). Granovetter (1973) categorised personal relationships into strong ties and weak ties: the former are personal relationships between family members and close friends, whereas the latter connect individuals to people from different social groups. Weak ties serve as bridges to socially distant groups and provide access to novel information and resources (e.g., job information in other communities or cities). They are seen as bridging social capital, while strong ties as bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000). The Internet makes it easy to establish weak ties, which leads to an explosion of specialised communities, i.e. networks consist of people sharing similar interests or concerns across time and space (Wellman, 2001).

The Internet has implications for the defence and promotion of workers' rights and welfare. As a communication tool, it can be deployed by social actors to disseminate information and mobilise other resources. To fight for workers' rights and advance their causes more effectively, trade unions and other labour organisations around the world have set up websites and established a presence on social media platforms (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015). In the context that trade union memberships have been declining over the past few decades, it is argued that the Internet carries the potential to revitalise trade unionism and is instrumental in helping unions disseminate information (Hennebert et al., 2021), raise awareness of labour issues (Bergman, 2016; Geelan & Hodder, 2017), reach out to potential members and allies (Hennebert et al., 2021; Wood, 2015), organise and run campaigns (Hennebert et al., 2021; Pasquier et al., 2020; Wood, 2015), and seek and strengthen international cooperation and solidarity (Dahlberg-Grundberg et al., 2016; Geelan, 2021; Geelan & Hodder, 2017).

Furthermore, by facilitating new social formation and interaction, the Internet gives rise to a new type of contentious politics in addition to collective action – connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). In contrast to collective action, which is typically mobilised and coordinated by resourceful organisations, connective action develops spontaneously from individual-initiated content-producing and content-sharing activities across media networks. Heckscher and McCarthy (2014) argue that with the

rise of the network society, the form of solidarity has changed from strong-tie social networks of industrial solidarity to a collaborative form of solidarity that builds on weak ties established on social media. They propose that unionism which relies on solidarity should be re-imagined, moving from a traditional centralised command-and-control to a decentralised peer-to-peer model. Research, however, indicates that despite the adoption of digital communication platforms by labour organisations, such a transition is difficult to achieve largely because these organisations have a centralised organisational structure and do not have sufficient resources to engage platform users (Dahlberg-Grundberg et al., 2016; Geelan & Hodder, 2017). Nevertheless, hybrid forms of mobilisation combining the traditional logic of collective action (e.g. top-down and hierarchical) with the new connectivist logic (e.g. decentralised and grassroots) have been shown to be effective (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014; Pasquier et al., 2020; Wood, 2015). In hybrid forms, for example, a social movement can be initially planned by labour organisations, and then rely on social media networks to distribute the messages, through which movement related actions and activities can be expanded to other locations and organised at local levels (Pasquier et al., 2020; Wood, 2015). In other cases, social organisations provide platforms for other actors and individuals to plan, organise, and publicise local actions and events without intervention from the centre (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014). In these cases, a large number of people can be mobilised for common causes across time and space.

The literature has demonstrated that the Internet and social media have implications for trade unions and labour organisations and for their strategies and tactics to fight for workers' welfare and rights. Understandably, the research focus has been on trade unions and/or labour rights movements initiated and mobilised by trade unions, though in the process some grassroots activities may get involved. Since the Internet allows grassroots bottom-up activities, it is also important to pursue a different line of enquiry, that is to examine the cases in which individual workers defend their labour rights via the Internet and social media. This paper pursues this line of enquiry and focuses on the case of Chinese seafarers. It will complement the existing literature to provide a more comprehensive view of the implications of social media for workers' rights defence.

Defending workers' rights implies exerting power, which is the capacity to direct or influence the values and behaviour of others or courses of action. Wright (2000) proposes that workers traditionally rely on two forms of power: associational and structural power: while the former is related to collective organisations of workers, the latter is derived from workers' position in the economic system. Structural power can be further divided into two subtypes: marketplace power generated from tight labour markets and workplace bargaining power which is based on workers' location in the production process and their ability to paralyse it. According to Silver (2003), whereas

workers' associational and marketplace power have been undermined by globalisation and the hypermobility of capital, their workplace power may have maintained and even grown in certain cases. One such case is dock workers who have the potential to block the country's maritime trade. Fox-Hodess (2019), however, argues that workplace bargaining power is not determined by economic factors alone, but is also affected by socio-political factors. In her study of dockworker unionism in Colombia and Chile, Fox-Hodess noted that due to state-sanctioned repression, Columbian dock workers had less workplace power than their Chilean counterparts, and instead they leveraged international allies to put pressure on local employers. By contrast, in Chile where basic democratic norms were respected, dock workers relied more on workplace power to advance their interests. Fox-Hodess' research thus points out that the socio-political context conditions workers' structural power.

The types of power discussed above do not take into consideration of the social context of the network society (Anner et al., 2021). In the network society, Castells (2011) points out that the major form of power is access to networks, because it is crucial to one's capacity to influence others' values and goals. In a study of Walmart workers' campaigns, Wood (2015) showed that in the process of mobilisation via social media networks, workers deployed and leveraged symbolic power to cause reputational damage to the employer. Similarly, Pasquier et al. (2020; see also Anner et al., 2021; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014) argue that connective actions largely focus on leveraging symbolic power to grab the attention of the media and the public, rather than aim to gain workplace bargaining power by disrupting the production processes through strikes or go-slows.

The above discussion does not mean that the traditional forms of power are no longer relevant in labour rights defence activities facilitated by social media networks. This paper explores the power dynamics in the process of seafarers' labour rights defence activities, and shows that for such activities to be effective, both traditional forms of power and the new forms of power afforded by social networks are crucial. Since the usage of social media in workers' rights defence is socially mediated (Geelan, 2021), I discuss the wider context of this study next.

Research context and methods

In China, the most popular social media platform is WeChat with around 1.1 billion daily active users in 2021 (Zhang, 2021). WeChat supports three types of social networks: WeChat friend networks, WeChat groups, and WeChat public accounts. A friend network consists of all the bilateral ties that a user maintains via WeChat, such as ties with family members, relatives, friends, colleagues, schoolmates, business associates, and so on. A WeChat group is set up by one individual (as the host) who

then invites people (as guests) from his/her friend network to join the group discussing issues of common interest. The guests can also invite people from their friend networks to join the group. As such, from one member's perspective, the group includes people both in and out of his/her friend network. These two types of networks are private. The 'moments' (text-based status updates, pictures, videos, and links) one shares or posts on their WeChat wall can only be seen, liked, and commented on by their WeChat friends, and chats between two friends or within a group are private talks. By contrast, a WeChat public account is similar to a Facebook page, aiming to attract as many followers as possible. Its followers automatically receive the update once a new post is made, and can read, like, and comment on the post. Furthermore, the followers can share the post into their WeChat friend networks and groups, and people in these networks, whether they follow the public account or not, can then read the post and share it further. Thus, a public account is open to any WeChat users and its posts can be spread out through WeChat networks. While WeChat is an app free of charge, it costs an annual fee of RMB 300 to open a public account.

WeChat is a smartphone application and its popularity is underpinned by the widespread adoption of smartphones. It allows not only text-based chats, but also audio and video calls, and as a result, it has replaced phone calls and messages to become the prime means for people to keep in touch in China. Furthermore, it allows users to share news and information from other sources on the Internet and has become a major source of information for many people. The same applies to Chinese seafarers: as it is easier to carry a mobile phone which provides access to the Internet at port (and at sea if there is a Wi-Fi network on the ship), WeChat is the major channel connecting them to the outside world.

In this context, many seafaring- and maritime-related public accounts have been set up. The followers are mostly stakeholders of the industry, including seafarers, seafarer family members, ship managers, and other maritime professionals. Following Anderson (1983), it can be said that they form an imagined maritime community, and since this community is based on professional identity, it is a specialised one (Wellman, 2001). I have been following a few of them for some years and check their posts daily.

In March 2020, COVID-19 spread worldwide causing a global pandemic. Many countries closed their borders and put restrictions on international travel. It led to a crew change crisis in the shipping industry as crew changes involved flying seafarers between their home country and the port at which they join or sign off a ship. At its peak, the crisis made 400,000 seafarers trapped on ships and forced to work beyond their contract (IMO, 2020). The crisis was also a humanitarian one, causing fatigue and mental health problems among the stranded seafarers. Legally they could stop working, but it rarely happened in practice because it would put the ship and the lives

of the crew in danger (McDonald, 2020). Although industry and world leaders, including the UN Secretary-General and the Pope, made pleas to national governments to designate seafarers as key workers and facilitate their international travel, many countries (including China) persistently refused foreign crew changes in their ports.

For Chinese seafarers, the crisis was taken to a different level. In April 2020, though the pandemic had been brought under control in China, crew changes between Chinese seafarers were not allowed in many cases even in Chinese ports. While the central government issued a policy notice in March requesting the facilitation of Chinese crew changes in domestic ports, the local authorities faced pressure from above and were held accountable if their decision to allow crew changes opened the door to more infections (Shen, 2020). In two separate cases, the local government officials were sacked due to imported cases. This pressure explained why the local authorities were reluctant to allow crew changes. Understandably, Chinese seafarers who had served on ships beyond their contract were frustrated; some of them tried to defend their rights and asked for help via WeChat.

The research consisted of two stages. In the first stage, I focussed on crew change crisis stories rather than a particular WeChat account. When crew change crisis stories emerged in April 2020, they caught my attention and I started to follow the development of this crisis and archived (by downloading) the related reports from the seafaring and maritime-related WeChat accounts that I followed as well as from maritime news websites when they were published. This was similar to a 'guerrilla ethnographer' approach (Yang, 2009), in which because relevant stories could emerge from many locations online, the researcher would need to crisscross a range of platforms, various sites, and hyperlinks in order to track the needed information.

Social media are part of a 'messy web' where various sites and platforms are interconnected through a labyrinth of visible and invisible links, and researchers need to be flexible to adapt to and capture this messiness (Postill & Pink, 2012). To this end, I adopted a more focused approach in the second stage (from September 2021 onwards), choosing CNSeaman, a WeChat public account, as the focal site. It served as a starting point, from where I could disentangle the messy web of information and activities related to the crew change crisis by tracing its connections with other sites. There were a few reasons for choosing CNSeaman. It specialised in posting seafaring-related content, such as information and news reports about seafarers' welfare, training, and recruitment. It was one of the earliest and well-established seafaring-related public accounts, boasting to have 50,000 followers, and I had been following it for more than five years and was familiar with it. More importantly, as a seafaring-

related public account, it was involved in helping seafarers make pleas for crew change facilitation from the very beginning.

Once this focussed approach was chosen, I went back to check all the posts that CNSeaman published from March 2020 to September 2021 to make sure that the data I had achieved for this research included all the crew change crisis stories on its WeChat page. Then, I searched on WeChat with relevant keywords to find out whether the stories published by CNSeaman were also covered by other public accounts. Furthermore, Google searches for these stories were conducted to find out whether they were followed up by traditional news media. This approach helped me carve out the boundaries of a case study of CNSeaman without losing its linkages to the messy web.

The data collected on WeChat and the Internet only revealed what was presented online by CNSeaman; to draw a full picture, it was equally important to understand how decisions were made behind the screen and what factors influenced them. To this end, I interviewed the CNSeaman manager via WeChat. Thus, following Postill and Pink (2012), I carried out a series of practices during the research: catching up (browsing social media sites frequently to keep up with research-related developments), exploring (links), archiving, and interacting (interviewing the manager). Together, these practices yielded detailed contextual information which enabled me to draw out and make sense of the power dynamics involved.

The crew change crisis stories posted by CNSeaman were concentrated in two phases with different outcomes. Next, I discuss each of them in turn.

Phase one – concentrated and joint campaigns

On April 14th 2020, CNSeaman posted the first crew change crisis report entitled, 'I'm a Chinese seafarer; my mother passed away but I cannot get off the ship'. The report started with a 15-second video. In the video, two seafarers at the front held a Chinese flag and another eight at the back held a giant white banner with red words 'We are Chinese seafarers; we are healthy and request to go home' on a ship; and they chanted, 'We are Chinese seafarers; we request to go home', a few times. The report published an open letter written by 12 seafarers to the local authorities of Zhoushan, one of the major port cities in China. In this case, the 12 seafarers had been working on-board the ship for more than 10 months which exceeded their contracted length of service. They were expecting to be relieved from the ship at Zhoushan. Furthermore, three of them needed to go home urgently to deal with family emergencies: one seafarer's mother just passed away and he was expected to go home and arrange the funeral; another seafarer's grandpa passed away and his mother was ill and

hospitalised; and a third seafarer's father was hospitalised due to a stroke. The ship arrived at Zhousan from Taiwan on April 1st and the seafarers did not go ashore and followed strictly quarantine procedures onboard the ship according to the COVID-19 control policies. On April 12th, the 12 seafarers were tested negative. They also agreed to spend another two weeks in a local quarantine hotel and to take another two rounds of tests after leaving the ship to make sure that they were not infected before traveling back home. However, on April 13th, their crew change request was refused. The local authorities gave the excuses that they did not have enough quarantine hotel rooms and that their test capacity was limited. The seafarers were frustrated and wrote the open letter demanding their right to leave to be respected.

At the end of this report, CNSeaman made a disclaimer that this report was sourced from Shipping-Online, another public account. A search of the keywords of this report on WeChat suggested that it was also reposted by another five public accounts on the same day, and another two on the second day. Clearly, the seafarers sent the letter and video to Shipping-Online (public accounts publish their contact details at the end of each report for their followers to contact them) who edited and posted this report, which was then seen and reposted by other public accounts.

The flag, banner, video, and open letter in the report demonstrated symbolic power, i.e. the seafarers deployed symbolic forms with the hope to intervene in the course of this event (Thompson, 1995). The flag and banner emphasised that they were Chinese citizens and that it was unjustifiable to deny their entry at the door of their home country. The open letter clarified that it was their right to sign off the ship because they had completed their contract and carried no virus. The title of the report and the remaining of the letter stressed family emergencies and human feelings, which added more moral weight to their reasoning. Taken together, these symbolic forms constituted strong moral persuasion – it was not only wrong and violating their rights but also immoral and inhuman to deny their request.

Due to the decline of industrial solidarity (Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014), Pasquier et al. (2020) and Wood (2015) argue that workers' rights defence actions facilitated by social media tend to leverage symbolic power rather than employ structural power. For international seafarers, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) has been rather effective in representing them, bargaining with maritime employers to raise wages and improve working conditions (Campling & Colás, 2021; Lillie, 2013). It does so by leveraging the power of dock workers who could boycott ships at port in support of seafarers (Lillie, 2013), rather than relying on seafarers' workplace actions. The shipboard workplace is isolated and accommodates no more than 20ish crew members, and as such large-scale collective actions are practically difficult (Tang & Bhattacharya, 2018). For Chinese seafarers, industrial solidary has never existed.

Although China has a seafarers' union, its role is 'to help the governments achieve economic goals through maintaining stable labour relations' (Qi, 2010: 16); and although worker activism does exist in China, collective actions would be ruthlessly repressed by the authorities (Franceschini & Nesossi, 2018; Fu, 2017). China is one of the top seafarer supplying countries with more than 200,000 seafarers working on ships trading internationally (MSA, 2021), but it does not allow foreign interference with its domestic affairs. As such the ITF has neither presence in China nor connections with Chinese trade unions (Tang & Zhang, 2021). It was in this context that the 12 seafarers opted for symbolic power. It was hoped to cause damage to the reputation of, and put moral pressure on, the local authorities.

For symbolic power to produce any tangible effect, however, visibility needs to be generated (Thompson, 2005) – if nobody read the report, no damage would be inflicted. In this context, public accounts played an important role by exercising what Castells (2011) calls networking power. It refers to the capacity to let a message enter a communication network through gatekeeping. Even though the Internet is decentralised, some nodes have more web traffic than others. On WeChat, networking power is derived from the capacity of established public accounts to distribute messages more widely. They are better connected than common users because a common user's personal network is private and rather closed. In the case of the 12 seafarers, Shipping-Online pushed the story to their followers; some of the followers shared the story into their WeChat friend networks and groups, and people in these networks, whether they follow the public account or not, could then read the post and share it further. It was read 22,300 times and received 86 comments on Shipping-Online. Furthermore, public account managers keep an eye on other accounts in related fields. When asked about their relationship with other maritime-related public accounts, the CNSeaman manager stated:

> We stay in touch with and keep an eye on other public accounts. Maritime-related accounts have different focuses and we focus on seafarers' welfare, training, and career. If they have good seafaring-related content, we would be happy to share and distribute it to more people.

Therefore, it is not surprising that this Shipping-Online report was reposted by CNSeaman and another seven public accounts. On CNSeaman, it was read 8,452 times and received 68 comments. On the other seven accounts, it was read 28,866 times in total. These public accounts were hub nodes where attention to this story converged. They served as distribution centres, distributing the message widely to the followers as well as the followers' personal networks. As such, it is more appropriate to say that public accounts have strong networking/distributing power and that the account managers are gatekeepers, exercising this form of power by including/excluding a story from their WeChat page.

The wide distribution of the story on WeChat networks grabbed the attention of traditional media organisations. *China Shipping Gazette*, a weekly shipping news magazine, and *China Business Network*, a national news organisation, followed up and covered the story by interviewing the seafarers, the local port authorities, and officials from the Ministry of Transport, and analysing the problem. Their coverage in turn fed back into WeChat networks. On April 16th, CNSeaman posted an update on the story, which summarised the responses and comments of the followers to the initial report, and collated information published by the two media organisations. This update maintained its followers' attention on the story, and at the same time highlighted that the story had spread out of the maritime circle to the general public. On 17th April, CNSeaman published another update announcing that the 12 seafarers were finally allowed to sign off the ship.

In the age of mass self-communication, even though any message has the potential to reach the world at large via the Internet, rarely are they received by a large audience in practice. Networking/distributing power certainly helps spread a message, but the audience makes the final decision whether to receive it. On WeChat, to receive a message means that receivers interact with the message by reading it, commenting on it, and/or sharing it. In this case, the report achieved exceptional reception. In the interview, the manager stated that crew change crisis posts on their WeChat page received far more attention and were shared more widely than other posts. This was corroborated by a comparison between the receipt of crew change posts and that of other posts made during the same period. From 14th to 17th April, CNSeaman posted 17 reports. As mentioned above three of them were related to the crew change story, and the remaining 14 were general seafaring-related information. Table 1 shows that the three reports were read and commented on more widely than the other 14.

Table 1 Comparison between crew change story and general posts[1]

		Views	Comments
The crew change story	Initial post	8,452	68
	Update one	7,557	52
	Update two	5,382	38
Among the 14 non-crew-change related posts/reports	The most read post	4,592	29
	The least read post	111	0
	Average	1,736	3.6

The exceptional attention suggested two points. Firstly, the story caused moral outrage among the public account followers, who were members of the wide maritime community including seafarers and their family members. The indignation was visible

in the comments, which either condemned the local authorities or lamented the marginalised status of seafarers. Two typical comments read:

> Sternly condemn the Zhoushan Port and all the relevant authorities. Whether it is for KPI or fear of responsibility, it is completely irresponsible not to act; it is lazy governance.

> Wake up! In China, seafarers are low-class citizens, coolies at sea. No authorities care about seafarers. Seafarers who can find employment ashore should do so as soon as possible.

Secondly, the moral outrage reflected solidarity among members of the maritime community. It was unorganised and spontaneous solidarity facilitated by WeChat networks. It was formed not only by human feelings towards injustice, by also by common interests. Apart from seafarers, ship managers were also affected by the crisis, as they were concerned that the crisis harmed the morale of seafarers and thus ship operations. Common interests together with moral outrage spurred them to join forces. Solidarity reflected associational power, though the mobilisation did not involve any offline action but was restricted to reading, commenting, and sharing.

As such, symbolic power in this case aided by the networking/distributing power of public accounts and associational power of the maritime community generated high visibility and put moral pressure on the local authorities. Such pressure produced tangible effects as the 12 seafarers were allowed to sign off the ship in the end. Furthermore, on April 26th and 27th, CNSeaman received another two calls for help from two groups of seafarers and reported these two cases. In these two cases, similarly, crew change requests were rejected by the local port authorities, and in the reports, photos of seafarers holding banners were shown. The first one was read 31,100 times, and the second one more than 8,000 times. These two cases were reported to be solved rather quickly. One reason for the successes seemed related to the continued focus on exposing the crisis by a number of public accounts and the growing momentum to add moral pressure on local authorities.

After repeated petitions and pleas from the Chinese shipping community during this period and supported by the transport ministry, a policy statement was jointly signed and released on April 22nd by six central government agencies, pledging to solve the crew change crisis (Shen, 2020). The statement requested local governments to co-operate by strictly implementing the rules on changeover of Chinese seafarers. This intervention put more pressure on local authorities and gradually eased the crisis. As a result, the discussion on crew change faded away in May, and in June crew changes between Chinese seafarers in Chinese ports became largely routine operations.

Phase two – an isolated and single-handed campaign

One year later, the more infectious COVID variants forced the local authorities of Chinese ports to tighten control measures, which brought the crew change crisis back to the surface. On July 21st 2021, CNSeaman posted a new crew change story entitled 'We are not allowed to sign off the ship because …'. Again, an open letter to the port authorities was posted. According to the letter, eleven Chinese seafarers had been working on the ship beyond their contract. Before reaching Jinzhou, a Chinese port, they sailed at sea for 17 days with no chance of contacting anybody ashore and nobody showed any sign of infection. However, their request for crew changes at the port was rejected because there were also 10 Myanmar seamen on the ship. It was also stressed at the end of the letter:

> During the pandemic, we were not able to take shore leaves. Coupled with excessive homesickness, some people cannot sleep all night, suffer from mental health problems, and need to take leaves urgently to recoup. One seafarer's parents are sick in bed and urgently need him to go home to take care of them. One seafarer sprained back, and another one sprained foot. They need to go home for treatment and recuperation. If the request is not permitted, it will greatly affect seafarers' morale and have a great impact on safety and environmental protection management.

Below this letter, the CNSeaman editor added,

> The current seafarer shortage is serious. It should be the responsibility of the whole society to facilitate crew changes so as to safeguard our supply chains. Furthermore, it is a national policy to protect and safeguard the basic rights of seafarers. They are healthy and entitled to leave. … Taking one step back, even if they have unfortunately contracted the disease abroad and returned to their home country, can we just abandon them?

In this case, the seafarers did not use banners, photos, or videos but relied purely on text. Nevertheless, it was similar to the first one demonstrating that it was wrong and inhuman to refuse crew changes. The title of the report stressed that it was absurd to reject the request simply because foreign seafarers were working on the ship. It pointed out that the port authorities were too bureaucratic to have any human feelings left.

The editor's comments further add to the symbolic power by pointing to seafarers' structural (marketplace) power – they ensured undisrupted supply chains, and that this power was already in effect – the pandemic and the crew change crisis discouraged seafarers from joining ships and led to a shortage of active seafarers. According to the

2020 Chinese Seafarer Development Report (MSA, 2021), compared with the 2019 figures, the number of Chinese seafarers working on ships trading internationally in 2020 contracted by more than 20 percent. As a result, the wages of Chinese seafarers increased significantly after the pandemic started. The employment contraction and wage inflation reflected a labour shortage, which was believed to be a result of the crew change crisis and seafarers' reluctance to sign on ships (Shen, 2021). In this context, the editor stressed that it was not just a moral issue not allowing crew changes, but also a problem of supply chain and economic security.

Despite the moral persuasion aided by demonstrating structural power, the first plea was ignored by the authorities. On July 26th, a follow-up was posted which contained just a recording of a call between the ship captain and a port official. The port official insisted that they were just implementing the policy approved by the local authorities which clearly stated that crew changes could be arranged only if all the crew members were Chinese. On July 30th, the second follow-up was posted. This time, the seafarers resorted to using the traditional and more dramatic symbolic forms. They made two photos and wrote a second open letter. In one photo, eight seafarers held a long white banner with big red characters, 'We want to go home; do not abandon us'; in the other photo, the same banner hung outside of the ship's bridge. The editor also added comments stressing that their 50,000 followers on WeChat and many more Chinese seafarers were following the event.

By stressing the number of followers, the editor resorted to the solidarity of the community. Although such solidarity could only result in reading and sharing the story, it posed a threat that the relevant authorities would be shamed. While unfolding, the event attracted a growing amount of attention on CNSeaman. Table 2 below shows that each follow-up drew more readers, which indicated that solidarity was growing.

Table 2 The receptions of the post and updates.

	Views	Comments
The initial post	4,607	41
Follow-up 1	8,342	75
Follow-up 2	18,300	72

Eight days later after the second follow-up, on August 8th, the final update was posted with the title, 'Captain says, our heart sinks'. It featured a screenshot of a WeChat conversation between the captain and the editor. The captain said:

> Crew changes were not allowed in Jinzhou, and our request for PCR tests was also refused. The shipowner has decided to have PCR tests done at the next port in South Korea and carry out crew changes in Singapore regardless of the

costs. … Our hearts have sunk. The port authorities treated us like we were viruses. They have no heart or moral principles.

This post was read 16,100 times and received 78 comments. The high amount of attention nevertheless would not change the situation anymore.

This case demonstrated four forms of power, symbolic, networking/distributing, associational, and structural (marketplace) power. The latter two were not deployed to launch industrial actions but symbolically demonstrated to prop up symbolic power. These forms of power worked well on CNSeaman where the story received exceptional attention.

However, other public accounts did not join forces to distribute the story. A search showed that just another one re-posted the second follow-up and recorded 24 views only. As a result, the distribution of the story was quite limited even within the maritime community. Furthermore, official media organisations did not take up this case. Being excluded from other networks, the story failed to generate wide visibility as the first case did.

A few factors may underpin the failure. The crisis was a new phenomenon in early 2020. The symbolic actions taken by the seafarers in the first case were novel and eye-catching. By contrast, in 2021 the crisis and seafarers' symbolic actions became familiar and thus were less shocking and less newsworthy. The crisis was widespread and affected the whole maritime community in early 2020. As mentioned above, Chinese crew changes in Chinese ports were largely routinised after mid-2020. There were cases where extra barriers were set up to hamper crew changes, but they were not widespread. Furthermore, since most Chinese seafarers worked on single nationality crewed ships (Tang, Llangco, et al., 2016), the second case was not typical and did not affect the majority of shipping companies or seafarers. This further weakened the newsworthiness of the story. As such, the second case received little coverage from other maritime-related public accounts. Without the wide participation of public accounts, the symbolic power was not effective in adding sufficient moral pressure to the local authorities.

Censorship

From the cases discussed, it can be seen that symbolic power is at the core with the other forms of power being exercised to prop it up so as to generate visibility. To what extent it can be propped up, however, depends on networking/distributing power and

associational power. In the process, public accounts as the holders of networking/distributing power play a key role and serve as hub nodes. Seafarers' rights defence activities on WeChat would go unnoticed if these activities cannot reach hub nodes. Without the support of networking/distributing power, symbolic power cannot grow but wither away.

The key-ness of hub nodes nevertheless poses a challenge to seafarers' rights defence. To render seafarers' symbolic actions invisible, one only needs to control hub nodes. Since early 2020, CNSeaman has received a large number of calls for help related to crew change problems. However, as shown above, they only posted a very limited number of stories. When asked why the manager explained:

> Taking into various factors such as the survival of our platform, we can only select representative or common cases to publish. The aim is to maximise our influence and get the government, maritime authorities, the media, and the society at large to pay attention to the crew change problems.

These words indicated that reporting problems might put their survival at stake. China is notorious for Internet and social media censorship (Yang, 2009). King et al. (2013) noted that China allowed online criticism from individuals but blocked comments spurring collective mobilisation. However, when Xi Jinping took power in 2013, Internet control was further tightened and it was required that social media focus more on spreading 'positive energy' (i.e. how the government makes the effort to solve problems) rather than making complaints about the authorities (Yang & Tang, 2018). At the beginning of 2020, I followed nine maritime-related public accounts. By September 2021, four of them were closed and their WeChat Wall shows, 'This account has been closed due to its violation of the Internet User Public Account Information Service Management Regulations.' All these four were seafaring-related accounts and active in discussing the crew change crisis. Less seriously, some public account holders were given warnings by the authorities not to discuss the crisis. In one post, one account manager mentioned that as far as he knew four individuals had received such warnings from the Internet police. The CNSeaman manager explained the pressure from the authorities further:

> Pressure is certainly there; it is mainly from the local government and maritime authorities. Crew changes involve different departments of the local government, the procedures are relatively complex, and whether they succeed or not depends on many factors. The authorities would explain to us the complexity and request the deletion of the relevant posts.

On the one hand, such pressure reflected the impact that symbolic power had on the authorities. On the other, it constituted a challenge to seafarers' rights defence. With the threat in mind that the authorities could deploy repressive power, hub nodes were

not free to exercise their networking/distributing power. While Fox-Hodess (2019) has noted that the socio-political factors condition workers' workplace bargaining power, this research shows that such factors also constrain networking/distributing power, and by extension symbolic power, involved in seafarers' rights defence on social media.

Concluding discussion

This paper examines the power dynamics in Chinese seafarers' rights defence on WeChat. As socio-political factors are key to understanding worker power (Fox-Hodess, 2019), two features of the social context should be highlighted here. Firstly, as seafarers work on ships that are mobile and isolated, their ability to socialise with each other is hindered. In this context, WeChat enables seafarers to stay in touch with family, friends, and the world beyond the workplace and allows them to form and join professional networks. It expands seafarers' personal community and leads to a loosely connected maritime community, where seafarers and other maritime professionals can share information, experiences, and concerns and reap bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000; Wellman, 2001).

Secondly, due to the current political setup, collective actions are banned in China (Franceschini & Nesossi, 2018; Fu, 2017). Although seafarers are strategically located in the economic system with workplace bargaining power to disrupt international trade, such power is annulled by potential repression from the authorities. In Fox-Hodess' (2019) study, as Columbian dock workers' workplace power was curtained by state-sanctioned repression, they leveraged international allies instead to put pressure on local employers. For Chinese seafarers, however, it is politically impossible to seek support from international seafarer organisations (Tang & Zhang, 2021), and their national union does not function to mobilise collective action (Qi, 2010).

In this context, Chinese seafarers rely on symbolic power to defend their rights on WeChat; they hope to change the course of events by mounting moral pressure on the local authorities. The centrality of symbolic power in workers' rights defence on social media has also been revealed in previous research (Pasquier et al., 2020; Wood, 2015). What has not been explored is the dynamics of different forms of power in the process. The centrality of symbolic power does not mean that associational power is no longer relevant on social media. This form of power is still important but works symbolically by generating a large number of views, comments, and sharing. What symbolic messages strive for is visibility (Thompson, 2005), and associational power helps generate visibility by mobilising people in the maritime community to read and comment on the messages and share them through WeChat networks. Furthermore, it is rarely the case that symbolic power can be automatically propped up by associational power to achieve visibility. For the messages to reach the wide

community, it needs to be distributed widely with the help of hub nodes and their networking/distributing power.

Seafarers' rights defence mobilisation and actions were unorganised, initiated by individuals, and took place on social media leveraging on symbolic power, and as such the cases would be expected to be akin to connective action (Pasquier et al., 2020). The concept of connective action stresses that peer-to-peer spontaneous activities are new forms of labour movement in the Internet era (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014; Pasquier et al., 2020). Connective action assumes a flat and undifferentiated network structure. A close examination of seafarers' rights defence activities suggests that on WeChat, established public accounts are key nodes in the networks. Their networking/distributing power serves as a bridge between symbolic power and associational power. Without these nodes, symbolic messages may not be able to reach a large number of people and the fight for visibility would be futile. As such, support from key nodes can be crucial for grass-root rights defence activities; if they rely exclusively on peer-to-peer distributing, they may not travel far. Thus, being unorganised does not mean that it is unstructured or fits into the decentralised peer-to-peer model. Rather, the hub nodes served as distribution centres, which indicates a tiered structure.

By exploring the power dynamics involved in Chinese seafarers' rights defence, this paper indicates as far as labour rights defence is concerned, the Internet and social media may not have a flat network structure; rather the nodes have hierarchies with key/hub nodes have more traffic and thus stronger power. In fact, it is well known that the Internet has led to power concentration. This matters for rights defence – grass-root rights defence activities may not be effective if relying only on peer-to-peer distributing without support from key nodes. Perhaps for this reason, influential labour mobilisations facilitated by social media tend to be in hybrid forms (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Heckscher & McCarthy, 2014; Pasquier et al., 2020; Wood, 2015), in which the message is spread via social networks and actions are organised by relatively autonomous units at local levels to fit their own purposes, while labour organisations provide the coordination platform and serve as the orchestrator.

In this research, public accounts were not orchestrators as they neither planned nor coordinated the defence activities proactively. Instead, they reacted to the requests of individual seafarers. As Chinese seafarers had to defend their rights themselves, they needed support to spread messages and create visibility. It is in this context that maritime public accounts temporarily took up the role of facilitator. Their capacity to facilitate is related to their position as hub nodes and their networking/distributing power. However, as Fox-Hodess (2019) stressed, power is conditioned by socio-

political factors. The crucial factor here is Internet censorship. While online criticism without aiming to spur collective mobilisation used to be tolerated in China (King et al., 2013), since Xi took power, the room for negative comments on the authorities has been increasingly squeezed (Yang & Tang, 2018). Consequently, account managers were cautious about taking up the role of facilitator, which curtailed their networking/distributing power. Given the socio-political context of Internet control and ineffective union/collective representation, Chinese seafarers' rights defence remains a huge challenge and the crew change crisis continues to baffle seafarers, especially when local authorities tighten up control measures in response to new COVID variants.

Note:

1. To save space, instead of showing the figures for all the 14 non-crew-change-related posts, the table exhibits only the figures related to the most read and the least read posts and the average of the 14 posts.

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