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# Chinese seafarers' use of the Internet and social media to promote labor rights

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## Abstract

Research on seafarers and the Internet so far has focused primarily on Internet access onboard ships. It frames Internet access as a welfare issue concerning seafarers' communication with their families. This paper expands the focus to examine how seafarers use the Internet and social media to build and extend their social networks for reciprocal support and solidarity. Taking a case study approach, this paper examines two cases of Chinese seafarers protecting their rights online. The data were collected from relevant Internet and social media sites in 2022. The two cases demonstrate that the Internet and social media provide social spaces for Chinese seafarers to expand their social networks and form online professional communities, which afford them new resources to defend their rights and protect their interests. In the context that the Chinese seafarers' union does not function to represent and help seafarers in labor and employment matters, these resources are particularly salient.

## Keywords

seafarers, collective action, labor agency, social network, solidarity, WeChat, China

## Introduction

While Internet use has become largely ubiquitous on land, access remains a challenge for many seafarers working at sea. This is because ships are mobile

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and remote workplaces where Internet access can only be provided by expensive satellite services. As a result, research on seafarers and the Internet has largely focused on Internet access onboard ships and has framed Internet access as a seafarers' welfare issue concerning seafarers' communication with their families.

However, the Internet is more than a communication tool; it enables "the formation of new forms of social organization and social interaction along electronically based information networks and thus leads to social transformations" (Castells, 2000: 693). Networks are useful not only for personal interaction but also for reciprocal support and solidarity (Castells, 2000). While the previous research on seafarers and the Internet tends to emphasize a welfare perspective (with a focus on the seafarers' communication with their families), this paper takes a social network perspective and expands the focus to examine how Chinese seafarers use the Internet to foster reciprocal support and solidarity. This expansion also contributes to the discussion of labor agency, which is understood as the intention and practice of taking action to safeguard and further one's self-interest in work and employment (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Rogaly, 2009).

## **Seafarers and the Internet**

This paper focuses on Chinese seafarers working on merchant cargo vessels. China is one of the top seafarer-supplying countries in the world (BIMCO/ICS, 2021). In 2020, it boasted to have 592,998 registered seafarers (MSA, 2021). While it has a large national fleet manned by Chinese seafarers, China also has a well-established crewing industry (Chen and Tang, 2022; Zhao et al., 2016). Chinese seafarers started working on foreign-flagged merchant cargo vessels in 1979 (Tang, 2022a). Since then, the number of Chinese seafarers deployed overseas has grown steadily. By the 1990s, they had become a force to be reckoned with in the global seafarer labor market (Tang et al., 2016a). According to official statistics, China had 250 licensed crewing companies serving foreign ship owners and managers, and collectively dispatched 114,843 Chinese seafarers to work on foreign-flagged vessels in 2020 (MSA, 2021).

Although China has a seafarers' union, the Chinese Seafarers and Construction Workers' Union (CSCWU), under the current political setup, is considered to be ingenuine and ineffective in representing workers when labor disputes occur (Tang et al., 2016a; Tang and Zhang, 2021; Zhao and Tang, 2023). In fact, trade unions in China are required to "help the governments achieve economic goals through maintaining stable labor relations" (Qi, 2010: 16). Nevertheless, in compliance with the Maritime Labor Convention (MLC), member states are required to ensure seafarers the fundamental rights to freedom of association and the effective recognition of

the right to collective bargaining. In this case, the CSCWU representing Chinese seafarers and the Association of Chinese Ship Owners representing shipping companies signed the Chinese Seafarers Collective Bargaining Agreement (CS-CBA) in 2009. Since then, this collective agreement is reviewed and renewed annually according to the MLC (Tang and Zhang, 2021). It covers seafarers' contracts, the minimum wage, social security and welfare, occupational health and safety, training and development, and dispute resolution. The agreement states that seafarers may make complaints to the Union, which can help resolve disputes through mediation. More broadly, the employment of seafarers in China is also governed by the Labor Contract Law (LCL) which has been in force since 2008 and covers all Chinese workers (Chen and Tang, 2022; Tang and Zhang 2021). In this context, the CS-CBA further states that seafarers may also settle their employment disputes through legal means in accordance with the LCL.

Regardless of nationality, seafarers are mobile, working and living on ships, and isolated for prolonged periods, which affect their ability to interact with significant others and are cut off from support networks. While working at sea, seafarers are unable to spend time with family members and participate in family activities, which affects the quality of family life and poses a challenge to family relationships (Tang, 2012; Thomas and Bailey, 2009). In addition to family separation, seafarers also work in isolation, detached from the social world ashore. They are often likened to prisoners with a wage. The intermittent absence from social life ashore makes it difficult for seafarers to develop and maintain friendships with people ashore. Furthermore, it is also difficult to develop close personal relationships or friendships with colleagues on ships (Aubert and Arner, 1958; Thomas, 2003), because seafarers on a ship only form a temporary team—they come and go and may join a different ship or even a different shipping company next time. This is particularly the case today as the majority of seafarers are employed on a temporary tour-of-duty contract (Tang and Zhang, 2021). As there is no guarantee of continued interaction, it is difficult for seafarers to develop close relationships with colleagues.

In this context, the availability of the Internet as a communication tool is instrumental in improving seafarers' well-being. Early research conducted by Davies and Parfett (1998: 12) pointed out:

Where E-mail links to seafarers on their vessels are possible, it plays a significant part in keeping seafarers in touch with family and friends. E-mail facilities enable seafarers to remain part of the family even when away at sea and E-mail exchanges have a permanency that is not possible from telephone calls.

Understandably, email and internet access onboard ships were patchy in the early days (Davies and Parfett, 1998; Kahveci, 2007).

With the development of communication technologies and ships being connected to the Internet for work-related communication, seafarers' access to the Internet for personal use onboard ships has also improved over the years. In the crew communication survey conducted by [Nautilus International \(2017\)](#), 88 percent of seafarer respondents from the UK and the Netherlands had internet access. Moreover, in the Crew Connectivity Survey Report ([Futureonautics, 2018](#)), three-quarters of the respondents from 30 countries reported having access to the Internet while at sea. Today, ships without internet access have become unattractive. It also reports that 92 percent of the respondents agreed that internet access strongly influenced their decision on who to work for. Additionally, [Papachristou et al. \(2015\)](#) found in their survey that for about 65 percent of the 511 seafarers surveyed, internet access onboard was a critical factor when choosing which shipping company to work for.

The Internet, however, is more than a communication tool—it expands an individual's social networks which have implications for work and employment. Next, this paper discusses the literature on internet-enabled social networks and labor agency.

## **The Internet and labor agency**

According to [Castells \(2007\)](#), the Internet and social media networks promote mass self-communication. It is referred to as mass communication because it is diffused throughout the Internet with the potential to reach the whole world. Meanwhile, it is referred to as self-communication because its content is self-generated, its emission is self-directed and its reception is self-selected. Mass self-communication allows sociability building along self-selected communication networks, on or off depending on the needs and moods of each individual. Consequently, Internet-supported sociability building makes it easy to establish weak ties, leading to an explosion of specialized communities, that is, networks consisting of people sharing similar interests, experiences or concerns on the Internet ([Wellman, 2001](#)).

The literature on industrial relations demonstrated that weak ties formed on the Internet and social media platforms facilitate and even transform collective mobilization. According to [Heckscher and McCarthy \(2014\)](#), the rise of the network society is changing the form of solidarity, from strong-tie social networks of industrial solidarity to a form of solidarity that builds on weak ties established on social media. In this context, new forms of labor mobilization leveraging weak-tie solidarity that do not fit the traditional centralized and hierarchical organizational model emerged ([Bennett and Segerberg, 2012](#); [Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014](#); [Pasquier et al., 2019](#); [Wood, 2015](#)). In one of the new forms, labor mobilization is initially planned by labor organizations, and then relies on social media networks to distribute the messages, through which mobilization can be expanded to other locations and organized at the local level

(Pasquier et al., 2019; Wood, 2015). In another form, social organizations provide platforms for other actors and individuals to plan, organize and publicize local actions and events without intervention from the center (Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014). In both forms, the message is spread via social networks and actions are organized by relatively autonomous units at local levels to fit their own purposes, with labor organizations providing the co-ordination platform and serving as orchestrators.

While the abovementioned literature is concerned with labor mobilization through labor organizations, the labor agency literature has a broader scope, examining not only collective agency but also how individual workers exercise agency in and beyond the workplace (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010). Carswell and De Neve (2013) for instance, argue that the conceptualization of labor agency as a form of resistance in the workplace is rather narrow, and call for recognition of the wide range of actions that workers take either in or out of the workplace to create manageable working lives and safeguard their well-being. Research on the gig economy (also known as the platform economy) and labor agency revealed that gig workers use internet forums and social media groups to share labor market opportunities and information, and provide mutual support and advice, which create feelings of community (Wood et al., 2018). Within these communities, some of the more knowledgeable were willing to sacrifice their time to support the less experienced, providing advice on identifying fair or unreliable clients and best practices for dealing with clients (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Lehdonvirta, 2016; Wood et al., 2018). Thus, workers are also able to draw on resources from online communities to promote their interests and exercise agency.

The above discussion suggests that there is a large body of literature examining the impact of the Internet on labor agency (either collective or individual). However, this body of literature tends to assume that when workers act, they do so in response to capitalist exploitation, and thus focuses on the labor-capital nexus. Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) argue that labor agency is embedded in a web of relations with other social actors and institutions, including not only the employers, but also the state, the community and labor market intermediaries. Following this line of argument, it is also worth noting that workers interact with each other and with other social actors not only in the workplace or in the local community, but also in other social spaces, such as the virtual space. This paper extends the previous literature, showing that by enabling different social relations, social spaces shape seafarers' agency.

This paper focuses on Chinese seafarers; therefore, it is also important to discuss the literature on online collective action in China. As the Internet aids community building and significantly reduces the costs of producing content, and acquiring and disseminating information (Castells, 2007; Wellman, 2001), it facilitates online collective action by promoting collective identity and helping to spread messages and attract participants (Garrett, 2006). This is also the case

in China (Tang et al., 2016a; Xue and van Stekelenburg, 2018; Yang, 2009). However, unlike online activism in Western societies which tends to be organized and coordinated by resourceful organizations, in China it largely takes the form of what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) refer to as “connective action,” characterized by spontaneous and unorganized activity in the form of producing and sharing personally expressive content via social media (Tang et al., 2016b; Xue and van Stekelenburg, 2018; Yang, 2009). Drawing on the various bodies of literature discussed above, this paper explores how the internet and social media enable different social relations and social spaces that shape seafarers’ agency.

## Methodology

This paper utilized a case study approach, examining two cases. The two cases were not representative but were chosen for two reasons. First, they reflected two types of action—individual action and collective action. Secondly, they contained richer information and involved longer interactive processes than others. Flyvbjerg (2006) points out that information-rich cases activate more actors and more basic mechanisms. As such, they would allow for detailed exploration to generate an in-depth understanding of labor agency.

As both cases took place online, this study employed online research, involving searching for and downloading relevant information from the Internet. Being a maritime researcher, I have been observing Chinese seafarers’ activities on Internet forums as well as on the major Chinese social media platform “WeChat” for more than ten years. The first case took the form of a discussion thread on the Seafarers Internet-Bar, one of the popular forums where Chinese seafarers share information, experiences and concerns. The thread was about how employers were controlling seafarers’ freedom to change jobs. It was one of the longest threads on the forum, with 1,178 posts covering the period from April 2015 to August 2017. In this case, all the data were contained within that thread. The second case, however, was different. It was about the crew of a COVID-infected ship asking for help on the social media platform WeChat (which will be explained in detail later) in August 2021. Although the story started on WeChat, it quickly spread to various news media. It is argued that in this context, a guerrilla online ethnographer approach is necessary (Yang, 2009; Tang, 2022b), meaning that the online researcher traverses a number of platforms, different websites and hyperlinks to track down the necessary information. In line with this approach, searches were conducted on WeChat using relevant keywords to find out where the story was covered on this platform. Then, Google searches were carried out to find out where the story was covered by other websites. The posts and web pages found provided a detailed description of the story and its development.

Online research raises the question of whether informed consent is required. While informed consent is desirable, it is not always possible, and in some cases seeking consent from online participants may be seen as intrusive (Snee, 2013; Sugiura et al., 2017). To address this issue, it is argued that a researcher should be reflexive and should consider the specific context and nature of the research (Snee, 2013; Williams et al., 2017). If the materials or blogs produced online do not contain sensitive information, are not password protected and are intended to attract more readers, then consent is not essential and no potential harm would be caused (Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain, 2011). This paper investigates past events and it was not possible to trace the individuals involved. In addition, the posts did not contain sensitive information and the seafarers involved intended to publicize their problems and raise public awareness. Indeed, the second case was widely reported in the media. Consent would therefore be neither possible nor necessary. Nevertheless, the online IDs of the seafarers involved were anonymized, even though online IDs were not related to any personal information.

Next, this paper discusses the two selected cases. While the first case reflects individual agency in the form of mutual support in online forums, the second case involves collective action by seafarers on WeChat and demonstrates collective agency. Together, the two cases demonstrate that the Internet and social media provide new spaces for Chinese seafarers to expand their social networks and form online professional communities, which affords them new resources, such as mutual support and solidarity, to exercise agency both individually and collectively.

## Results and discussion

### *Case 1: Finding mutual support online*

As mentioned above, the first case relates to a discussion thread on the Seafarers Internet-Bar. This forum is hosted by the Baidu Internet-Bar platform, which was set up in 2003 and became China's largest online community in 2004. It is unknown when the Seafarers Internet-Bar was created, but it boasts to be the largest seafarers' forum with more than 120,000 members in 2023. Jia (pseudonym) initiated this thread on 27 April 2015 to share his experience of fighting for his rights. In the opening post, he recounted the unfair treatment he received from his employer. After graduating from a maritime college, Jia signed an employment contract with a crewing company headquartered in Beijing, the length of which was 60 months at sea. The company acted as the employer responsible for securing ships for Jia's cadetship and employment. At the same time, Jia's personal file and seafaring certificates were transferred from the college to the crewing company. In China, every student has a personnel file kept by the school recording his/her behavior and performance at the school.



This file is not open to the student but follows him/her from primary school to university. After graduation, it would be transferred to the employer to keep a file of his/her employment information. This file is useful for future employment. After serving on one foreign ship as a cadet, however, he felt that a career at sea was not for him and decided to quit. However, to have his documents returned, he was asked to pay a USD 6,000 (about 40,000 Chinese Yuan (CNY) at the time) penalty for premature contract termination. The reason given for this penalty was compensation for cadet training. According to the LCL in China, if the employer provides training for an employee, the employer can make an agreement with the employee on the length of service period and require the employee to pay a financial penalty if the agreement is violated.

While most Chinese seafarers in a similar situation were forced to pay the penalty in the end because they saw no other options—the seafarers' union did not function to represent and assist them in labor disputes nor have the resources to take legal action (Tang and Zhang, 2019), Jia was determined to challenge the company's request. The fact that he also aimed to raise awareness of rights protection among seafarers by sharing the process of fighting is of particular relevance to this paper. He wrote in the opening post:

I start this thread to share my journey of protecting my rights. It will cover issues including [...] what rights seafarers have, what pitfalls the employers have set up, and how we could avoid these pitfalls. [...] Only if we are united and let society know about seafarers' conditions, can employment practices be effectively monitored and seafarers' rights be protected.

This opening post quickly attracted the attention of other seafarers to the forum. By the end of the same day, 21 seafarers replied, encouraging Jia to continue sharing, making it a relatively long discussion thread.

In subsequent posts, Jia explained that he had studied the LCL, other relevant laws and the three contracts he had signed—the 60-month employment contract, the cadet shipboard training agreement with the crewing company, as well as the tour-of-duty employment contract with the foreign shipping company. Based on what he learned, the shipboard training was, in fact, an internship that did not incur any costs and thus, the company cannot claim compensation. Although the LCL requires the local authorities to set up a (local) Labor Inspectorate to enforce LCL and investigate complaints, Jia learned that seeking assistance from the Labor Inspectorate will not be fruitful for two reasons. First, the Labor Inspectorate had little knowledge of seafaring jobs involving foreign shipping companies; and second, the crewing company had good connections with the Labor Inspectorate. Instead, Jia made an arbitration application to the China Maritime Arbitration Commission (CMAC), as his employment contract stated that he could apply for arbitration to this office in the event of a labor dispute.

Jia continued to share the challenging arbitration process he went through. The CMAC mainly dealt with international trade issues, such as maritime, transport and logistics-related disputes. It did not handle seafarers' labor disputes often and none of the Beijing arbitrators covered maritime-related labor disputes. The arbitration fee was expensive, starting from CNY 5,000 depending on the value of the claim. Jia's arbitrator specialized in marine insurance. Fortunately, because Jia had studied the relevant laws, he was able to explain his case and the relevant regulations to the arbitrator. During the arbitration process, Jia contacted the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) which confirmed that cadet training is a form of on-the-job training and not training for which trainees should pay. In the end, Jia successfully terminated his contract without paying the penalty.

Jia's actions reflected agency in two ways. First, he challenged the crewing company to protect his interests. Second, he aimed to make Chinese seafarers aware of their rights and how to protect themselves. This second type of agency was enabled by the Internet. While offline, seafarers either work on a ship with a maximum of about 20 colleagues or take vacations at home where there would not be many local seafarers. It is rare for a large number of seafarers to gather together physically. In this context, the Seafarers' Internet-Bar provided a convenient space for seafarers to interact with each other without time or space constraints.

While telling his story, Jia actively interacted with other seafarers and maritime college students. The discussions can be categorized into four types of interaction. The most basic one was simply saying "I give my support." This would update the thread and push it to the top of the list in the forum. In this way, it would catch more attention and be read by more people.

The second type of interaction involved seeking advice from Jia. A few students who had signed or were about to sign a contract with the same crewing company asked Jia how it compared with other companies. Another six seafarers also tried to leave their current company, but the company held on to their certificates and refused their requests. One seafarer, for example, said in a comment:

My experience is the same as yours. Sometimes it is so unbearable that I want to use extreme methods to terminate the contract with the so-called employer. But the problem has been solved yet. I would like to talk to you and my telephone number is xxx.

In the third type of interaction, the netizens told Jia about their experiences of terminating contracts with companies. One seafarer said, "I paid CNY 3,000 to terminate the contract with (the former company). It was too tiresome and energy-consuming to go through other channels. It was much more straightforward to pay them." Finally, in the fourth type of interaction, the

netizens lamented the situation that without collective representation, seafarers remain individualized and thus, in a weak position.

Jia responded to each of these comments, and asked those who read the thread to tell their friends about it:

If you think what I have shared is useful, please let more people pay attention to this thread so that more seafarers can see it and will know that they can use the law to protect their rights. Only if we have rights protection awareness and know the way to protect our rights, can we fight against these violations and stop them from continuously infringing on our rights and clean up the environment of the industry for ourselves and future seafarers.

He also wrote a guide for the students explaining the issues they needed to consider when signing employment contracts and drew a flowchart listing the steps that could be taken if their rights were violated.

These forms of interaction demonstrated mutual support and agency through sharing experiences and providing advice. Furthermore, they kept this discussion thread alive for more than two years (from April 2015 to August 2017), making it one of the longest threads. As such, it is reasonable to assume that a large number of seafarers read and learned something from this thread even though they did not participate in the discussion. Armed with knowledge, other seafarers would arguably be able to better exercise agency to protect their rights and interests in the future.

This case shows that similar to gig workers who relied on the Internet for mutual support (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Lehdonvirta, 2016; Wood et al., 2018), seafarers socialized with each other in Internet forums and exercised agency to share experience and knowledge of rights protection. Anwar and Graham (2020) noted that due to the absence of trade unions for gig workers, such agency is characterized by individual actions and practices rather than collective action (a group of people doing something together). In the case of Chinese seafarers, however, collective action did take place online, and one such case is discussed next.

### *Case 2: Fostering collective action online*

The second case relates to a widely reported incident in which the local Chinese port authority denied medical assistance for the crew of a COVID-infected ship; the crew then resorted to asking for help on WeChat. The post was highly visible on WeChat for a few days (from 07 to 12 August 2021). WeChat is the most popular social media platform in China, with around 1.1 billion daily active users in 2021 (Zhang, 2021). It is a smartphone application and its popularity is underpinned by the widespread use of smartphones. It allows text-based chatting as well as audio and video calls, and has replaced telephone

calls 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 that provides access to the Internet at port (and at sea if there is a Wi-Fi network on the ship). Hence, WeChat is the major channel connecting them to the outside world.

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 on 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 to discuss issues of common interest. Guests can also invite people from their friend networks to join the group. 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.

In contrast, a WeChat public account is similar to a Facebook page, aiming to attract as many followers as possible. Its followers automatically receive an update once a new post is made and can read, like and comment on the post. Furthermore, the followers can share the post with their WeChat friend networks and groups, and people in those networks 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. In this context, many seafaring- and maritime-related public accounts have been set up. The followers are mostly industry stakeholders, including seafarers, seafarer family members, ship managers and other maritime professionals. Similarly, seafarers have formed many WeChat groups.

On 07 August 2021, a few seafaring-related public accounts exposed the Grand Progress incident. Grand Progress was a ship crewed by Chinese seafarers. On the morning of 30 July 2021, it left a Philippine port for Nantong (a Chinese port) and during the night, the chief officer developed a fever. On the second day, another four crew members developed fever symptoms too. The captain informed the company and the ship agent. Later, the agent told the crew that Nantong refused the ship to enter the port due to the local pandemic control policy. On 03 August, while the ship was sailing in the vicinity of Zhoushan (another Chinese port), the main engine encountered problems and the crew dropped anchor to repair it. By this time, the entire engine department crew had fallen ill. They managed to fix the engine but could not continue to work. They requested emergency medical assistance from the Zhoushan port authority, who refused and told them that such a request had to be made

through the ship agent. The agent, however, resigned. The company called the Zhoushan municipal government for help, and the municipal government officials again said they needed to go through an agent, but there was no agent in Zhoushan willing to work for the company. Furthermore, the Zhoushan port authority sent a message to all nearby ships warning them not to approach the Grand Progress.

With some crew members seriously ill and yet with no hope of obtaining help through official channels, the Grand Progress crew resorted to contacting a few maritime public accounts for help on the morning of 07 August. In addition to a text message explaining their situation, the crew also sent a photo and a short video to the public accounts. The photo featured the crew in front of a giant white banner hanging beneath the ship's nameplate and on the banner, which read, "We have seafarers on-board with fever and request urgent medical assistance." In the video, a distressed crew member holding his identity card explained the dire situation and cried for help.

The message quickly sparked collective mobilization of the maritime community in the form of reading, sharing and spreading the message further. It was first posted on their WeChat page by three public accounts. Two of them posted the text message and the photo, while the third also posted the video. Within hours, the message had been reposted by at least eight other public accounts. The message was read and shared quickly and widely on WeChat. The post made by one of the public accounts, for example, received more than 50,000 views. The video went viral. According to a news report ([Zhang and Chen, 2021](#)), one ship captain shared it on his social media accounts; within an hour, he noticed that it had been viewed more than 10,000 times. Later that day, the message and video were noticed by a journalist who shared them further on Sina Weibo, a Twitter-like social media platform. In the early morning of the second day, as the news media started to follow the story, the Zhoushan authorities finally started the emergency assistant procedures.

This incident demonstrated the different outcomes of seafarers' agency exercised in two social spaces. Initially, the seafarers and the company tried to obtain medical assistance through official channels. Even though they tried for a few days and the situation worsened, no support from the local authorities was granted. Instead, they were treated as a source of danger to be avoided. When they sought help through maritime public accounts on social media space, the port authority acted quickly. Two factors contributed to this positive outcome.

First, the seafarers deployed symbolic power ([Thompson, 1995](#)), that is, they produced symbolic forms (the banner, video and text message) with the hope of influencing people's minds and intervening in the course of this event. They described the dire situation that seafarers were in. Under such situations, it was the responsibility as well as a moral duty of the port authority to provide emergency support. Furthermore, it was Chinese seafarers who urgently

needed help at a Chinese port. However, in this case, the authority not only continuously evaded the calls for help but also warned others not to provide aid. The irresponsible behavior of the authority further highlighted the severity of the crisis facing the seafarers. Understandably, these symbolic forms would evoke strong feelings of empathy and sympathy for the seafarers and indignation against the authority, especially when other Chinese seafarers received them.

Second, there is an easily accessible maritime community on the WeChat platform. As mentioned earlier, seafarers have established extensive social networks on WeChat consisting of interconnected friends, seafarer groups and maritime public accounts, which form a community of seafarers, seafarer family members, ship managers and other maritime professionals. When the incident was exposed by the public accounts and aroused feelings among followers, the latter acted on the feelings by sharing the story with their friend networks and WeChat groups. As such, the story quickly spread through the WeChat social networks, which activated and reflected the connectedness and social relations in the community. It galvanized the community members to come together and show solidarity in support of the seafarer victims and to demand action from the authorities. It reflected collective agency and collective action—the action of sharing and spreading the message taken by a group of people simultaneously. The solidarity created visibility and strong symbolic power; it put moral pressure on the port authority and quickly changed the course of the event.

The unfolding of the Grand Progress incident shared some similarities with the findings in the industrial relations literature. First, according to [Heckscher and McCarthy \(2014\)](#), the rise of network society has produced a form of solidarity based on weak ties established on social media. This incident reflected this form of solidarity. It should be noted that the solidarity was not only among seafarers but also between seafarers and other stakeholders, such as ship managers and crew managers, since many managers were ex-seafarers. Furthermore, as employers of seafarers, they had a duty to look after their welfare. Their action of sharing and spreading messages can be seen as a form of collective action.

Second, the literature noted that collective action facilitated by social media was characterized by leveraging symbolic power ([Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014](#); [Pasquier et al., 2019](#); [Wood, 2015](#)). The aim was to grab the attention of the media and the public and to cause reputational damage to the employer. Similarly in the Grand Progress incident, collective action was in the form of sharing symbolic forms, which shed the spotlight on the behavior of the local authorities and put moral pressure on them. Furthermore, it caught the attention of journalists and forced the authorities to act quickly. In fact, coverage of this incident continued even after medical assistance was provided. Some national news organizations, including China Central Television (CCTV), the

national broadcaster, followed and reported on the incident. These reports were also posted by maritime-related WeChat public accounts in the following days. As a result, the incident dominated the headlines of these public accounts from 07 to 12 August.

There are also differences between this case and those discussed in the industrial relations literature. In the latter (Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014; Pasquier et al., 2019; Wood, 2015), while mobilization was planned and coordinated by trade unions against capitalist exploitation via social media platforms, collective action took place offline. The Grand Progress incident involved neither labor organizations nor offline action. It was initiated by the seafarers themselves and community members participated spontaneously by spreading the message through social media networks. It can be understood as “connective action” (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012: 739). This finding is consistent with the major characteristics of online activism in China—spontaneous, unorganized and involving the production and sharing of personally expressive content via social media (Tang et al., 2016b; Xue and van Stekelenburg, 2018; Yang, 2009).

It is also worth mentioning that expressions of solidarity on WeChat are subject to constraints, as the internet and social media are tightly controlled in China, and Chinese authorities are wary of collective action, especially since Xi Jinping came to power (King et al., 2013; Yang and Tang, 2018). As a result, in some occasions, various authorities asked public account holders to delete certain posts and/or stop discussing seafarers’ issues (Tang, 2022b). Nevertheless, when seafarers are in dire situations and there is clear evidence that their rights have been blatantly violated, some public account holders would be happy to help, as this second case has shown.

## Conclusion

Working at sea means long periods of separation between seafarers and their families. In order to maintain social ties with their families ashore, seafarers rely on long-distance communication at work. In this context, previous research on seafarers highlighted the benefits of Internet access as a tool to enable seafarers to stay in touch with their families more conveniently and to improve their well-being and welfare.

This paper adopted a social network perspective and shifted the research focus to the question of how the internet and social media enable different social relations and social spaces to shape seafarers’ agency. By virtue of their occupation, seafarers are individualized and isolated in the physical space. The diffusion of the Internet and social media, however, created virtual spaces where seafarers can establish social ties with each other, expand their social networks and form online professional communities.

Through two case studies, this paper showed that social networks enable Chinese seafarers to exercise agency both individually and collectively. Similar to gig workers (Anwar and Graham, 2020; Lehdonvirta, 2016; Wood et al., 2018), seafarers exercised individual agency to share experiences and knowledge about rights protection in internet forums. In terms of collective action, while the industrial relations literature (Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014; Pasquier et al., 2019; Wood, 2015) show that social media platforms are instrumental for labor organizations to plan and coordinate worker mobilizations offline, this paper revealed that social media enables seafarers to engage in what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) call “connective action.” Taking advantage of the professional networks and rapid message dissemination enabled by social media, Chinese seafarers spontaneously participated in collective mobilization in response to unfair treatment. This is consistent with the characteristics of online activism in China as suggested by the previous literature (Tang et al., 2016b; Xue and van Stekelenburg, 2018; Yang, 2009). The two cases demonstrated that the Internet and social media provide social spaces for Chinese seafarers to expand their social networks and form online professional communities, which affords them new resources, such as mutual support and solidarity, to exercise agency.

By adopting a social network perspective, this paper not only generated a new understanding of seafarers’ use of the internet and social media but also contributed to the debate on labor agency. Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2010) point out that the web of social relations in which workers are embedded conditions their agency. For Chinese seafarers, the social spaces constituted by the Internet and social media transform their social relations with the maritime community. Without the Internet, the community would remain largely imagined (Anderson, 1983), in the sense that although seafarers were aware of and could imagine the existence of other members, they were unable to establish (communicative) connections due to social isolation. The Internet and social media, however, allow them to connect through digital social networks. Social relations in the maritime community are no longer imagined but become tangible and can be activated for mutual support and mobilized for collective action. They help seafarers exercise agency to protect their interests against labor rights violations, not only by employers but also by government authorities. By embedding seafarers in a new web of social relations, the virtual social spaces enhance seafarers’ agency.

Given the context that the Chinese seafarers’ union does not function to represent and help seafarers in labor and employment matters (Tang et al., 2016b; Tang and Zhang, 2019), these online social relations are particularly salient in providing resources to help seafarers promote their rights. While these two cases are not representative, they are not unique either. For example, the Seafarers Internet-Bar contains millions of posts made by seafarers discussing and complaining about injustices they have experienced. During the



COVID-19 pandemic, many Chinese seafarers experienced being denied crew changes in Chinese ports (Zhao et al., 2023), and some of them complained and asked for help on WeChat (Tang, 2022b). Nevertheless, it should also be noted that seafarers' agency on the Internet and social media is also constrained as the latter is tightly controlled by the Chinese government fearing that collective action online could lead to social instability (King et al., 2013; Yang and Tang, 2018).

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