

Hong Kong's Maritime Miracle: The Story of our City since 1945*

A new exhibition at Hong Kong Maritime Museum opening on 24 June 2022, explores the contribution of shipping and the maritime sector to the meteoric growth of post-war Hong Kong.

Introduction

This special exhibition coincides with the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong SAR. Organised and curated by the Hong Kong Maritime Museum, *Maritime Miracle* explores how shipping and maritime developments were key to the reconstruction and growth of the city after the devastation of the Second World War – with a depleted population and a city partly in ruins – up to the present day. The story is told through 25 historic exhibits divided over five themes. Information is provided via (relatively minimal) text panels and QR codes, in combination with art tech, interactive technology, and an immersive movie experience directed by award-winning filmmaker Heiward Mak.

Key messages and narrative

Maritime Miracle contains a few key messages. First, people should be aware of the importance of shipping for our daily lives, as over 90% of our daily needs is transported over water ('no shipping, no shopping' could be the slogan). Second, the exhibition tries to emphasize the high level of connectivity between Hong Kong people and the maritime community. Heiward Mak's movie clips feature Carmen So, a fictive character that explores her - and her family's - ties with the city's maritime past and present. Third, Hong Kong's maritime history is importantly based on people's resilience and their 'we can do' spirit. Moreover, *Maritime Miracle* will live up to its title, as it emphasizes several miraculous momenta that seem to be so characteristic for the Hong Kong community.

Themes

The massive (and impressive!) story of 77 years of maritime initiatives, entrepreneurship and international economic and political developments is arranged chronologically. The exhibition comprises of five phases: 'Regeneration (1945-1948)', 'Back in Business (1949-1970)', 'The High Growth Years (1960s-1980s)', 'The Container Changed Everything (1972-present)', and 'The Future'. The exhibition concludes with a forward-looking section dedicated to sustainability while celebrating Hong Kong's spirit of resilience and vitality.

The first theme describes the years immediately following the devastation of the Second World War. The two main shipyards in the city were bombed by the allied forces to prevent the Japanese occupational army from using these industrial sites to their own benefit. No fewer than 230 shipwrecks jammed maritime traffic in Victoria harbour. It was expertise in marine salvage that initially restored the harbour to working order *within a year after the war* – a miracle! The city was also physically re-built *with shipping*—steel from salvaged ships was used as the bars in reinforced concrete, a key component in post-war high-rise construction in the city. Local demand for steel for the construction industry led to the establishment of over twenty different ship demolition sites in Cheung Sha Wan, Ngau Tau Kok, Kwun Tong, Kwai Chung and Tsuen Wan. Only a few years after the war, much of this steel was exported to Japan – a miraculous achievement in different ways.

The second phase deals with the crucial years for Hong Kong's maritime expansion. The immediate post-war period laid the foundations for modern Hong Kong. The city underwent a pivotal change in 1949. The end of the Chinese Civil War prompted tumultuous change in China. A substantial number of refugees left their homes in the mainland, with many heading to Hong Kong. Whilst the incoming migrants came from all different social classes, a notable portion consisted of wealthy merchants from Shanghai and Ningbo. It was understandable that having left behind almost everything in Shanghai and

with an uncertain future for Hong Kong ahead, shipping should prove an attractive business for the new migrants. There was no shortage of opportunities for the new arrivals in Hong Kong. However, shipping was (and still is!) a capital-intensive business. Before they could start to build the fleets, which came to be dominant players in global trade, capital had to be raised. Turning their hands to what they did best—trading—several future ship-owning families established trading businesses.

The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 much helped propel the growth of the new generation of Hong Kong shipowners. As access to the Chinese market became more restricted, regional trading, particularly to Japan, became the mainstay of the Hong Kong shipowners. Rebuilding the nation which had limited natural resources provided a huge market for shipping. Hong Kong's merchants were already well established in trading Chinese products with Japan and were quick to grasp the opportunities that shipping provided.

The third theme focuses on the years of unprecedented success for the Hong Kong shipping community. The arrangements described in the preceding two paragraphs allowed both for the rapid development of the Japanese shipbuilding industry and for the Hong Kong shipowners to dispose of much of their older tonnage and replace their fleets with modern vessels as they reinvested the earnings afforded by the long-term employment. Initially, this was primarily bulk carriers, but in the late 1960's, as Japan's oil demand grew and the super tanker was developed to transport oil from the Middle East, the Hong Kong owned fleet grew to be a major player in the world oil transportation market.

Subsequently, it was the growth of the Japanese economy which propelled Hong Kong shipping through the 1960's and 1970's in what is considered the golden age of Hong Kong shipping. The following data are miraculous – and telling of Hong Kong's success story. They serve as a mere example, as many other success stories from Shanghai immigrants can be told. In 1976, Y.K.Pao's World-Wide Shipping was the largest privately owned fleet ever assembled, bigger than the combined fleets of Greek titans such as Onassis, Nirachos and Lemos.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, China had remained largely closed off. In 1979 with the inauguration of Special Economic Zones just over the border in Shenzhen, China's economy opened up and Hong Kong quickly adapted to the new opportunities. Much of Hong Kong's manufacturing industry moved to Southern China. Hong Kong rapidly became the largest overseas investor in the mainland.

Containerization and its massive, revolutionary, transformational impact on shipping is the focus of theme 4. Containerisation and ship specialisation later enabled a major surge in trade growth by slashing transport costs and boosting the city's prosperity. Kwai Chung Terminal, completed in 1972, became the *largest container port* in the world for the first time in 1987 (within 15 years, another miracle), giving rise to further expansion of the port to eight terminals by the mid-1990s.

The fifth theme focuses on the future of maritime Hong Kong. The exhibition dwells on important environmental and socio-economic issues like green/blue shipping (the reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, the usage of new types of fuel), on innovative ideas about naval architecture, but also on the further development of Hong Kong's harbourfront as link between the water and the community.

Next to the major exhibition, there will be an Education Corner focusing on loading and unloading practices with an interactive display, on stories for children about shipping, and with interviews of representatives of the multifaceted Hong Kong maritime community. Lecture series, a symposium and a richly illustrated book/catalogue will accompany this extensive project.

The exhibition also includes an outdoor display of a historic *Dai Fei*, high speed smuggling vessel on loan from the Hong Kong Marine Police. These infamous cross-border smuggling speedboats fitted with four or five giant outboard engines and capable of speeds of up to 70 knots, were endemic in local waters in the 1980s and 1990s.

We are grateful for the generously support from the HKSAR government, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust as major sponsor, and the many important sponsors from the maritime industry.

Joost Schokkenbroek
Museum Director

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