



Can Ships Help Cultivate Cross-Country Ties?

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Ships are everywhere. War ships, education-based ships, missionary ships, hospital ships, cargo ships and cruise ships are just a few of the types of ships that operate around the world. They come from every corner in the globe, stemming from countries and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations alike. They employ and serve millions of people each year.

Sociologists and policy makers need to take seriously the socio-economic and cultural effects of ships because the port cities in which they dock are dramatically altered by the accompanying influx of people, goods, ideas, and cultures, whether through an increase in transportation infrastructure or the creation of ethnic enclaves, among other influences. Yet, we know more about how permanent migrants from these ships have shaped cities, and less on how people, ideas, and goods that are intended to be transient and fleeting affect the communities that host them.

In my research on Subic Bay, Philippines, I use observations, interviews, and document analysis to compare a U.S. military ship and an evangelical missionary ship, and find that despite their differences, both ships reproduce inequality and promote unsustainable development of the host community in three ways.

First, when a U.S. military ship docks into a foreign port, there is an influx of U.S. service personnel who are predominantly men. Accompanying these service personnel are sexualized bar advertisements that are only displayed when ships are docked. This influx of men, and the accompanying sexualized advertisements, also directs where local—in this case, Filipino—men and women go and where they avoid, since the men and women I talked to who frequently visited the Freeport Zone made conscious decisions not to visit the boardwalk when a U.S. ship was docked, precisely because of the sexualized atmosphere it created. The catering to U.S. servicemen in ports also shapes how and where women service personnel travel and visit, as many of the available activities within the port are geared toward men and vice, and what's left are traditional women's activities, like shopping.

The evangelical ship I studied also directs where their personnel travel and visit based on gender but in a different way. For example, based on their religious beliefs where an even number of men and women are not allowed to go out with one another, missionaries are not allowed to venture outside the Freeport Zone alone, and where the women—but not men—I spoke with preferred staying inside the ship at night, being in large groups of people, and not interacting with locals outside mandatory activities associated with their missionary work.

All three situations create markets that are limited, appeal to a small segment of the visiting and local populations, and are based on particular understandings of gender that limits the movement and activities of women onboard the ship and often those in the local community.



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Second, I found that ships provide cultural orientations to their personnel before they dock in a port. While this is meant to help better inform their personnel about the history and cultures of the places they visit, these orientations are often based on inaccurate or out-of-date information and perpetuate racial and national stereotypes. As such, what personnel are taught in orientations does not always—although it may—match what they witness or encounter when they leave the ship. This can have the unintended effect of personnel dismissing any information given by these orientations, since they cannot discern what is useful and what is not, possibly contributing to friction between ship personnel and locals when ship personnel behave in ways that may offend someone in, or are inappropriate for, the local community.

Finally, in addition to previous scholarship that focuses on their effects on the environment and public spaces, ships also impact local markets. By providing basic necessities—for example, shelter and food—personnel who leave the ship tend to consume relatively luxurious goods and services, such as the purchase of food not available on the ship that are bought as special treats or gifts for relatives back at home. This means that stores offering basic necessities do not benefit from the influx of ship personnel but those who offer luxurious goods and services do. It also means that formal and informal businesses that meet the demands of ship personnel may be flooded with customers when ships are docked but may suffer when there are no ships in port because there is little to no demand for their goods and services. This is particularly concerning when there are long periods of time between ships that dock there.

This sudden influx of people can also lead to the rise and proliferation of informal economies, some of which may be degrading or violent, as is an example from my research where a U.S. serviceman asked Filipino children to “prank” his fellow colleagues by hitting and kicking them.

What steps can policy makers take to address the social problems that ships create and reproduce? They can link foreign ships and their respective organizations (whether the U.S. military or another foreign entity) with a partner from the host community, either local governments and/or local non-governmental organizations.

First, if local organizations or governments are able to help coordinate activities in port, this can create a wide array of options for off-duty personnel that go above and beyond sexualized and/or feminized entertainment. For U.S. military ships, these activities only reinforce stereotypes about local women, in this case, an understanding of Filipinas as revolving around the sexual pleasure of U.S. servicemen.

Second, if local organizations or governments create and give cultural orientations to ship personnel, locals would have the power to determine what information is important for them to know, express any concerns about their presence, and offer any recommendations to mitigate these concerns, as well as provide up-to-date and culturally relevant information regarding understanding, and how to navigate, the city in which they are located.

Finally, although ships provide shelter and food by necessity, since they are at sea for long periods of times and once docked, food and shelter may be matters of national defense and security, creating ties with local organizations and kitchens to provide meals, for example, would alleviate some of the stress of the market, and can also serve as a means of cross-cultural exchange by introducing local foods and cultivating ties with local communities that go beyond feminized and sexualized entertainment.

All three of these policy recommendations, alongside fair compensation provided to local governments and/or organizations for the work provided, would foster better relations with locals, and cultivate cross-cultural exchange that goes above and beyond stereotypes or superficial introductions to the people they encounter and the cities around the world in which they dock.

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