

CAN CHINA'S FISHING VILLAGES MAKE A COMEBACK?

By Songzi Wang

Though China is one of the biggest producers of marine fish in the world, little is known about its small-scale fisheries (SSF) sector, particularly with regard to the impact of urban development initiatives on communities and livelihoods. Using Hainan Province as a base for research, China Blue Sustainability Institute is gathering information that will be useful for provincial governments and other stakeholders to work towards the sustainable transformation of fisher communities as well as protection of the marine environment. Key in this process are community engagement and respect for traditional knowledge.



Credit: Mingzhi Chen

Fishers carrying catches in Rongshanliao, Hainan Province

Not long after 1 a.m., the fishers of Rongshanliao in Hainan Province push their way out to sea in 8 metre-long fiberglass boats from the coastline under cover of darkness. They set off for somewhere around two nautical miles offshore to retrieve the nets they had placed a few days ago. Often, two men operate a boat, and they do all the work onboard together, from casting to bringing in nets weighing two to three hundred pounds with their bare hands. The wives of these fishers usually wait on the wharf. Once the boats dock, the women wade to the boats to collect the heavy boxes of fresh fish and carry them to the beach; they then sort, weigh, and record the catches before loading them onto trucks and

driving away. Within hours, the seafood will be displayed in various farmers' markets and restaurant kitchens in Haikou, the capital city of Hainan.

Fishers can earn a few hundred RMB by a good catch, in contrast to not even a hundred RMB by a poor catch. Due to unstable income, fishers sometimes cannot afford fish workers' day-end wages of 200-250 yuan.

Such fishery production patterns like those in Rongshanliao can be found everywhere along Chinese coastal marine areas. Despite slight differences in the boats' length, fishing

methods and nets, these forms of production have similar features: a low number of workers (often around 2-6 people); boat owners are also involved in the daily labour; production that only guarantees the livelihoods of boat owners and their hired workers; and limited capacity for expansion. It should be noted that China does not yet have an official definition of small-scale fishing, but the FAO describes the practice as a “sub-sector of fisheries employing labour-intensive harvesting, processing, and distribution technologies to exploit marine and inland water fishery resources”, and notes that it is not appropriate to develop a universal definition of “small-scale fisheries (SSF)”, given its complexity and dynamics. The form of fishery production in Rongshanliao and other coastal fishing areas can therefore, for all intents and purposes, be categorised as “small-scale fisheries”. In this article, small-scale fisheries is broadly characterised as “subsistence fishing close to shore using vessels around 12 metres in length”.



Small-scale fishing boats in Lingao, Hainan Province

Looking at it in isolation, “small-scale fisheries” implies mainly low-level production. Globally, however, around 200 million people depend on small-scale fisheries and their industrial chains to make a living. According to statistics from 2021, there were nearly 300 000 small-scale fishing boats based in China, accounting for 79% of the national fishing fleet. With such an industry size but with little attention given to them, the invisible small-scale fisheries sector has a direct and far-reaching impact on marine product supply, sustainable fishery resource utilisation, the aquatic environment, and other issues.

Challenges faced by small-scale fisheries in China

Workers and communities involved in small-scale fishing are currently facing unprecedented challenges in recent years. Behind these changes lie complex reasons that are intimately linked to the decline of fishery resources, unequal development between urban and rural areas, and other economic, social, and ecological problems.

The widespread use of highly efficient fishing tools in commercial fishing leaves small-scale fisheries little access to fishery resources. Compounded by climate change, marine pollution, etc., there is an obvious decline in the population size and types of species being caught, according to fishers, which has turned many common species of fish into rare goods. Due to the financial strain, fishers have switched their nets for ones with finer mesh size. However, the increased fishing of juveniles prevents more fish from being sexually mature enough to reproduce. This in turn results in catches of smaller sizes of the species, causing a continuing decrease in the germplasm resources.

The fishery resources depletion has driven many fishers out of the business and they have no choice but to leave in search of new opportunities in the city. The younger generations are often encouraged to study and work outside the village by their families as fishing is considered to be limited in scope, needing only so-called “general skills” and heavily reliance on physical strength, as well as being a poorly paid occupation. In the process, the real value of these fishing skills is largely ignored.



Nowadays, fishing operations in villages are mainly carried out by middle-aged and elderly people

More fishers abandoning traditional lifestyles

Nanbianhai, in the city of Sanya located in the southern part of Hainan Island, has been home to the water-dwelling Tanka people for generations. Here, international tourism island construction and urban development has cast a shadow over the community, even faster than the fishery resources crisis. In 2016, Sanya port, where Tankas used to dock, fish, and trade, was transformed into a yacht marina while a new large fishing port was built at Yazhou. As the Yazhou Central Fishing Port is far away from Nanbianhai, coupled with local tourism development in the area, fishers started to go ashore to find alternate livelihoods. For young Tanka people, they can only imagine traditional lives through folk songs.



Credit: Mingzhi Chen

A boat on Bamen Bay in Wenchang, Hainan province, Nov. 19, 2020

Moreover, to save the collapse of fish stocks, governments have imposed moratoriums on fishing from May to September, as the period is vital to the survival of marine life, with most fishing vessels banned from venturing out to sea. Still, fishers must take on short-term jobs ashore to support their families during this time. It's common for them to take manual heavy jobs with low wages like construction workers or carriers.

An important question to ask is whether it is possible to develop sustainable fisheries so that local fishers can earn a living without being forced to leave their hometown.

“Go ashore, go farther out to sea, and go recreational fishing”

More recently, the Hainan government has called on fishers to “go ashore, go farther out to sea, and go recreational fishing.” “Going ashore” refers to encouraging fishers to move into aquaculture, specifically fish farms that can be centrally managed to minimise environmental damage. “Going farther out to sea” means developing deep-sea farming and fishing. However, moving into aquaculture and deep-sea fishing requires capital to rent ponds and buy equipment, as well as skills and know-how, which often deters small-scale fishers.

In 2001, recreational fishing, defined as “transforming fishery resources, space, and culture into tourism experiences”, was first officially proposed by the Chinese government. In 2011, what is now China's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs, included recreational fishing in its development plan for the first time, recognising it as one of the country's five modern fishery sectors.

As the transformation of fishers' livelihoods has become increasingly urgent recently, coastal governments at all levels are exploring new ways to develop recreational fishing. In July 2020, Hainan Province issued *Guidelines on Pushing Forward the Recreational Fisheries Pilot Establishment for Healthy Development of Recreational Fisheries*. It is advised

by the government that “recreational fishing boats should be over 24 metres in length”, presumably out of consideration for security and safety, management, as well as capital and technical engagement. But of Hainan's more than 20 000 registered fishing vessels, nearly 80% are under 12 metres in length, which means only a small number of the island's fishers can get involved in the recreational fishing industry.

In 2021, after a year of deliberations, a few municipal and county governments tailored previous measures to local conditions based on trials. For example, according to the Wenchang government, recreational fishing boats involved in a trial can comprise 15 types, the minimum of which is no less than 12.05 metres in length; while two pilot recreational fishing boats approved by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of Qionghai for the “wusuoguizhi” fishing cooperative are both less than 12 metres in length. Predictably, governments will issue more flexible policies that can include a growing number of small-scale fishers in recreational fishing. The recreational fishery in China is entering a phase of development and testing, during which complementary rules are constantly being refined and improved by relevant sectors.



Credit: Xing Tao

Two pilot recreational fishing boats owned by “wusuoguizhi”, a local fishing cooperative

Creating a renewed sense of community

In addition to top-down policy promotion, community engagement is key to the transformation of fishing villages. Fishers underestimate the value of fishing expertise and traditional wisdom they already possess; they also tend to have a low sense of self-worth; and the common loss of cultural identity among fishers is a major obstacle to local community development. Thus, it is important to help villagers rebuild their self-confidence and a shared identity, the basis of their involvement in community public affairs. A shared identity can encourage fishing villagers to actively connect with their neighbours, care about common interests, and look for opportunities together for community development.



A scrapped wooden boat is turned into a playhouse

What is also worth noting is that the relevant policies and channeling of resources like investments should also consider the traditional rituals and cultural practices of the residents, so the first step is to learn about the cultural traditions in fishing villages. External stakeholders such as the public, government officials, and investors usually have no access to knowledge about fishing culture and have tended to see all Hainan fishing villages as essentially interchangeable. This only makes capturing and sharing each village's unique elements even more important.

“Bring Fish to Table, Bring Fisher Home”

In 2019, China Blue, as a third-party organisation caring for fisheries, fishing villages and fishers, launched the project “Bring Fish to Table, Bring Fisher Home” that documents and shares the cultures, traditional rituals, living conditions, and fishing practices of more than forty traditional fishing communities across Hainan. In addition, China Blue has held photo exhibitions in a few villages, guiding viewers to rediscover the unique value of traditional fishing culture. China Blue also helps fishers to preserve and protect Tanka culture and communities through compiling oral Tanka songs into words and recording their singing performances.

The organisation hopes to continue to explore the traditions and cultures of fishing communities and promote two-way interaction within and outside local villages through images, writing, and other means of communication.

With a deeper understanding of the local fishing community, the project “Bring Fish to Table, Bring Fisher Home” will proceed to the operational practices stage. In the near future, China Blue will work with a fishing cooperative in Qionghai to explore how to involve local communities in the transformation towards recreational fisheries. Starting by identifying each community's needs, China Blue, along with the fishing cooperative, will then search for a recreational fishery development path in order to promote the sustainable development of the fishing community and protection of the ecological environment. This process will provide experience for the transformation of fisher communities in other areas as well as for policy formulation by the relevant government departments.

In this “International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture 2022” declared by the UN, China will continue in-depth study and practices, as well as gain experience and build up a systematic knowledge system based on Chinese small fisheries, which is hoped to be a reference for peers worldwide.🌐



A photo exhibition held in Dongshuigang, a fishing village in Hainan, drew the attention of villagers



Songzi Wang is a project manager and researcher at China Blue Sustainability Institute (<https://www.chinabluesustainability.org/>), and is actively involved in the project “Bring Fish to Table, Bring Fisher Home”. She is interested in studying the inheritance of fishery culture and the sustainable development of fishing communities. She has published a few articles featuring small-scale fisheries in China.