

How Arriving Ships Impact Port Communities and Economies

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Ships are everywhere. War ships, educational 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 of the globe and are deployed by countries, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations alike. They employ and serve millions of people each year.

Scholars and policymakers need to take the economic and cultural effects of ships seriously because the port cities in which they dock are dramatically altered by the accompanying influx of people, goods, and ideas. Transportation infrastructures are modified, and ethnic enclaves may form near ports. To date, more is known about how cities are shaped by migrants who arrive by ship than about the many ways in which transient people, ideas, and goods affect the communities that host ships.

To enrich knowledge of these issues, my work on Subic Bay, Philippines, uses observations, interviews, and document analysis to compare a U.S. military ship and an evangelical missionary ship. Despite differences, I uncover several ways in which conveyances from both ships reproduce inequality and promote unsustainable development in the host community.

How Gender Shapes Interactions When Ships Arrive in Port

When a U.S. military ship docks in a foreign port, it brings an influx of U.S. service personnel who are predominantly men. As the ships dock, their personnel see sexually charged advertisements for bars. The influx of men and upsurge in sexualized advertisements in turn influence the places local Filipino men and women frequent and avoid. Filipino men and women I spoke with said they avoid the boardwalk of the Freeport Zone when a U.S. ship docks, precisely because of the sexualized atmosphere created when this happens.

U.S. service men and women also frequent different locations while in port. Many of the most visible activities in the port feature alcohol and sex and are geared toward men. For women, there are gender stereotyped port activities like shopping.

In different ways, gender also shapes the port-side activities of personnel from the evangelical ship I studied. The religious beliefs of these visiting missionaries prohibit men and women from going out with one another, and they are not allowed to venture outside the Freeport Zone alone. The women – but not men – told me that they preferred staying inside the ship at night. They also want to remain in large groups of people and avoid interaction with locals outside mandatory activities associated with their missionary work.

For the local port economy, all of these dynamics among arriving ship personnel create markets that are limited and favor activities that appeal to a small segment of the visiting and local populations. Understandings of gender especially limit the movement and activities of women who arrive on the ships – and often limit the activities of women in the local community too.

Orientation Briefings Often Contain Misleading Stereotypes

Managers on ships often provide cultural briefings to their personnel before they dock in a port. Although these background orientations are meant to help inform personnel about the history and cultures of the places they visit, I find that they often include inaccurate or out-of-date information that perpetuates misleading racial and national stereotypes.

What is more, the ideas personnel hear in these cultural orientations often do not match what they encounter when they leave the ship. Many people arriving on the ships simply dismiss the mix of accurate and misleading information conveyed in these orientations. The misinformation offered in cultural orientations may very well contribute to friction between ship personnel and locals – and perhaps even make it more likely that some ship workers will behave inappropriately while on shore.

Local Economic Impact

The impact of ship dockings on local environments and public spaces has been well-documented, but less is known about the impact on local markets. My research shows that because ships provide basic necessities like shelter and food, personnel leaving the docked ships tend to focus their buying power on relatively luxurious goods and services. For example, many service personnel buy food and goods that are not available on the ship to take as gifts to relatives back at home.

This pattern means within the local economy around the port stores offering basic necessities do not benefit from the influx of ship personnel, while stores with luxuries do better. Furthermore the markets are episodic and specific to particular kinds of arriving ships. Businesses that meet the demands of the personnel arriving on particular kinds of ships are flooded with customers when ships are docked, but suffer after those ships leave port. For local merchants, the downturns can be especially severe when there are long periods of time between ships that dock there. Sudden influxes of temporarily visiting people can also lead to similar dynamics in informal economies, some of which deal in degrading or violent illicit trades.

Ways to Improve Port Life and Encounters

To address the social problems that ships create, policymakers should link foreign ships with local governments and non-governmental organizations:

- Local organizations or governments could help coordinate activities in port and create a wide array of entertainment options for off-duty personnel, beyond sexualized services.
- Local organizations or governments could provide more realistic and interesting cultural orientations for ship personnel, designed to include tips on good visitor etiquette and highlight any concerns about the interactions between newcomers and natives.
- Although ships of course provide ongoing shelter and food to their workers and travelers, local businesses and kitchens could be contracted to provide meals in port. This might smooth market ups and downs and serve as a means of cross-cultural exchange.

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Read more in Victoria Reyes, “Port of Call: How Ships Shape Foreign-Local Encounters” *Social Forces* 96, no. 3 (2018): 1097-1118.