

What's the Issue? United States–China Relations

by TRADOC Culture Center



Introduction

The United States is still the world's only true superpower, preeminent in its economic, military, ideological, and cultural reach. But two decades into the 21st century, all indicators are that the People's Republic of China is quickly headed toward superpower status itself. It is second only to the United States in regard to the size of a single nation's economy. It is also rapidly increasing its military spending and is growing more assertive in wielding its influence and economic power around the world. History teaches us repeatedly that when a nation on the rise challenges the existing dominant nation or nations, friction, rivalry, and sometimes conflict are inevitable. Combine this with significant cultural differences, and one has the situation that exists between the United States and China today.

The Chinese are very conscious and proud of what they see as 5000 years of uniquely unbroken ethnic history. Their perception of this history views China as the historical cultural center of Asia, when other countries used to pay tribute to China as the benevolent stewards of Asian civilization. This self-image plays a significant role in what China considers its rightful place in Asia, especially against the backdrop of the late 19th through the early 20th century, which many Chinese call the "Century of Humiliation." Much of Chinese policy today is in part aimed at China regaining its lost pride, its place in the world, and perhaps above all, the means to make itself strong again—in a way that other powers, especially Western ones, cannot diminish. At the same time, in what may seem contradictory to a Westerner, many Chinese also have an admiration for the United States, a country whose industriousness brought it

from nonexistence to world preeminence in only two centuries, a chronological drop in the bucket by Chinese historical standards. Indeed, some might see modern China as a 21st century model for capitalism (albeit one overseen by China's authoritarian political rule), an economic system that the United States championed throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

China is also the birthplace of Confucianism, a philosophy that the government often cites to justify principled government rule over a populace that collectively fulfills its duty by individuals subsuming themselves to what the government determines is best for the people. While the communists officially rejected Confucianism when they took control of China, this collectivist mentality is still a prominent factor in Chinese thought. Although China has many elements of capitalism in its economy, ultimately it is still a state-controlled economy within a communist system. It does not have what we would consider a free press, freedom of movement, or many of the other individual liberties that most Americans take for granted. This is in contrast to the relatively young and more historically forward-looking, less reflective United States, which achieved world preeminence in the 20th century and whose stated ideals of democracy, individual liberties, and international equality, enforced through international law and led by the United States, can come into conflict with China's worldview.

Another major factor to consider when examining United States–China relations is that despite the image of a unified, single-minded Chinese people intent on one common purpose, many potentially destabilizing forces exist within modern Chinese culture—economic, demographic, cultural,

and ideological, to name a few. China's greatest issues are internal. Additionally, Chinese policy often aims to solidify China's domestic atmosphere through developing common goals or causes, or by creating economic advancement and benefit that will win the satisfaction of the people. China, with its vast and unwieldy population, has experienced many foreign invasions over the millennia and incredibly tumultuous and lethal domestic periods since it became communist. This, combined with a 5000-year-old desire to seek and achieve harmony, results in a risk-averse mentality that seeks to eliminate situations that may lead to chaos.

countries, once again led by Great Britain, refused to cooperate and went to war with China in what is now known as the First Opium War. England won decisively, forcing China to continue allowing the opium trade (in which the United States was engaged as well), to pay silver, and to open up even more cities to trade with the West. While the United States was not directly involved in the fighting and was generally looked upon with a bit more tolerance than some of the other European nations trading in China, Americans were still foreigners and in this way were associated with some of the anger about the Opium War in the public consciousness.



The slogan says "Long live the triumph of Chairman Mao's revolutionary line of literature and art!" and the background shows the town of Yan'an, where Mao Zedong declared that all art and literature should serve politics first and art second. Characters from the revolutionary operas, 1974. Jiasheng Ding; Shanghai Theatre Academy (est.1945).

The Second Opium War involving England and France against China started in 1856 over the Western countries' perceptions that China was not living up to the treaties it had signed after the First Opium War. This also ended in a crushing Chinese defeat. The Chinese know the series of treaties China signed after the Opium Wars, such as the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 and the Treaty of Tianjin in 1860, as the Unequal Treaties. In this series of treaties, China had to open up many trading ports, relax trade restrictions, grant legal extraterritoriality, and allow Western traders to build and live in expatriate communities and worship as they chose within Chinese territory. In return, the Western powers would not attack China. These losses in the Opium Wars began a period known in China as the "Century of Humiliation."

Roots of Contention

Century of Humiliation. Chinese officials did not meet with United States representatives during their first attempt to establish relations with China in 1784, but by the early 1810s, the opium trade between Western countries—led by Great Britain—and China had begun. To varying extents, many Western countries felt resentment at the way the Chinese government treated foreigners as inferiors who needed to acknowledge their subordination to the Chinese Empire. They also resented China for believing that Chinese culture was more superior and richer in history than all others were and that the Chinese emperor was emperor of the entire world.

In 1839, China sought to end the opium trade and confiscate stores of the addictive and damaging drug sold by Western countries, primarily Great Britain. The Western

countries, once again led by Great Britain, refused to cooperate and went to war with China in what is now known as the First Opium War. England won decisively, forcing China to continue allowing the opium trade (in which the United States was engaged as well), to pay silver, and to open up even more cities to trade with the West. While the United States was not directly involved in the fighting and was generally looked upon with a bit more tolerance than some of the other European nations trading in China, Americans were still foreigners and in this way were associated with some of the anger about the Opium War in the public consciousness.

After the Opium Wars, the Chinese government, which had weakened and lost prestige, had to deal with several destabilizing incidents that came about as a result of the Western presence in China. These incidents included the Sino-Japanese War, the internal Taiping Rebellion, and the 100 Days Reform Movement. They also included the Boxer Rebellion, which the Chinese government initially opposed but later partially embraced. The Boxer Rebellion resulted in open conflict against Western powers (including the United States) and Japan, whose militaries ended the rebellion and then extracted massive monetary reparations and even more territory concessions from the Chinese government. This period was accompanied by massive famine and poverty in the majority of China, which was rural and

agricultural. All of this damaged and eventually led to the fall of Imperial China.

Then, in World War I, the Chinese sent more than 100,000 troops to Europe to fight on the side of the Allied powers. But at the war's end, Chinese territory that the Germans had controlled was not given back to China by the victorious Western powers but instead was given to China's enemies, the Japanese. Less than 20 years later, the Japanese invaded China and commenced a brutal occupation that directly or indirectly cost the lives of approximately 40 million Chinese.

This "Century of Humiliation," from the First Opium War until the establishment of the communist People's Republic of China in 1949, is something both actively taught in schools and invoked in public pronouncements by the Chinese government. Seen from a Western perspective, many modern Chinese seem to look at this period more as a lesson and catalyst for resolute progress and development than a source of openly expressed anger with the West.

Treatment of Chinese Immigrants in the United States. In the United States, there was an influx of Chinese immigrants after the 1849 Gold Rush in California. Chinese immigrants also often ended up working on the construction of the railroads, in factories, and on farms. Some even managed to become business owners. Racial hatred, stereotypes about Chinese being drug pushers and all Chinese women being prostitutes, and fears about Chinese immigrants taking Americans' jobs resulted in great discrimination. Chinese were paid lower wages, had their rights legally restricted or eliminated altogether, were barred from gaining citizenship, and were the subject of a great deal of physical violence, including the murder, physical assault, and property theft of hundreds of Chinese. Many laws were passed specifically to limit the rights of Chinese residents in California. Numerous cities sought to remove all Chinese from their limits, and eventually the Chinese Exclusion Act banned almost any Chinese from immigrating to the United States. These laws were the first immigration-limiting laws in American history. Within China, this discrimination against Chinese created some ill feelings toward the United States.



Shiyu, or Lion Islet, part of Kinmen County, one of Taiwan's offshore islands, seen in front of Xiamen, China, on September 7, 2014. Just off Kinmen's shores are the glass-walled high-rises from the booming mainland port of Xiamen in one of China's most prosperous provinces.

Photo by rheins

People's Republic of China. By the mid-20th century, just before and after the Japanese occupation and World War II, China was engaged in a civil war between the Nationalists, who were allies of the democratic United States, and the Communists, who were allied with the Soviet Union. (The two sides had fought together against the Japanese.) In 1949, the Communists under Mao Zedong eventually won and allied themselves with America's Cold War foe, the Soviet Union. The Nationalists fled to what is known today as Taiwan. The United States did not recognize the communist government that controlled all of mainland China, known as the People's Republic of China, as the legitimate government of China. Instead, it recognized the Nationalists in Taiwan, the Republic of China, who claimed they were the true government of all China.

In the years before and during World War II, the Japanese occupation of parts of China was brutal and involved many atrocities. Though the United States decisively fought and defeated Japan in World War II, immediately afterward the United States helped rebuild Japan into the capitalist economic power that it is today and became allies with the island nation not much more than 500 miles away from the Chinese coast. The Japanese treatment of the Chinese during their occupation is very much in the collective consciousness of the Chinese.

During the Korean War (1950–1953), China (along with the Soviet Union) supported North Korea against the United States and South Korea. Later, when United States forces had fought up to the North Korean–Chinese border, the Chinese

fought the United States in open warfare. The Korean War eventually ended in a stalemate; to this day, China is an ally of North Korea, and the United States is an ally of South Korea. The Korean War has never been declared officially over, though that may change in the near future.

In the Taiwan Strait Crisis during the mid-1950s, the United States-backed Nationalists in Taiwan deployed to some nearby Chinese islands. The People's Republic of China considered this an act of aggression by the Nationalist government and responded by shelling the islands with artillery. The United States then indicated it would use military force to defend Taiwan itself. Eventually, the Chinese agreed to negotiate and the hostilities ended.

The Chinese asserted control of Tibet in 1950, and when there was a Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule 9 years later, the People's Republic of China's response killed thousands. The United Nations and the United States condemned these actions, which supported Tibetan resistance. China claims that Tibet has been part of China for centuries, and based on that interpretation of history, it is part of China. Today, the United States recognizes Tibet as part of China.

In 1964, China tested its first nuclear bomb, adding a clear level of threat to the United States in the "capitalist democracy versus communism" cold war.

The Chinese, along with the Soviets, supported the communists in North Vietnam and the Viet Cong insurgents in South Vietnam against the United States and South Vietnamese government during the Vietnam War.

Later, when the Soviet Union and China split over various political and ideological differences, the United States reopened relations with the People's Republic of China for the first time as part of the United States strategy to defeat the Soviet Union, eventually recognizing the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government of mainland China.

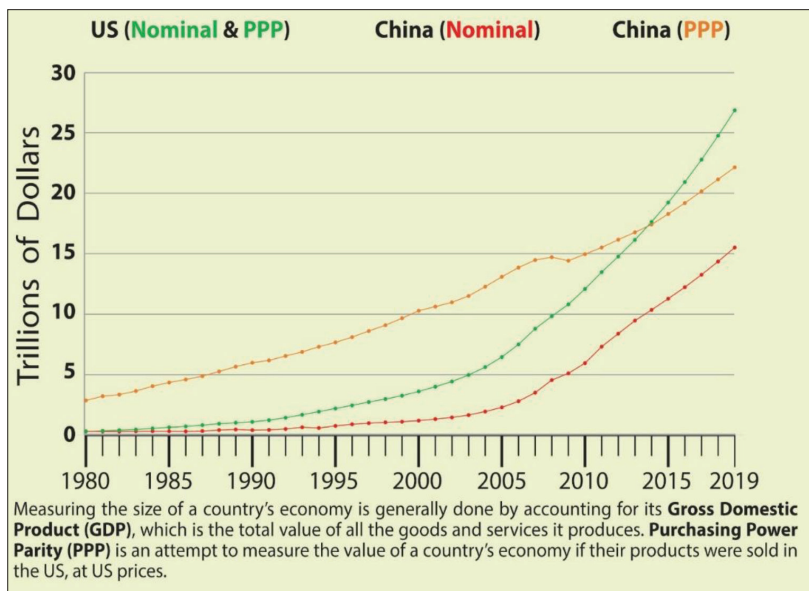
Relations improved for some time until what is known in the West as the Tiananmen Square protests. The initial Tiananmen Square protest in the spring of 1989 resulted in student-led demonstrations against elements of the government, which occurred in many cities regarding a variety of issues, especially corruption, the effect of economic policies on urban dwellers, and the need to allow a greater expression of beliefs and grievances. The People's Republic of China government stopped the protests with violent measures and many people were killed or wounded. Several countries around

the world, including many voices in the United States, were angered by this and called for sanctions. The United States suspended arms sales and high-level visits to China and implemented some economic sanctions, and relations grew more distant for a while. But in the long term, the United States has recognized China's economic importance on the world stage.

After the Tiananmen Square protests, China's economic policies became much more capitalist and much less communist, resulting in a rapidly growing and booming economy. In 2000, the United States normalized trade relations with the People's Republic of China. In 2001, China was allowed into the World Trade Organization and became a permanent Most Favored Nation of the United States, giving it highly favorable trade terms with the United States. China continued its rapid rise in economic wealth and power, becoming the United States' largest foreign creditor in 2008 and the world's second-largest economy in 2010.

The Issues

Economic Competition. The United States and China are the world's two largest single-nation economies, the United States having had the world's largest economy for the better part of the last 150 years. However, the current rate of growth puts China's economy on a path to surpass the United States, and by some measures, it has already. Historically, this makes competition and perhaps even conflict between the United States and China almost inevitable. Many of the region's countries risk alienation depending on whether they align themselves (for economic or security reasons) with China or the United States. China is aggressively seeking out raw materials and resources to power its economy and is therefore establishing relationships all



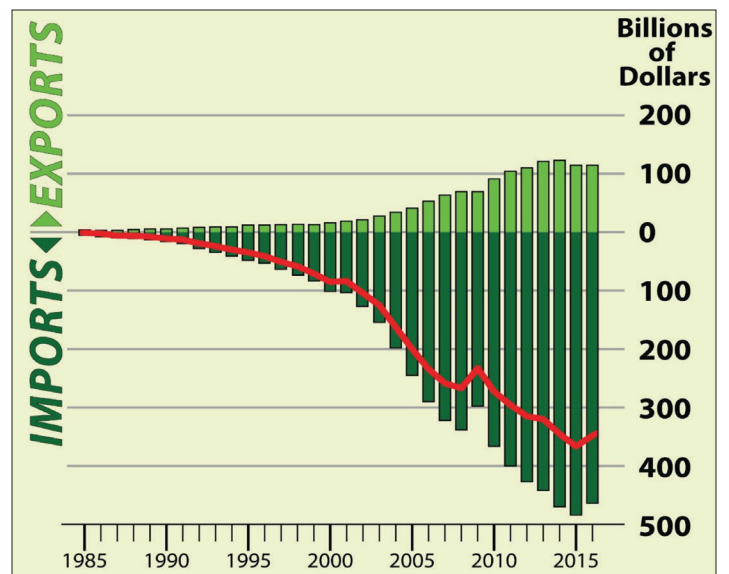
United States vs China GDP

around the globe. This often puts China in situations in which it is competing with the United States' interests economically and, inexorably, politically, socially, and even militarily.

Trade. The United States has a large trade deficit with China—with the United States buying close to \$400 billion more of Chinese products than China buys from the United States. The United States believes this is fueled by restrictive Chinese trade practices that limit the amount of investment American entities can make in China and limit the number of goods and services the United States can export to China. This, in turn, not only limits potential American business profits but also can negatively affect American jobs. In the summer of 2018, the United States implemented tariffs and restrictions on multiple Chinese imports, including steel, aluminum, electronics, and clothing and began considering others to deal with what are considered unfair trade practices by the Chinese, as well as their technological and intellectual property theft. The Chinese believe they are still a developing economy with an average standard of living well below that of the United States and other developed countries and, as such, need to protect their economic growth and long-term prospects to provide a better quality of life to their citizens. They responded to U.S. trade restrictions with tariffs and restrictions of their own on U.S. products. China is also pushing for Chinese-Russian trade to be conducted exclusively in Chinese and Russian currency rather than the United States dollar, which has been the currency of international commerce for quite some time.

Intellectual Property/Cyber Theft. The United States finds Chinese practices of cyber theft and coercive procurement of business technology and information a very serious problem that is a crime, an act of aggression, and certainly detrimental to the United States' technological and informational edge. Many Chinese see the acquisition of technology and information as essential to China's prosperity and, by extension, their domestic welfare and security. China is also a communist society, albeit in a form unique to China. As such, Chinese may not see violating capitalist laws and standards to obtain for-profit, private intellectual property as negative, but rather as something that is more egalitarian, leading to more people being able to share in knowledge, which is a good thing. The Chinese also point out what they see is the United States' hypocrisy on the issue of hacking and nefarious cyber practices, especially given the revelations that came about as a result of Edward Snowden's espionage and theft.

Taiwan. The People's Republic of China considers Taiwan a province that is both historically and currently part of their country, as declared in their "One China" policy. This



United States Trade Deficit with China

is despite various Taiwanese political factions considering Taiwan as somewhere between a completely different nation and an independent, self-determining part of a single Chinese country. The People's Republic of China has stated that any actions involving a tangible attempt to support Taiwan's separation from the People's Republic of China will be considered an act of war.

The United States considers Taiwan's status as unsettled. While the United States does not support the idea of Taiwanese independence, it does not officially oppose it either. The United States officially "acknowledges" (notes the existence of) the People's Republic of China's "One China" policy but does not officially confirm the United States' support for it. In 1979, the United States established the Taiwan Relations Act, which allows the United States to sell defensive weapons to Taiwan and gives the United States the option to defend Taiwan militarily if necessary, according to what Congress determines. The People's Republic of China sees this as an intrusion into domestic politics and objects to the United States' arms sales to Taiwan. The United States' policy can be generally described as one designed to minimize open conflict between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China without angering the People's Republic of China too much.

North Korea. North Korea is an ally of China. Though China has had several occasions to be unhappy with North Korea, the two countries are still allies and comrades in their declared communist forms of government. North Korea also provides a land buffer between China and South Korea, a United States ally. China has already clearly shown during the Korea War that it does not want the United States or South Korea near the Chinese border. The United States, on the other hand, sees North Korea as a clear threat. It is

a nation that has invaded South Korea before and lethally attacked American and South Korean personnel in multiple incidents since then. It is currently a nuclear-armed nation that not only continues to develop nuclear weapons capable of hitting the United States and its allies but also openly and proudly proclaims it is doing so. China's support of North Korea, in general, and the perceived lack of strong measures by China to try to control its ally have been a source of great dissatisfaction for the United States. The long-term nature of the complicated relationship between China, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States is yet to be determined.

Human Rights. The United States and United Nations have cited China as a human rights violator in many areas: free speech, internet, press, religion, movement, association, political choice and practice, physical treatment of many of its citizens (including rural workers), treatment of many ethnic minorities, torture, wrongful executions of accused criminals and political prisoners, and a variety of other issues.

China objects to these accusations in several ways. First, it cites what it sees as the United States' hypocrisy on human rights, given our invasion of Iraq, rate of incarceration, racial and class issues, breakdown of families, extremism, and crime, to name a few. Second, China considers itself a developing country, where uplifting the quality of life for all its citizens requires measures that countries such as the United States also employed when it was still developing, in order to ensure a secure and prosperous future. These factors and the difference in cultures, many Chinese argue, put China in a different situation than the United States—one that cannot be assessed according to the same cultural expectations or standards. Third, China has a generally collective culture that seeks societal harmony above the needs of individuals. To the Chinese government, the welfare and security of the many and the means necessary to secure them are more important than the needs or wants of a relatively small number of people. This is a clear contrast to the United States' individualist culture, which the Chinese often perceive as chaotic, disorderly, and fractious.

Additionally, China has well over four times the number of people as the United States and has serious issues, including aging population demographics and difficulties related to its massive rural-to-urban migration over the past few decades. Analysts generally agree that China has to do everything in its power to keep the country united

and on the same path, despite its public image of one vast, unified people, all marching to the same beat.

Maritime Disputes. China claims large areas of the South and East China Seas, along with several landmasses in those areas. These seas have billions of dollars in commerce passing through them every year and have massive oil and natural gas resources. China is also building islands and modifying reefs in the area to hold and supply military equipment, vessels, and personnel.

If one looks at the map, it quickly becomes apparent why these seas are physically important to China. To the east and south lie the United States' allies or countries traditionally aligned with the United States, effectively encircling China's Pacific coast. By gaining control of the South and East China Seas, China ensures commercial and military access to the Pacific and can counter any perceived United States military, political, or economic influence in the area.

China treats these areas as if they were Chinese territory, which means they push out other countries that are operating according to international law or those own countries' maritime or territorial claims. China often cites historical or claimed historical presence in these areas as justification for their assertions of control. China often views international law as laws made by, and for the benefit of, Western nations when they were unquestionably the dominant



Map of Areas Claimed

powers in the world, and not necessarily in line with Chinese culture and interests. In the Chinese consciousness, these laws also harken back to the Century of Humiliation when policies made in the name of free international trade were forced on China by Western powers.

The South China Sea is one of the most oft-traveled waterways in the world. Each day, thousands of vessels from many different countries travel and carry on international commerce vital to the region and the world as a whole. Most of the countries in the area believe they have the right to freely navigate it and claim waters close to their nations as their own. As a matter of principle, the United States supports internationally recognized law for determining the location of a country's maritime borders rather than inter-

national waters. The United States also supports these rules because they facilitate free trade and provide relatively equal rights to countries regardless of their size and power, including those countries that are U.S. trading partners and allies. The United States does not want China to control the South and East China Seas because this conflicts with international law and might create a Chinese stranglehold over Asian maritime commerce at the expense of other nations in the area. Many observers argue that these maritime disputes may eventually escalate into military conflict. 🌟

Endnote

1. rheins [CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)].

Want to Learn More about China?

The role of history in Chinese policy:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/10/how-humiliation-drove-modern-chinese-history/280878/>.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/13/opinion/chinas-quest-to-end-its-century-of-shame.html>.

The treatment of Chinese in American history:

<https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/chinese4.html>.

http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/ap_prog1.html.

The history of the People's Republic of China's relationship with the United States:

<https://www.heritage.org/asia/report/the-complicated-history-us-relations-china>.

<https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china>.

<http://uscipf.org/v3/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/backgrounder-on-United-States-China-relations>.

United States–China trade issues:

<https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL33536.html>.

<https://www.thebalance.com/u-s-china-trade-deficit-causes-effects-and-solutions-3306277>.

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/04/09/how-chinas-tariffs-could-affect-u-s-workers-and-industries/>.

Theories on why the Chinese engage in certain practices and how to deal with these issues:

https://www.theepochtimes.com/why-china-will-not-abandon-theft-in-its-strategy-to-surpass-us-economy_2502976.html.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/03/31/donald-trump-china-intellectual-property-theft-column/458320002/>.

<http://thehill.com/opinion/finance/379800-intellectual-property-will-make-or-break-us-china-relations>.

<http://thehill.com/opinion/cybersecurity/385379-to-stop-chinas-technology-theft-the-us-needs-a-people-warfare-strategy>.

Taiwan as an issue between the United States and China:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/04/30/china-u-s-taiwan-relations-are-in-choppy-waters-heres-whats-going-on/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.6207a96053b8.

<https://www.npr.org/2018/04/10/601215534/the-taiwan-travel-act-threatens-to-further-complicate-u-s-china-relations>.

China's view of North Korea:

<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-north-korea-relationship>.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/22/world/asia/china-north-korea-nuclear-talks.html>.

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2143145/why-china-remains-cautious-over-prospects-breakthrough>.

Human rights in China:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2142765/china-named-force-instability-us-human-rights-report>.

<https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/china-us-accuse-each-other-of-human-rights-violations/>.

China's disputed maritime claims:

<https://www.businessinsider.com.au/why-the-south-china-sea-is-so-crucial-2015-2>.

<http://theconversation.com/why-is-the-south-china-sea-so-important-to-the-us-71477>.

<https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/risk-of-u-s-china-confrontation-in-the-east-china-sea/>.