

# Eddie Wong's Navy:

## Ta Hing, Fir/Abeto and associated companies

Ta Hing Co. (HK) Ltd (1946)  
Ta Hing Trading Co. Ltd (1947)  
International Salvage Association Ltd  
Ta An Co. (HK) Ltd (1956)  
Fir Steamship Co. Ltd (1956)  
Canadian Fir Steamship Co. Ltd (1956)  
Hongkong Fir Shipping Co. Ltd (1957)  
Fir Line Ltd (1957)  
Compania Naviera Abeto, S.A., Panama (1958)  
Mercantile Shipping Development Co. Ltd (1963)  
Ta Hing Co. (Singapore) (Pte) Ltd (1966)  
Abeto Shipping (Panama) Corp., Panama (1970)  
Great Malaysia Line (1970)  
Elsey Shipping Corp., Panama (1973)

By Howard Dick

All Rights Reserved August 2021, 2023  
[h.dick@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:h.dick@unimelb.edu.au)

**\*May be cited with acknowledgement to the author at [www.oldchinaships.com](http://www.oldchinaships.com)\***

This update posted 16 January 2023

## INTRODUCTION

### The Wonderful World of Eddie Wong

Of all the postwar Hong Kong shipowners, Edward ('Eddie') Wong Wing-Cheung stands out as one of the most venturesome and also elusive. Neither his birth nor his death are known and little of his background, though York Lo has located some information in Rola Luzzatto (ed.), *Hong Kong Who's Who*. Wong graduated with a western education from the prestigious St Joseph's College in Hong Kong. In April 1942 he married Shanghai-born Linda Chang. By then life had become difficult in Japanese-occupied Hong Kong so the couple fled to free China, first to the provincial capital and transport hub of Guilin (Kweilin) in Northeast Guangxi (Kwangsi), where Eddie traded as Chung Hing Co. in food, hardware and timber, then, as the Japanese seized that strategic city, to more remote Kunming (Yunnan) and Guiyang (Kweiyang) in Guizhou (Kweichow). In December 1945 the couple returned to a very damaged Hong Kong. Sadly Linda died in childbirth on 14 February 1949 at age 28,

leaving behind two sons and a daughter. It might be inferred that by then Eddie was at least 30 years of age, thus born before 1920 and able to complete his secondary education ahead of the Japanese invasion that closed the college in December 1941 – after the war he helped to revive the alumni association. His wife was said to have been well known in ‘Chinese social and Christian circles’ (SCMP, 15/2/49). To round out the personal side of the story, it may be added here that in May 1952 Eddie remarried to Mary Suffiad (b. 1920), a graduate of St Paul’s Girls College. York Lo records that she became ‘an influential social welfare leader’ and ‘the third female member of the Legislative Council’ but while carrying out official duties suddenly collapsed and died shortly afterwards in March 1973.



Eddie Wong in the 1970s (SCMP).

Eddie must have arrived back in Hong Kong with some capital, probably in part from black-market trading and currency exchange, because in mid-August 1946 he is registered as one of the founders of the syndicate Ta Hing Company (HK) Ltd. The fact that the company is identified as ‘HK’ suggests that there may have been a previous Ta Hing Co. under Chinese registration (if registered at all). The new company started out with the intent to run ferries to Macao but soon diversified into more lucrative blockade-running, first in Indonesia, then in China, before further diversifying into deepsea tramps, salvage, troopships, cattle carriers and pilgrim ships. According to Dean Barrett of China Engineers Ltd, which backed several of these ventures, Eddie was personable and a good ‘fixer’. Others described him as ‘flamboyant’. He gained a reputation as ‘Fast Eddie’ and certainly had a wonderful ability to find business partners and lenders, not always to their advantage. His network gradually spread from Hong Kong to Singapore, Indonesia, China, Australia, Panama, Malaysia, the USSR and USA. Yet notwithstanding these entrepreneurial abilities, he seems to have been a better networker than businessman and fortune evaded him in business as in private life. In 1977 he became the subject of well-publicised bankruptcy proceedings. Since a legal case in 2003, the record is silent.

Ta Hing Co. (HK) Ltd was registered in Hong Kong on 12 August 1946 as No. 1903 with premises in the St. George’s Building, 2 Ice House Street, Central. The directors were listed as Wong Wing-Cheung, T.W. Liang, Y.Y. Wong, Mrs Tsien Hong Wong and Cheang Koon Zung, all Chinese. By 30 October 1946 the distribution of shares was also identified, being in roughly descending order of size 320 Cheang

Koon-Zung of that Shanghai-based family and its General Inv. Co. Ltd (reg. 23/6/39), 190 WWC, 250 Ko Fook Sing of Tak Shing Inv. Co. Ltd (reg. 7 July 1939), 100 Ko Fook Lu (ditto) and 50 Ko Fook Wing (ditto), 30 T.W. Liang, 30 Mrs T.H. Wong, 20 Wong Kien Nam, and then, singly, W.A. Doust, Yun Yu Wong and Shita Hon Yan, in all 1002 shares of \$1000 making up a capital of \$1 million. It may be deduced that Wong was the promoter and active party but had formed Ta Hing as a syndicate that enjoyed capital backing from the merchant, property and banking Ko family/Tak Shing with a combined 400 shares (40%), and K.Z. Cheang of General Investment Co. Ltd 320 (32%), both controlling more than the Wong family's 220 shares (22%). By 16 December salvor Captain W.A. ('Sandy') Doust, now salvage director for Moller's in Hong Kong, had also been made a director and as of 3 March 1947 had increased his personal holding to 50 shares and by 1 October to 226, making him a substantial party too. Ta Hing Trading Co. Ltd was registered at Hong Kong in April 1947 with similar directors and shareholders and presumably took over the import and wholesale side of the business, including cottons, linens and woollens.

Ta Hing took delivery of its first ship on 31 August 1946 just over a fortnight after the company's registration in Hong Kong. The 395-grt/9-knot 'C'-type coaster *Empire Mayrover* was purchased from British salvor Risdon Beazley, who had acquired the ship just five days previously. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of the following month, Ta Hing acquired the identical sistership *Empire Mayring*, also from Beazley and only four days after his purchase. This double juxtaposition of Ta Hing and Beazley suggests that Mollers as broker had come to an arrangement with Beazley to facilitate sale to an otherwise unknown Hong Kong Chinese firm. The two small vessels so acquired belonged to a class of 16 ships built in 1945-46 by nine British yards for deployment by Britain's South East Asia Command in the reconquest from Japan. The simple open-shelterdeck design of forward bridge, two hatches and engines aft was based on a prewar Straits S.S. design known as 75-tonners (net). When the war ended in August 1945, not all the vessels had been completed. Ten were eventually delivered to Straits S.S. and subsidiaries for



EMPIRE MAYRING unloading at Singapore in 1946 after her initial sailing from the UK, still in the colours of her managers W. N. Lindsay Ltd (Erich, <https://www.shipsnostalgia.com/media/ss-empire-mayring-1946.402158/>).

commercial service out of Singapore, two went to British Guyana, two initially to Beazley, one to MacBrayne and the last, not completed until November 1946, as below. Captain Murdoch Campbell of Moller Line (UK) Ltd was listed as Manager of what became the Ta Hing pair. Before departure from UK the two vessels loaded some cargo, including Austin and Hillman motor vehicles, and sailed via Suez for Singapore, where on 25 November they were reported as proceeding onwards to Hong Kong. As often happens at the onset of the east monsoon, conditions were rough in the South China Sea and after a week or so the ships decided to turn back to Singapore.

At this point, things took a dramatic turn. A Singaporean Chinese is said to have purchased the vehicles and chartered *Empire Mayrover* to ship them on to the West Java port of Cirebon (old spelling Cheribon), then in the hands of the Republican Government that had declared independence from Dutch rule and was now engaged in armed struggle. The return cargo would be rubber. On 9 January 1947 the Dutch Navy reported having seized the ship while discharging and ordered it east to Semarang to be searched for arms (ST, 10/1/47). After nothing had been found, the ship resumed its interrupted voyage taking back nine now damaged cars to Singapore. Ta Hing had found lucrative charters for its two ships. While *Empire Mayring* was employed on a shuttle between Singapore and the rubber port of Palembang, *Empire Mayrover* returned to Cirebon, being seized there again on 28 January and escorted west to Tanjung Priok, where its rubber cargo seized before British protests caused the ship was allowed to be released and return to Singapore on 22 February. Then on 27 March the vessel was seized at Cirebon for a third time, now carrying relief supplies, and again escorted to Priok, before on the 19<sup>th</sup> being released and allowed to proceed to Cirebon to discharge. At this point the Linggadjati ceasefire agreement came into effect and the blockade was lifted for the time being. For those three months, *Empire Mayrover* had seldom been out of the news as the British and Dutch governments disputed freedom of navigation.

Ta Hing's original intention in buying the two 'Empire May' vessels seems to have been to trade between Hong Kong, Canton and Macao, routes no longer served by the Hongkong, Canton & Macao Steamboat Company, which had lost its ships during the war and did not plan to retonnage. The Ko family (Takshing Investments) who were substantial shareholders in Tak Shing, had prewar interests in Macao. When the Ta Hing vessels were delayed in arriving at Hong Kong, Mollers, who had brokered the deal, agreed to charter their *Merry Moller*, prewar a passenger tender at Shanghai. She was advertised from 16 November 1946 to take up the daily run from the 26<sup>th</sup> with departures at 8am from the Wing Lok Wharf, returning from Macao at 1.30pm, about three hours each way for 360 passengers in three classes (SCMP 16 and 26/11/46).

In that same month, a third 'C-type' coaster had been completed in UK in November 1946 for Ta Hing and as *Maydream* arrived in Singapore in mid-February 1947. This vessel did not run the Dutch blockade to Indonesia but before proceeded via Manila to Hong Kong, where she was promptly renamed *Wing Hing* and also placed in service to Macao. *Empire Mayring* and *Empire Mayrover* were both registered at Hong Kong to Ta Hing Co. (HK) on 13 February 1947 and six weeks later became *Sing Hing* and *Wa Hing*. As of 1 April they were all mortgaged to The Chartered Bank for \$240,000 each, shortly afterwards being renamed *Sing Hing*, *Wa Hing* and *Wing Hing*. In August second mortgages for \$200,000 were taken out to Moller's Trust.

These mortgages helped finance the purchase and refit of a fourth and larger vessel, the former Australian minesweeper HMAS *Bendigo*, which on 17 July sailed Sydney for Hong Kong and on arrival in August was taken in hand for conversion to a smart passenger ferry for the Hong Kong-Macao run. The work was completed in early March and after fitting out and public inspection, she commenced the evening service to Macao on the 18<sup>th</sup>, advertised to leave Tung On Wharf at 5pm and depart Macao at 10.30am the following day. Here speed of 14½-15 knots was more than enough to maintain the customary three-hour voyage each way. The former mess deck was converted to carry 250 tons of cargo. The morning service from Hong Kong (now 8.30am) and 2.15pm sailing from Macao was still maintained by *Merry Moller* but by September under the direct agency of Mollers (Hongkong) Ltd. This was no doubt connected with the fact that by December 1948 Ta Hing had switched general managers from Mollers' to Wallem & Co. in Hong Kong. In mid-October 1949 Ta Hing applied to the government to lease the Tung On Pier on Connaught Road – prewar Tung On had operated the big ferries *Sai On* and *Tung On* (both 1950/24) to Macao. York Lo records from 'The China Mail' (14/3/50) that after the tender was accepted in February 1950 the pier was renamed the Ta Hing Pier, painted green and illuminated.



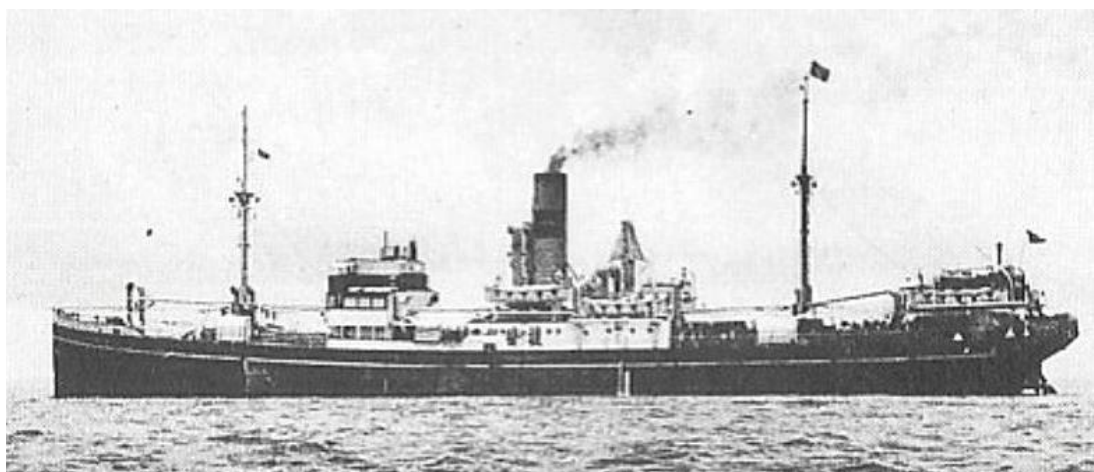
Early 1950s view of Sheung Wan waterfront. Ta Hing Pier is the empty pier with the white housing next to (above) Ping On Pier that has the white, raked-bow TAI LOY alongside (coll. Klaus Liphard).

At the end of March 1948, *Cheung Hing* was mortgaged for \$400,000 to Central Trust of China. Next month both mortgages were paid off on each of the other three ships and next day all were re-mortgaged to the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank for \$400,000. When *Cheung Hing* was likewise paid off and re-mortgaged to HSB, Ta Hing had total mortgages to HSB of \$1.6 million on its four ships, a large amount for a company formed only two years previously and suggesting strong and respectable backing. It also suggested big ambitions. As early as mid-November 1946 SCMP reported Ta Hing in the SCMP as 'intend(ing) to run a fleet of small coasters for Canton, Swatow, Bangkok and Manila, etc., in

the near future'. On 4 May 1947 it was similarly reported that Ta Hing 'intends...to operate other lines running to Amoy, Bangkok, Singapore and Kwangchow Wan as soon as more of their vessels arrive'. In fact those additional vessels would not arrive and sale of *Wa Hing* to East Pakistan in April 1949 would reduce the owned fleet to just three vessels. Other Chinese companies, including newcomer Jebshun, would seize those foreshadowed opportunities.

### Ferries and Blockade Running

By December 1948 Ta Hing was listed as agents and may well have been charterers of the Norwegian-flag *Pronto* (1920) trading between Hong Kong and Shanghai. On 22 April the vessel returned to Hong Kong from Tientsin, the first sailing from that now Communist-controlled port, after bartering a general cargo for 1,600 tons of beancake (SCMP, 23/4/49). By late 1949 Ta Hing were also agents for at Hong Kong for the Great Northern Shipping Co. Ltd, apparently a PRC-front company. Yet despite *Pronto's* voyage from Tientsin, many Chinese ports remained closed while the civil war still raged. Shanghai fell on 2 June but Foochow not until 17 August and the redesignated Republican capital of Canton (Guangzhou) not until 15 October, followed by Amoy (Xiamen) two days later. In August 1949 Nationalist forces with U.S. support imposed a blockade on all Chinese ports and even the regular ferries from Hong Kong to Canton stopped running.



PRONTO on the China coast (<https://www.sjohistorie.no/no/skip/23176/>).

For Ta Hing, which had gained experience of blockade running in Indonesian waters, this was an opportunity. In mid-November 1949 *Sing Hing* ran the blockade to Swatow (Shantou), there being bombed by Nationalist aircraft and shelled by PRC shore batteries but successfully returning to Hong Kong. By January 1950 she was running further north to Amoy under Australian Master R.A. Young of Sydney. Meanwhile, *Wing Hing* was running south to the formerly French enclave of Kwang Chow Wan, where in October 1949 she was detained for five days by Nationalist troops seeking urgent transfer to Taiwan. By November *Wing Hing* was back on the run to Swatow, on 30 November arriving back at Hong Kong with 100 lots of fresh vegetables and oil, 7 mail bags and 150 passengers. Although the 'C'-type had not been designed to carry passengers, as shown by the photos below, provision had been made on both ships by removal of the foremast and fitting a temporary structure behind the bridge and over No. 1 hatch. On 14 January 1950 while anchored off Swatow after discharge, *Wing*



*Hing* was damaged by shrapnel from two 250-lb bombs dropped by Nationalist aircraft. A month later, while on voyage from Hong Kong to Amoy with around 100 passengers, 43 Chinese crew and 3 European officers, *Wing Hing* grounded in heavy weather on Chilang Point (90 m. N. of Hong Kong) and was then further damaged by fire. All passengers and crew were able to be rescued but the vessel was a total loss.

After the sale of *Wa Hing* and the loss of *Wing Hing*, Ta Hing's owned fleet was reduced to the blockade runner *Sing Hing* and the Macao ferry *Cheung Hing*. The route between the colonies of Hong Kong-Macao line was not directly affected by events in China but the closure of Canton had displaced those ferries and caused more vessels to be brought onto the Macao run. The rate agreement made by the existing operators in August 1949 did not last beyond mid-March 1950. First-class rates that had been \$20 in September 1948 were cut further from \$16 to \$12 and deck/steerage, originally \$8, from \$6 to \$4 (SCMP, 22/9/50, 16/3/50). In consequence, Ta Hing withdrew *Cheung Hing* for refit while exploring the possibility of utilizing her turn of speed to make more money as a blockade runner to South China ports. On 28 April she returned from Amoy with passengers and some cargo after some gunfire and a hurried night-time loading while *Sing Hing* returned the same day from Canton, the two vessels together bringing some 300 passengers (SCMP, 29/4/50). On 1 May 1950 *Sing Hing* was detained by Nationalist gunboats when entering Amoy and not until after much diplomatic negotiation was she released to return on the 28<sup>th</sup> to Hong Kong under escort by HMS *Alacrity*. On 2 June *Cheung Hing* returned from Amoy without landing her 8 passengers and cargo because of shelling at that port (SCMP, 3/6/50), then on the following voyage on 5 June 1950 was attacked by a Nationalist warship off Amoy and arrived back in Hong Kong with hull damage and eight dead among the 100 passengers (SCMP, 7/6/50). A month later she came under fire from shore batteries. Notwithstanding, she was still the best fitted out and fastest of the blockade runners for those passengers anxious to travel, many for transshipment to ports beyond Hong Kong: in September, for example, she returned to Hong Kong with 149 transit passengers for Singapore and Manila (SCMP, 13/9/50). After a trial run to Canton in October 1950, on 14 November *Cheung Hing* departed Hong Kong for Shanghai.



CHEUNG HING at Macao (*Life* magazine).

At the beginning of September 1950 Ta Hing succeeded in obtaining a permit from the Navigation Bureau at Canton to operate *Sing Hing* in a regular passenger-cargo service between Canton, Hong Kong and Kwang Chow Wan, the first commercial permit since the PRC took over. Notwithstanding, on the first voyage the ship was detained three days at Bocca Tigris by PRC authorities. It then seems to have reverted to the Swatow run until April 1951, when it followed *Wa Hing* to owners in East Pakistan, where both vessels would serve in the delta for many more decades.

Meanwhile, in December 1950 *Cheung Hing* had been re-registered to A.H. Carroll of Hong Kong. The relationship between Ta Hing and Carroll is obscure. *Cheung Hing* continued trading as before under the same name so Ta Hing may have retained an interest. Anthony (Tony) Henry Carroll (b. Dec. 1886 at HK) and his brother William Joseph (born 1885) had operated in Hong Kong as the shipbrokers Carroll Bros. since the 1910s. In mid-1917 the older brother had become registered owner of the old steamships *Rotorua* (926/1876), *Cornelia* (323/1878) and *Hok Canton* (504/1875), all acquired from the Eastern Shipping Company of Penang and soon sold on to Chinese owners. In October 1940 A.H. formed Carroll Shipping Co. Ltd as a joint venture with Ip Ting-San and becoming registered owner of the Singapore-built *Gold Leaf* (112/1913). Post-war he resumed business and in October 1946 bought the Australian coaster *Canonbar* (708/1910), which was mortgaged for \$150,000 to R.P. de Lasala's Lasala Investments Ltd. After the mortgage was paid off in June 1949, the ship was renamed *Rosita* under the Portuguese flag. When Britain recognised the People's Republic in January 1950, Carroll set up Carfung Shipping Co. Ltd as a joint venture with a new Chinese partner, Fung Kam Chung, hence Car(roll)-Fung, and transferred *Rosita* to British registry in Hong Kong and the protection of the Royal Navy. Carroll was probably the beneficial owner of Companhia Navegacao de Macau Ltda and the oceangoing lighter *Jade Leaf* (289/1944 NSW State Dockyard), which on 1 December 1948 had sailed from Sydney for Hong Kong in tow of Lasala's *San Rafael* (208/45). *Cheung Hing*, *Rosita* and *Jade Leaf* all ran the Nationalist blockade to South China ports.

In December 1950, coinciding with his apparent purchase of *Cheung Hing*, Carroll on behalf of Ta Hing purchased two ex-RAN minesweepers, *Benita* ex HMAAS *Goulburn* and *Carmencita* ex HMAS *Ballarat*, of the same class as *Cheung Hing* ex HMAS *Bendigo*, obviously intended for similar conversion and use on the China coast. However, because of the Korean War, the Australian Government refused to grant an export licence, despite Carroll himself travelling to Australia to negotiate, and the vessels had to be resold for dismantling. About 1953 *Cheung Hing* did pass to the PLC Navy and was rearmed. Carroll sold out of Carfung in August 1954 and in December 1956 liquidated Carroll Shipping Co. His brother died in Bangkok in 1952 but A.H. (Tony) remained in Hong Kong until his death in September 1983 at age 96. One other transaction between Ta Hing and Carroll may be mentioned. In early 1951 Carroll brokered the sale to Ta Hing of the 3351-grt Australian coastal freighter *Mungana*, which was towed from Sydney by *Christine Moller* for breaking up in Hong Kong.





BENITA and CARMENCITA laid up at 28B Darling Harbour, Sydney, probably early 1951 after refusal of export licence, Armament removed (Ian Edwards collection).

When *Sing Hing* passed through Singapore in mid-May 1951 en route to Chittagong, her blockade-running exploits were recalled in the local press (Singapore Standard, 19/5/51). The report stated that Ta Hing was selling off its small coasters to engage in deepsea tramping. This new investment took the form of the ex-American standard *Admiral Chase* (1920), acquired in Sydney in March 1951 under mortgage to HSB. The ship sailed in mid-March with a cargo of flour for Sumatra and a potential charter to Indonesian interests. By July 1951, however, the ship was trading Shanghai-Foochow on charter to Tai Tung Shg Co. At the end of 1951 it had engine trouble at Colombo and had to be taken in tow for Hong Kong by the big salvage tug *Caroline Moller W*. At the end of 1952 it was delivered to local breakers. This may not have been a profitable venture.

It may be noted here that from time to time, Ta Hing were listed as agents for other vessels. On 6 December 1947 the firm advised that they had ceased to act as Agents for the Chinese-flag *Chi Hwa* (2317/08 ex *Burwah* '47) and in December 1950 Ta Hing were noted as agents for the Philippine-flag *Sacramento* when sold for scrap after being laid up for twelve months at Hong Kong (SCMP, 30/12/50).

### Marine salvage

By 1953 Ta Hing no longer appears as a shipowner, though it is possible there was some nominee arrangement that has not been located, and the firm's activities are unknown except for one thread,

the International Salvage Association Limited. This entity was registered in Hong Kong on 31 August 1951 (#3351) with a modest paid-up capital of \$320,000 in 3,200 shares, of which the largest single block of 1,000 was held by Wallem's managing director Reidar Johannessen and the balance distributed among nine others, including Eddie Wong (200), Louis Wong (300) and W.A. Doust (300), the latter two at 58 Robinson Road, in Singapore. Directors were Eddie and Louis Wong, their Ta Hing colleague Liang Tze Wa and Capt. Doust, who the previous year had completed the clearance of Hong Kong harbour. A parallel entity, International Salvage Association (Malaya) Limited was then set up in Singapore with a capital of Straits \$500,000 and directors Doust, Eddie Wong, Liang and local merchant Lim Seouw Chuan (ST, 23/2/52). Work was due to begin in early March 1952 after arrival of the chartered salvage vessel *Islas Visayas* (516/1884) with the main tasks being the removal and cutting up of three sunken wrecks: British India's Calcutta-China-Japan liner *Sirdhana* (7,745/1925) had struck a British mine on 13 November 1939 and now lay beside the Inner Roads, the liner Canadian Pacific liner and latterly troopship *Empress of Asia* (16,909/1913) had been bombed and sunk off Sultan Shoal on 5 January 1942, while off the breakwater lay the former coal hulk *Oscar II* (ex *Astyanax*, 4872/1906), scuttled on 15 February 1942. The old *Islas Visayas* went off charter after only a few months and was replaced by the more practical converted landing craft *I.S.A. 6* (ex *San Manuel* ex *Kwok Luen*, ex *L.C.T. 1241*, 702/1944), which was registered in Singapore to the Malayan associate.

At the end of 1952 Doust withdrew from the syndicate and formed his own firm, Inter-Ocean Salvage & Towage Ltd. In August 1953 that led to a legal dispute as to which company was entitled to ownership of the wreck of the Shell tanker hulk *Spirila* (5695/1922) off Pulau Bukom, given that Doust had been a director of the Salvage Association when he bought the wreck and had used that company's equipment and divers (ST, 22/8/53). Work on these wrecks proceeded slowly and as of January 1957 had still not been completed, though many thousands of tons of scrap had been raised (ST, 17/1/57). In March 1959 the Association began work to salvage the Japanese submarine I-30 from Singapore harbour but work had to be suspended when live torpedoes were found in its nose (ST, 13/6/59). Work on *Empress of Asia* was still ongoing in March 1960 (ST, 5/3/60) but a number of other wrecks had been raised and broken up, including Toyo Kisen's *Zenyo Maru* (6441/37), which as a hulk had been towed to Singapore after being shelled, set on fire and sinking near Penang in August 1942 (advice from Peter Cundall). In June 1960 Wong set up International Salvage Association (Indonesia) Ltd in Hong Kong with he and Ta Hing holding the controlling interest along with a small nominee Indonesian interest that would have been on behalf of government figures. The likely purpose was to give access to Indonesian waters around Singapore.

While still living and working in Singapore as managing Director of the Salvage Association, in January 1956 Eddie registered a new company in Hong Kong, Ta An Co. (HK) Ltd with a nominal capital of HK\$2 million. This time his partner was local merchant Ching-Siu Wai. The articles of association stated that the aim was to run 'steam and other launches' but the similarity of names suggests a link to the Ta An S.S. Co. that in 1956 through Wallem & Co. took a hire-purchase contract on the 5295 -dwt Norwegian steamer *A/a* (1946). Eddie's luck again failed him. On 29 October of that year the ship caught fire on voyage Swatow to Hong Kong and had to be towed in ablaze and beached at Junk Bay, where the fire was extinguished. The ship was written off as a total loss but rebuilt in Japan) and in April 1957 reregistered at Hong Kong to Wheelock, Marden & Co. as *Moonlock*, then a month later transferred to the Panamanian flag as *Moon* and traded until sunk in collision in November 1960.

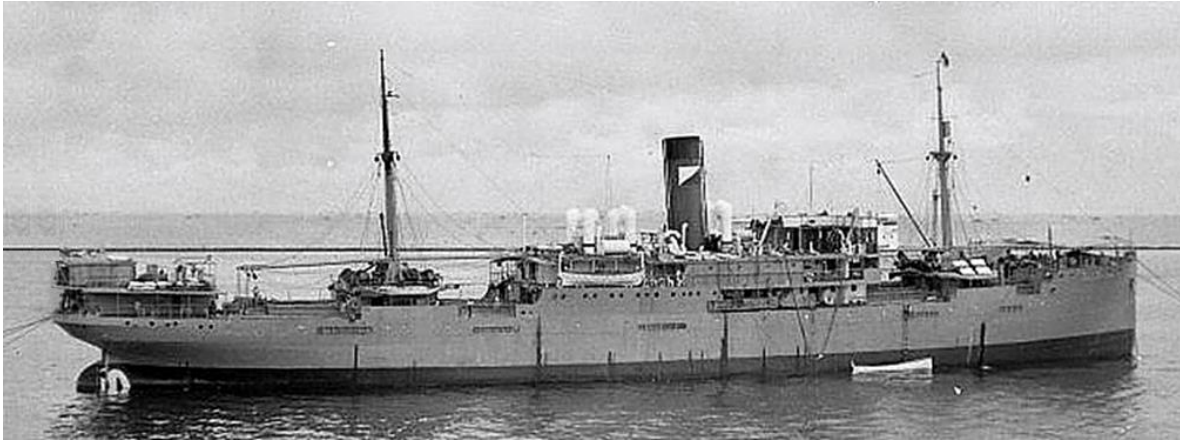
## China Engineers

Eddie's next set of ventures brought him together with China Engineers Ltd. According to Carles Broggi, that firm had been set up in Shanghai in 1928 by electrical engineer William Gomersall and developed a good business in the import, installation and maintenance of textile machinery. Gomersall and other staff were interned in Shanghai after Pearl Harbour but were able to revive the company after 1945 and, as the situation worsened in China, redirected its activities to Hong Kong. By the mid-1950s the rapid growth phase of Hong Kong's textile industry had passed and China Engineers was seeking to diversify. One industry that looked promising was shipping. Since 1952, one of the minor shareholders in International Salvage had been Norman Beale of China Engineers. He may have introduced Eddie to Gomersall. At any rate, on 18 April 1956 China Engineers and Eddie Wong became 50/50 joint-venture partners in Fir S.S. Co. Ltd, which was one of a series of shell companies registered since 1954 by solicitor W.G.E. Lannaman and accountant Colin Campbell on behalf of Wheelock, Marden & Co. Ltd, thus Ash S.S. Co. Ltd (April 1954), Birch, Cedar, Deal, Ebony (1955) and Fir (24 May 1955). China Engineers and Eddie Wong acquired half each of the paid-up capital of \$2,000, then in June injected funds to the full amount of the nominal capital of \$2.5 million. In September it took delivery of the 5,450-grt British tramp *Northleigh* (1937), renamed the ship *China Fir* and promptly mortgaged it to Hongkong & Shanghai bank (HSB). She was time chartered to Kawasaki. In December there followed the much older but larger 11,050-dwt ex-German *Frauenfels*, renamed *Canadian Fir*, registered to the single-ship company Canadian Fir S.S. Co. Ltd, set up in November 1956 with a nominal capital of \$2.5 million in 250,000 shares by William Charles Gomersall, chartered electrical engineer, and Alistair Drummond, chartered accountant. In this case, China Engineers took up the controlling interest with 160,000 shares, Ta An just 40,000 and the balance of 50,000 through Fir S.S., so Eddie Wong's combined interest was just over one quarter.

A third single-ship company was registered in January 1957, also with a capital of \$6.5 million, Hong Kong Fir Shipping Co Ltd, in which Chinese Engineers and associates held around two-thirds of the shares, Ta An and associates around one-third. The 9,131-dwt British cargoliner *Antrim* (1931) was promptly acquired for \$397,500 and renamed *Hongkong Fir*. Then on 30 March 1957 yet another shipping company was registered in Hong Kong, this time, and somewhat confusingly, The Fir Line Ltd. Excluding directors' shares, the 300 shares were taken up one-third each by Fir S.S., Canadian Fir S.S. and Hongkong Fir S.S. so once again it was substantially a China Engineers company. In May Eddie Wong was added as a director but held only an indirect minority interest, at least until August 1963 when Ta Hing bought out the other interests and gave Eddie Wong control. Essentially the arrangement with all of these companies was that China Engineers put up the capital and provided technical expertise, while Eddie Wong and associates looked after the employment of the ships, which usually meant charters.

In 1957, while Eddie Wong was still living in Singapore and managing the Salvage Association, he was also renewing connections with the Indonesian Government and the Army, which would have dated from his blockade running in 1947. One need that was identified was for a troopship for interisland movement of troops, something that had lapsed in public controversy and protracted legal dispute over possession of the 3,679-ton *Tasikmalaja* (1923), which finally was broken up in Hong Kong 1955. By 1957 the need had become more pressing. As regional commands became increasingly autonomous

and restive, the central government needed the capacity to dispatch forces to trouble spots. Against this background, in April 1957 HFSC paid Wheelock Marden's Ebony S.S. Co. \$165,000 for the 30-year-old former Andaman Islands passenger steamer *Maharaja*, recently renamed *Jennifer* and under refit in Japan. She was delivered to the Indonesian Government in Singapore in May 1957 and a few months later was sub-chartered to the Army Transportation Department (Djawatan Angkutan Angkatan Darat). After further refit at Singapore at the end of 1957 and renamed *Malaya Fir*, she could carry 1,200 troops. There followed a more ambitious reconstruction of the British cargoliner *Antrim* ex *Kaimata* (1931) to the troopship *Hongkong Fir*.



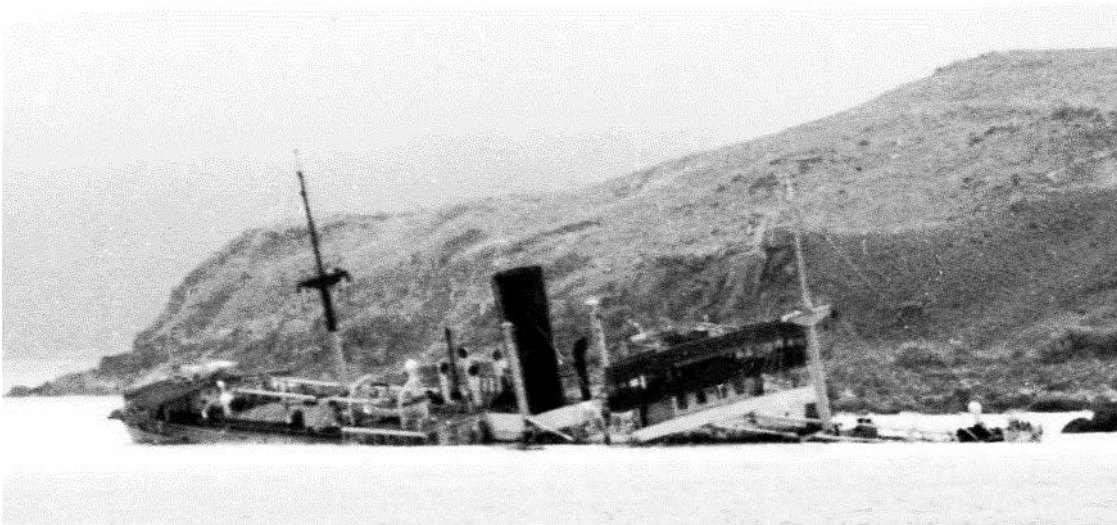
MALAYA FIR anchored inside the breakwater at Tanjung Priok, 26 April 1960, on charter to the Indonesian Army Transport Section (DAAD). (R. Maya/W. Schell).

At the end of 1957 Eddie Wong set up the Panamanian company Compania Naviera Abeto, S.A. ('Abeto' = 'Fir'). *Malaya Fir* was transferred in January 1958, *Hongkong Fir* in May 1958, while in October the big tramp *Canadian Fir* was sold to the People's Republic. In December the 30-year-old Dutch collier *Sidajoe* (1928), latterly laid up in Singapore, was purchased by Abeto from the K.P.M. with delivery in February 1959, after which it was extensively refitted to carry 950 troops, then in mid-1959 as *Djakarta Fir* also placed on charter to the Indonesian Army. As built the ship had carried only four cabin passengers with temporary fittings for deck passengers. Conditions aboard would have been cramped but the photo below suggests that it was a neat job.

At the beginning of 1961 *Malaya Fir*, *Hongkong Fir* and *Djakarta Fir* were all on charter to the Indonesian Army/DAAD, which in the course of the year would purchase the first two to become ADRI IX and ADRI X [ADRI: Angkatan Darat Republik Indonesia or Indonesian Army]. Then in September 1960 Ta Hing bought for £116,000 the 7,750-dwt British India cargoliner *Fultala* (1948), latterly employed in BI's Calcutta-Straits-Hong Kong-Japan line. As *Fultala* she was registered at Hong Kong to Fir S.S. in January 1961, then on the 27<sup>th</sup> transferred to Ta Hing as DJAWA FIR before two months later being sold to Indonesia to become ADRI XI. *Djakarta Fir* ex *Sidajoe* followed to become ADRI XII. All would have proven useful in the Trikora military campaign of 1961-62 to force the Netherlands to cede sovereignty over Nieuw Guinea/West Irian (now West Papua).

The relationship with China Engineers cooled after the death of Gomersall at Hong Kong on 4 July 1960 at age 65. It did not help that *China Fir* stranded off Hong Kong bound for Japan with ore in April 1961

and became a total loss. Overall China Engineers did not do well out of their shipping ventures and sought to disengage. When Hongkong Fir Shipping was placed in liquidation in October 1963, shareholders got back only 94% of their investment, while in the same year Eddie Wong assumed full control of Fir Line Ltd, which henceforth became group agents and general managers in Hong Kong. Other corporate changes may be noted here. After Singapore separated in 1965 from the newly created nation of Malaysia, Ta Hing Co. (Singapore) (Pte) Ltd was set up as a separate entity from Ta Hing Co. (Malaya) Ltd. Then in 1966 Fir Line Limited became a Liberian entity. Given that Cia de Nav. Abeto was a Panamanian firm, it could be said that Eddie Wong's operations had become opaque, which no doubt was the intent.



CHINA FIR half-sunk off Lamtong Island, 23 April 1961 (Dr. George Wilson).

Anyway, by 1962 Eddie Wong's Indonesian ventures were being channeled through Ta Hing, which in early 1962 followed up *Fultala* with two more B.I. cargoliners, in January the 9,200-dwt *Ormara* (1946) was bought for £116,000 to become *Neptune Fir*, then in March via China Pacific Navigation came the sistership *Dairen* ex *Obra*. After some structural work to provide troop capacity, both sold promptly to DAAD to become ADRI XIII and XIV. Finally in June 1962 via Chris Moller's Red Anchor Line came a third ship of that B.I. class, *Ruthy Ann* ex *Okhla*, likewise converted before delivery in August as ADRI XV. Instead of China Engineers, China Pacific Engineering (est. April 1962) now did the conversions and there was some crossover of tonnage from China Pacific, thus *Dairen*, as already mentioned, and in the same year, the N3-type *Ceylon*, which was chartered to Indonesia before a prompt sale to a private Indonesian owner. Conversely, the 'B'-type coaster *Grandhing* (1946) went from Ta Hing to China Pacific. The procession of ships did not pass unnoticed in Hong Kong and attracted the sobriquet of 'Eddie Wong's Navy'. Under the Indonesian flag the troop capacity of the larger ADRI ships may sometimes have been used but mainly they traded between Japan and Indonesia as a means for the central army command to earn precious foreign exchange, albeit unwelcome competition for Djakarta Lloyd and private operators.

## The cattle trade

While business was improving with Indonesia, Eddie Wong was also brokering a cattle trade to supply the Hong Kong market. During 1958 through the Ta Hing Trading Co. Ltd, he used some land at Discovery Bay on Lantau Island that had been a duck farm to set up a quarantined beef cattle depot and import modern equipment from W.J. Powell & Co. in Melbourne to establish an abattoir known as Tai Hing Slaughterhouse (SCMP, 17 and 31/12/58, 20/1/59 and [gwulo.com/node/53619](http://gwulo.com/node/53619)). Additional land was leased from the Lantau Development Company (Chairman J.L. Marden). Once again, W.C. Gomersall, N.G. Beale and S.E. White of China Engineers provided capital with Gomersall as Chairman and Wong as Managing Director. The project had government support because it would import cattle free of foot and mouth disease, help to develop Lantau with an abattoir away from crowded Victoria Island, and also bring down the high price of meat. Towards the end of the year, Wong chartered the KPM's 2,900-dwt cattle ship *Waiwerang* (1949), recently displaced from the interisland trade in Indonesia, to ship cattle from Darwin, probably in conjunction with Henderson, Trippe & Co., who since 1954 had been shipping to the Philippines. The first shipment of 612 head of cattle and 53 buffaloes arrived on 29 December 1958, the next 680 head about a month later, 730 head in late February, and so on. In the first half-year 1958/9, *Waiwerang* carried 3,451 head over five voyages and would remain on charter for two years. The ship anchored each time in the deep water of Discovery Bay and discharged the cattle into barges that conveyed them to a short pier with races to the adjacent holding ground. The product was advertised as 'East Fresh Australian Beef' and sold through butchers The Asia Company at Central, North Point and Kowloon.

According to 'The Age' (24/4/62), he was also part of a syndicate headed by Australian pastoralist Sir William Gunn in negotiations to buy from Norman Smorgon & Sons the 2,400 sq. km \*Elsey Station on the Roper River some 300 miles south of Darwin. During 1962 Ta Hing Trading imported 13,000 head of cattle and 2,000 buffaloes, mostly from Australia, and at a slaughter rate of about 130 per day was supplying 30% of the local market (SCMP, 22/3/63). The company also continued to export preserved ducks to the U.S. As Australian cattle became more expensive and after the import of Australian buffalo had been suspended, Wong organized to import cattle from eastern Indonesia through Mercantile Shipping Development Co. Ltd, set up in Hong Kong on 27 September 1963 as a 50/50 joint venture between Ta Hing (HK) and Indonesian interests, primarily state trading companies represented in Hong Kong as Eastern Agencies Ltd (est. November 1959) and Yuda Niaga (HK), originally USINDO (est. January 1961). Mercantile proceeded to acquire a number of old cattle carriers, mainly on hire purchase from John Manners & Co. Ltd, notably the tweendeckers *Lombok* ex *Anshun* (1930), *Sumba* ex *Van Swoll* (1930) and *Flores* ex *San Eduardo* ex *Waimarino* (1930). *Timur*, however, was a war-built tweendecker whose deployment is unknown. *Sumbawa* ex *Grandhing*, after reverting to Ta Hing, was chartered for trade to South Vietnam.

## Hornbeam

Hornbeam S.S. Co. Ltd was registered in Hong Kong on 6 April 1957 as a Wheelock Marden shell company. In April-May 1958 new shares were issued to the amount of HK\$7,500 and the HK\$2,500 Wheelock Marden holding was transferred jointly to the South African mining company Anglo-American Corporation and the British commodity trader Corrie MacColl & Son Ltd, the latter affiliated



with the plantation firm Harrisons & Crosfield. This entity, which in December 1958 became just Hornbeam Co. Ltd, acquired the little 920-dwt coaster *Francoise* (1920), also in 1959 the old 1,337-grt collier *Canopus* (1903) in Sydney, which was sold the following year to breakers without ever leaving Sydney, then *Francoise* was sold in 1960. By 1961 Hornbeam's capital had been increased to \$900,000 by allotment of another 80,000 shares to Horsford Nominees Ltd, a Hong Kong-registered subsidiary of the Standard & Chartered Bank. Two of the four directors, D.F. MacColl and F.C. Turner had the same London business address, while the other two directors were based in Singapore.

The specifics of the business are unknown, as also the actual connection with Eddie Wong/Ta Hing. A plausible hypothesis is that in 1958 Eddie Wong, then working in Singapore for the International Salvage Association, persuaded David MacColl, who had strong family and business connections in Singapore, that he (Wong) could run provide shipping for MacColl/Harrisons & Crosfield's rubber cargoes from Indonesia following the enforced suspension of Dutch-flag KPM services in December 1957, hence *Francoise*. According to Lloyd's Confidential Index (LCI) of December 1959, *Canopus* was an arrangement with Teh Hu S.S. Co. Ltd of Hong Kong. With the backing of Standard & Chartered Bank, Hornbeam may subsequently have become mortgagee for other Wong-linked vessels. Certainly Hornbeam was no commercial success because when the company liquidated in April 1966, about six months after the coup in Indonesia and as normal shipping services were about to resume with Indonesia, barely half the shareholder value was recouped after discharge of accumulated losses.

### **The pilgrim trade**

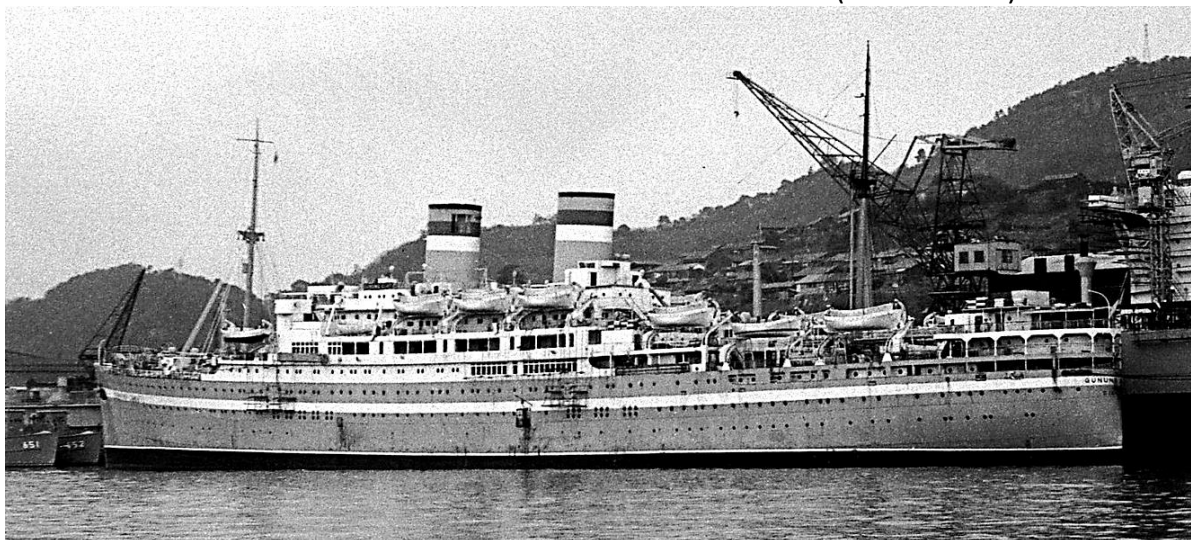
A third interest with Indonesia and the most enduring was the provision of ships for the seasonal carriage of Muslim pilgrims from Indonesian ports to and from Jeddah. For many decades this had been controlled by the so-called Kongsy Tiga (Trio Lines) of Stoomvaart Mij Nederland, Kon. Rotterdamsche Lloyd and Holt's Nederlandsche Stoomvaart Mij 'Ocean'. After the transfer of sovereignty in December 1949, the carriage was administered by the Department of Religion but the Trio Lines still carried the majority of pilgrims alongside some Indonesian-flag ships. After the Dutch were expelled from Indonesia in 1958, Holt's Blue Funnel Line carried on under the British flag, replacing the veteran *Tyndareus* (1916) with the stately, two-funnelled *Gunung Djati* (1936) running alongside ships of Djakarta Lloyd and P.N. Pelni. The outbreak of armed confrontation Indonesia and Britain in the last quarter of 1963 made British-flag participation problematic but neither Djakarta Lloyd nor P.N. Pelni was properly able to take over. Accordingly the idea gained support that Indonesia should set up a specialist pilgrim shipping company and on 1 December 1964 P.T. Pelajaran [Shipping] Arafat was established in Jakarta as a fully government-owned owner-operator of pilgrim ships to commence operations in 1965.

The issue now became one of capacity. Arafat had no ships. On the eve of the company's formation, it had been announced that three ships were undergoing conversion for the 1965 pilgrim season. A 10,000-ton liner turned out to be the 8,500-ton Dutch vessel *Prinses Irene* (1959), which in October 1964 had been taken over by Verolme shipyard for conversion to carry around 1,000 pilgrims. Remarkably, the other two ships were said to be Norwegian oil tankers of 12,000 and 16,000 tons. In the New Year, however, it was reported that the two tankers had instead been time chartered and it transpired that there had been nothing more than a memorandum of agreement. One of the tankers

was the 16,000-dwt Norwegian-flag *Vestan*, which in early 1965 was sold to Abeto and renamed *Bel Abeto*, then quickly resold to the China Pacific group and converted by them at Hong Kong to the bulk carrier *Atlantic Trader*. The other 10,000-dwt tanker has not been identified. After a year under conversion, *Prinses Irene* was delivered in November 1965 as *Tjuk Njak Dien* but too late to take part in the 1965 season.



TJUT NJAK DIEN after conversion with extra boats (Chris Howell).



GUNUNG DJATI under refit at Sasebo in PELNI colours (Tom@Flickr).



AMBULOMBO finishing refit at a Japanese yard c.1961 (Jiro Kimita).



GUNUNG DJATI in the new Arafat colour scheme (Bunts@shipspotting).

In September 1965, the Minister for Shipping announced that responsibility for the 1966 season would transfer from Djakarta Lloyd to Arafat, which now had *Tjut Njak Dhien*, from October 1965 *Gunung Djati* and, from January 1966, *Ambulombo ex Manoora* (1935). These ships three were supplemented by Djakarta Lloyd's *Setia Budhi* and *M.H. Thamrin* and PELNI's *Tampomas*.

To replace the two Djakarta Lloyd ships for the 1967 season, in July 1966 Arafat acquired two more ships on hire purchase from Eddie Wong through the Panamanian registered *Compania de Navegacion Abeto*. The memorandum of agreement of late 1964 was resurrected and the two tankers substituted by the fast British cargo liner *Flamenco* (8491/50) and the French passenger liner *Laënnec* (12,007/51), leading in July 1966 to bills of sale for what would be *Pacific Abeto* and *Belle Abeto* respectively. The terms were demise charter with extended payment over six years, thus until 1972. While undergoing conversion in Hong Kong, on 7 November 1966 *Pacific Abeto* dragged her anchors in a typhoon, collided with China Pacific's bulk carrier *Eastland Trader* (11,056/53) and blew ashore on nearby Stonecutters Island: refloated several days later she arrived in Indonesia just in time to take the last of the first series of outward sailings in the 1967 season.

Evidently satisfied with these two conversions, in August 1967 Arafat signed a hire- purchase agreement with Abeto for a second pair of ships on the same terms. The two new ships were the *Le Havre Abeto* (ex *Charles Tellier*, 12,006/52), outwardly the identical sister to the *Belle Abeto*, and the *La Grande Abeto* (ex *Meinam*, 8536/50). Despite the pretentious name, the latter was, however, only a freighter, and, although the *Pacific Abeto* was proof that such ships could be converted to pilgrim carriers, the Indonesian Government refused an import licence. *Mei Abeto* (ex *Louis Lumière*, 12,358/52), a very similar but more streamlined version of the *Belle Abeto* and *Le Havre Abeto*, was then substituted. Curiously, four ships kept their 'Abeto' names for the rest of their lives, notwithstanding that the strange melange of French, Spanish, English and Chinese had no Indonesian or religious significance whatsoever, in striking contrast with the Muslim connotations of *Gunung Djati* and *Tjut Njak Dhien*.

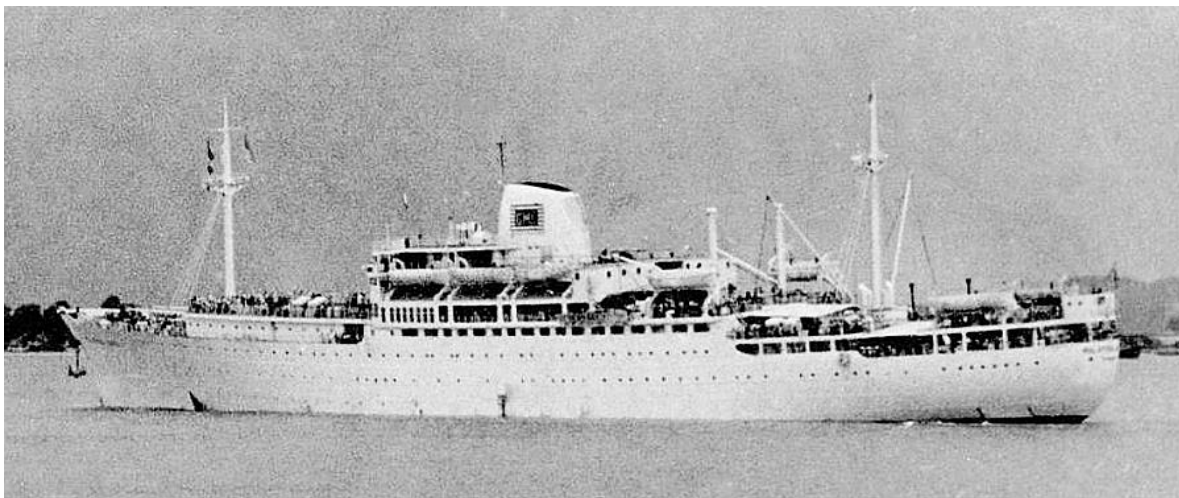
Still only 15 years old, the 16-knot motorships *Belle Abeto*, *Le Havre Abeto* and *Mei Abeto* were a fine trio of sisterships that had been designed to trade from Hamburg, Antwerp and Le Havre via Vigo (Spain) and Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro and the River Plate with very comfortable accommodation for 110 first-class and 326 third-class (emigrant) passengers (Dunn, 1961). During conversion in Hong Kong they kept their well-appointed first-class accommodation with its tasteful modern French décor but most of the cabin partitions in the lower deck were removed to increase the number of bunks for ordinary pilgrims. *Belle Abeto*, the first to be converted, could then carry another 1,300 pilgrims in the equivalent of steerage accommodation, whereas the two later conversions retained more of the original third-class cabins to accommodate about 300 pilgrims in what now became a second class, thereby reducing the dormitory accommodation to 640, meaning about 400 fewer in total. All of these ships could maintain a service speed of 16 knots, an important consideration given the tight schedule of two round voyages between the end of the fasting month and the Saudi government's deadline for arrival at Jeddah. In the off-season *Pacific Abeto* was chartered out as a freighter, while *Belle Abeto*, *Le Havre Abeto* and *Mei Abeto* were usually deployed in interisland passenger service, a marked improvement on the much smaller and overcrowded PELNI ships. The author (HD) travelled on *Belle Abeto* from Tanjung Priok to Tanjung Pinang in August 1974 and can attest that the ship was still well maintained along with its bright French décor.

Soon after Eddie Wong's first attempt to break into the pilgrim trade, Indonesian politics took a dramatic turn. Since the suspension of parliamentary democracy in 1958, President Sukarno had ruled by popular charisma and decree, but in 1965 rumours of his failing health brought to a head long-standing enmity between the Army and the Indonesian Communist Party. On 30 September 1930 a half-hearted but murderous putsch against the central army command triggered an Army coup led by General Suharto, who then gradually stripped powers from Sukarno, who was soon confined to his palace, while ruthlessly exterminating the Communist Party. In 1968 Suharto took over as President in charge of a so-called New Order regime. A minor consequence of all this was the disruption to Eddie Wong's Indonesian network. Markam (one name only), a business crony of President Sukarno, was immediately purged, forcing the recent sale of the 5,000-grt *Tjakra Donia Satu ex Eastern Fir* to be cancelled. Ta Hing's cattle trade with Indonesia had been flagging, with two Mercantile ships repossessed by Mannors during 1965, then *Lombok* caught fire in Surabaya in January 1966 and that was about the end of it. And there seems to have been no further involvement with the military. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the relationship with the Department of Religion and Arafat did flourish and he seems to have kept good relations with the Directorate-General of Sea Transport. He and his younger brother Michael Wong Wing-Tai would be involved as broker in many sales of ships to Indonesia.

In the 1970s, however, Eddie Wong's main focus would be the pilgrim trade of Malaysia. By 1969/70 the future of the pilgrim carriage by sea from Malaysia was in a state of flux. The regular ship since 1961, China Navigation's *Kuala Lumpur*, was 34 years old and showing her age, at least as far as her engines were concerned. If China Navigation were to retain control of the trade, it would need to invest in a new ship, but nationalist pressures for control of the pilgrimage suggested that there would be little security for a shipping line identified with the former colonial power, as Holts had found to their cost with *Gunung Djati*. Under these circumstances, Eddie Wong began to lobby intensively to gain the franchise for the Malaysian pilgrim trade. To this end, in Kuala Lumpur on 24 July 1970 he

established Great Malaysia Line Sdn Bhd, in which initially he himself controlled about 60 per cent of the company through Ta Hing and Fir Line. The balance of shares were apparently given to several prominent Malay political figures, including a former controller of pilgrimages and director of the Pilgrims Board. Great Malaysia Line subsequently won the franchise, commencing from the 1971/72 season.

Great Malaysia Line began operations late in 1971 with two ships on hire purchase from Abeto, which had recently purchased them from the Messageries Maritimes. *Empress Abeto* (ex *Laos*, 13,520/54) and *Princess Abeto* (ex *Pacifique* ex *Viet-Nam* - 13,520/53) belonged to a group of three fast sisterships that had been built, as their names suggested, for the line via Bombay, Colombo and Singapore to Saigon, then on to Hong Kong and Japan. Sold in late August 1970 to Cia. de Nav. Abeto, their accommodation for 117 first, 110 second and 120 steerage-class passengers was converted in Hong Kong to carry 1,696 and 1,612 pilgrims respectively, in part utilising the extensive third-class spaces that originally had been fitted out for troops. *Empress Abeto* became *Malaysia Baru* ('New Malaysia') – in the following year renamed *Malaysia Kita* ('Our Malaysia') – while *Princess Abeto* became *Malaysia Raya* ('Great Malaysia'). Painted all white with the GML houseflag on a white funnel, they looked much more modern and streamlined than *Kuala Lumpur* but appearances were deceptive. It soon appeared that the accommodation and quality of service were inferior to the former British-flag ships.



MALAYSIA RAYA departing Penang, 17 December 1971, on 2<sup>nd</sup> voyage of 1<sup>st</sup> pilgrim season (H. Dick).

The new line was ill-fated. At the end of the 1973/74 season, *Malaysia Kita* laid up in Singapore for docking and refit. At 2300 hours on 11 May 1974, while lying in the Eastern Anchorage, she caught fire and, after the Port Authority had attempted to fight the blaze, capsized on her side from the weight of water pumped into her. She was declared a constructive total loss. Salvage was protracted and eventually bankrupted the salvors, Singapore Ocean Salvage (Pte) Ltd. After the failure of the first attempt on 30 March 1975, she was finally raised and beached, still on her side, on 25-26 June; five months later she was righted and on 22 April 1976 left in tow for Kaohsiung for breaking up.

To replace *Malaysia Kita*, Great Malaysia Line chartered Abeto's *Eastern Queen* (12,457/53). A vessel of similar size and vintage, as *General Mangin* she had also been built for French owners for service to



French West Africa. In 1969 she was sold to Philippine owners to trading to Japan, then Abeto bought her at the end of 1971. After refit, in May 1972 she began a fortnightly 'ship-jet' service between Singapore and Fremantle on charter to the Singapore-Australia Shipping Co. Pte Ltd (SASCO). After being withdrawn temporarily for a \$0.5 million refit, she resumed the service in April 1973. Following the loss of the *Malaysia Kita*, she took her last sailing from Fremantle in mid-July 1974 and transferred to the pilgrim trade. It is likely that at least part of the rationale for her purchase by Cia. de Nav. Abeto was to have her available as a standby ship for the Malaysian and Indonesian pilgrim ships. As originally built, besides accommodation for about 360 cabin passengers she also had quarters forward for almost 600 troops, which could readily have been converted for pilgrims. In fact she would carry as many as 1,700, the same as *Malaysia Kita* and *Malaysia Raya*.



EASTERN QUEEN at Singapore 10 January 1977 (Capt. K.W. Smith; coll. H. Hoffmann).

Just before the start of the 1976/77 season, fate struck another blow. While lying at anchor at Port Kelang on 23 August 1976, *Malaysia Raya* caught fire when a gas barbecue exploded in the first-class lounge during an impromptu party. She was beached in the mangroves and the fire extinguished, but once again the ship was a constructive total loss. On 17 December she was delivered to the salvage firm Selco Ltd and on 12 January 1977 left in tow of the *Salviceroy* (492/72) for Kaohsiung and demolition. *Eastern Queen*, which had been in the course of sale, had to be kept for the 1976/77 season. At its end in April 1977, she was laid up in Singapore for sale.

Loss of *Malaysia Raya* was the last straw for a company that had long been on the brink of insolvency. For the year ending September 1974, the company had already accumulated a loss of M\$10.6 million and its continued financial viability hinged on settlement of the M\$14.5 million insurance claim on *Malaysia Kita*. Another \$2.64 million of assets were declared by the accountants as unable to be verified. The loss of *Malaysia Kita* does not seem to have been the root cause of these financial problems, because in fact the company had been unable to return a profit in any of its first three years of operation. Partly it was a matter of sheer bad management and lack of cost control with more than a whiff of high-level corruption. There was also the usual difficulty of keeping the ships employed profitably in the off-season, though *Eastern Queen* was later able to replace B.I.'s veteran liner *Rajula* (1926) in the passenger trade from Singapore and Penang to Nagapattinam and Madras. Ultimately, however, the death knell for both the pilgrimage by sea and the Madras trade was the inexorable shift



towards much faster air travel. Although the total number of pilgrims grew steadily, being about 50 per cent greater in the 1974/75 season than in the 1970/71, most of that increase was carried by air. In its final and record season of 1970/71, China Navigation had carried 9,522 pilgrims by sea while only 1,141 went by air: in the 1974/75 season Great Malaysia Line carried a new record of 10,207 by sea but the number travelling by air had risen to 5,159 pilgrims. Loss of the two ships and growing public discontent with living conditions aboard those ships accelerated this trend. In November 1976 the executive director of Great Malaysia Line, Eddie's son Michael Wong, who resided in Kuala Lumpur, stated that the company would not seek renewal of the franchise on its expiry at the end of the 1976/77 season. The sole surviving ship, *Eastern Queen*, was sold in September 1977 to the Bangla Desh Shipping Corporation and kept in the pilgrim trade as *Hizbul Bahr*.

## **Bust**

After the Indonesian pilgrim ships had finally been paid off and while the Malaysian ships were losing money, Eddie Wong needed a successful new venture. He did invest in two ships for conversion to cattle carriers, the 7,030-grt *Elsey Fir* ex French *Euphrate* (1955), which was converted, and the smaller 4,129-grt West Australian passenger ship *Kangaroo*, which was renamed *Hong Kong Fir*, and then promptly sold to Saudi owners. These, however, were just sideline investments. Eddie Wong's ambitions were set on bigger things and, as ever, he took risks. In May 1973 with Robert B. Anderson and others he set up Hong Kong Resort Co. Ltd to build a luxury resort around the site of the slaughterhouse at picturesque Discovery Bay on Lantau Island. Anderson (1910-89) was a very high-profile partner. Wikipedia reveals that he had served in the Eisenhower administration as Navy Secretary, Deputy Defense Secretary and from 1957 to 1961 as Treasury Secretary. In 1964 President Johnson appointed him as Special Ambassador to Panama and as such becoming Chairman of the Inter-Oceanic Canal Study Commission and concurrently and until 1973 Chief Negotiator for revision of the Panama Canal Treaty. At the same time, from the Anderson Group offices at One Rockefeller Plaza, New York, Anderson sought money-making deals around the world. One of his vehicles was Robert Anderson & Co. Ltd, Hong Kong (1961-72). In fellow entrepreneur Eddie Wong, he found a natural partner. Financing of US\$7 million was obtained from an unlikely source, the Singapore branch of the Moscow Narodny Bank. At first things went well. In December 1975 the masterplan was approved and in September title to the land was secured.

Concurrently, in June 1973 Eddie Wong bought into the defunct U.S. investment bank Pacific Atlantic Bank and through that entity and, according to the Panama Papers, with H.C. Schiro, paid US\$2.9 million for the prestigious Panama Hotel. Both these deals were also financed by the Moscow Narodny Bank with the funds, as for the resort, channeled through Pan-Atlantic Bank, Paclantic Financing Company Limited and Paclantic Investment Company Inc. Another suite of deals was the purchase from the Vallarino family in June 1973 of Panamanian air cargo operator INAIR. In this case the vehicle was Panama National Airways Corp. (PNAC), a joint venture of Eddie Wong and its former Hong Kong manager H.C. Schiro. According to the Panama papers, the holdings in INAIR were PNAC 40%, INAIR employees 20%, Vallarino a residual 16%, a Mr Duran (for Eddie Wong) 11%, and others 13%. The intention was to buy two Boeing 720-Bs from United Airlines United through an EXIM loan. To secure the favour of Panama dictator General Torrijos, family members were appointed to the board of the bank.

Then, as York Lo sets out in detail, everything fell apart. Eddie Wong lost control of Hong Kong Resorts and in January 1977 fled Hong Kong for Miami in an attempt to evade bankruptcy proceedings. In Miami he mooted establishing a Pacific Atlantic Bank of Miami and going into the casino business with Robert B. Anderson. It was all 'blue sky'. On 1 April Moscow Narodny Bank filed a claim for repayment of US\$14.9 million in Hong Kong against Eddie Wong, his brother Michael, Pan Atlantic Bank, Paclantic Financing, Paclantic Investment and Elsey Shipping. In May Hong Kong Resorts and the Discovery Bay project were sold to Cha Chi-ming family's Thornleigh Group and on 9 August Eddie Wong's 1,321 shares were transferred to Ozeaan Einfuhr und Ausfuhr Anstalt. Wong appealed these actions but in May 1981 judgement was passed against him, as again in 1984 on appeal to the Privy Council. It must have been galling that under the ownership of what became Hongkong Resorts International Ltd, the Discovery Bay project went ahead and became a great success ([www.hkri.com/en/About-HKRI/History-and-Milestones](http://www.hkri.com/en/About-HKRI/History-and-Milestones)). Anderson made a series of other dubious deals before dying in 1989 of ill health complicated, according to Wikipedia, by alcoholism.

That was not quite Eddie's last hurrah. On 20 January 1993 the 'Sydney Morning Herald' Reported that Summerset Holdings Ltd, registered in the Isle of Man) was joint owner with Chita Minerals, controlled by Eddie Wong, in a 45% stake in Udokan Mining Co. that was seeking to develop the Udokan copper deposit in Russian Siberia. The venture was outbid by mining giant BHP. By that time Eddie would have been at least in his mid-seventies. When and where he died is unknown. Taiwan and Japan would both be possibilities.

## Sources

This text has been written from an accumulation of more than fifty years of notes and drawing on information from the Hong Kong Corporate Registry, the Hong Kong shipping register, Indonesian government sources, the National Library of Singapore and the National Library of Australia (Trove). The sections on the pilgrim ships has been abridged from my unpublished manuscript 'The Pilgrimage by Sea from Southeast Asia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century'. I am grateful to Bill Schell for assistance with details of ownership of the vessels, and to him, Dr. George Wilson, Malcolm Cranfield and Alan Lee and Russell Priest (Nautical Association of Australia/NAA) for assistance with photographs. The posted August 2021 version has been revised to incorporate biographical detail from York Lo's informative post 'Fast Eddie: The rise and fall of Eddie Wong' that was uploaded on 27 August 2021 to the website [industrialhistoryhk.org](http://industrialhistoryhk.org) and also some more detail, especially on the cattle trade, from *South China Morning Post*. Stephen Kentwell has assisted with arranging the illustrations.