

BIMCO Seascapers

In good and bad times: KM Koo

Koo Kou-ming, known in Hong Kong as KM Koo, was born in 1924 in Ningbo, a seaport which lies South of Shanghai. KM's father, CS Koo, had started his first company as a customs broking house in Shanghai and then, with the purchase of his first paddle steamer, as Tai Chong Cheang Steamship.

During KM's childhood, Shanghai was one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world. As a free port, it was a centre for international shipping, banking and general trade and a magnet for merchants and foreign traders. CS Koo's company did well and by the middle of the 1930s, its fleet had expanded to include steamships that provided a cargo liner service in the Yangtze River and along the coastal waters of China, and a number of passenger ships. The Koo family lived in Shanghai's French Concession, with an office in British territory. KM Koo learned to speak English as part of his schooling.

The Japanese invasion of Shanghai in 1937, when KM was just fourteen years old, heralded the end of the city's era of international commerce and the beginning of a period of its dormancy that was to last until 1990. For Tai Chong Cheang Steamship, the war meant the expropriation of some of its fleet. Years later, KM still remembered the *Kiang Su*, a passenger ship that was commandeered by the Japanese on 8 December 1941.

The ship was used as a troop carrier and KM spotted her berthed alongside a wharf on the Huangpu River at the end of the war. He was able to reclaim her but the respite was short: *Kiang Su* and most of Tai Chong Cheang Steamship's fleet were finally commandeered by China's nationalist government during its retreat when the People's Republic of China was declared on 1 October 1949.



Left Mr. KM Koo and right, his father Mr. CS Koo

KM, 26 years of age at the end of the 1940s and by then manager of his father's business, had only ever been to Hong Kong once, for a month in 1948. But as civil war between the Chinese Nationalists and Communists closed in on Shanghai, he believed that his family's safety and future would depend on moving there.

Starting a new life

It was hard to persuade his mother to move from her much loved home to the unknown, but the Koo family finally left in May 1949, one of the last families to be able to charter a flight out of Shanghai to Hong Kong before the "Bamboo Curtain" fell. Although there was no property or business for KM and his family to go to in Hong Kong, there were personal and business contacts that would help them start a new life.

CS and KM Koo were able to purchase a second hand steamship, the 5,182 DWT MV *Valles* (ex *Ramona*) and registered their new company, the Valles Steamship Company, in 1950. KM was the main shareholder, as

his father – now 64 years of age – gradually retired from business. KM recalled that such was the shortage of tonnage when the Korean War triggered a rapid growth in the movement of freight, that good rates could be had for cargoes to Australia, Japan and Indonesia. Valles built enough business to purchase more ships and charter them to Indonesian and Japanese lines. Between the mid 1950s and 1960s, a number of 10,000 DWT general cargo vessels and the company's first tankers were added to the fleet and fixed on long term charters to American and Japanese lines. In 1965 Valles reached a special milestone in ordering its first new building, the 16,000 DWT *Silver Shelton*, from Japan's Hakodate shipyard.

Company expansion

KM continued to expand his company and its fleet, forming an in-house design team led by a naval architect and working with newly emerging Chinese shipyards. The first of these ships, a 27,000 DWT bulk carrier named the MV *Silver Clipper*, was built by the China Shipbuilding Corporation in



The 5,182 DWT MV Valles (ex Ramona)

1967. From then on, Valles kept pace with the changing designs and sizes of ships, steadily renewing its fleet with some ten dry bulkers and five tankers by 1980, including the 60,000 DWT Panamax *Hercules Bulker*. However, KM did not forget that hard times can recur and he was cautious in his funding of newbuildings. When the oil crisis of the 1970s tipped shipping into a severe depression, Valles was able to withstand the storm.

Supporting the Hong Kong ship owning community

In addition to controlling his own company fortunes, KM was a great supporter of Hong Kong's ship owning community. Along with many of the Chinese ship owners who had left Shanghai, he was a member of the Hong Kong Shipowners Association (HKSOA) and was its chairman in 1980 and 1981.

In December 1991 he was one of the fifteen members of the association who participated in an official visit to Shanghai as guests of the city's then Minister of Communi-

cations. This was his first visit back to his homeland after a delay of over forty years and many more followed.

In May 2005, amid the colourful flags and firecrackers that accompany the launching of new ships in China, KM Koo witnessed the launch of *Seamaster* on the Huangpu river, the 110,000 DWT Aframax tank-

er which Valles had commissioned from Zhong Hua Shipyard. It was a particularly special way to mark a home-coming.

KM Koo died on 13 March 2010 He was one of the last Chinese ship owners who left Shanghai and helped build the maritime centre that is so successful in Hong Kong today. ■



The Seamaster on the Huangpu River