

Ouyang Boat Works; Such a long Journey, indeed



The Albacore, loved (and manufactured) by one and all; what's in a name? Photo Adam Hunt

Another new entry was Ouyang Boat Works, which set up in Whitby in 1971. Born in 1910 Tian “Ti” Ouyang grew up in China during the chaos of the warlord era of the 1920’s and later the Japanese invasion in the 1930’s to the 1940’s. Ti kept his head down and stayed out of trouble, all the while learning the woodworking trade. He bounced around various Asian boatyards and finally settled in Calcutta, where he founded a successful commercial boat building and repair business (there was no such thing as “yachting” in the region, as there was no real middle class to support it). At it’s peak he employed 100 at the yard and exported most of the product, a not atypical success story in the post communist Chinese diaspora. In 1963

India and China went to war over a disputed border in the mountainous region of Sikkim. Prime Minister Indira Ghandi, with her characteristic capacity for overreaction, ordered the bank accounts of all Chinese nationals frozen and virtually prevented them from any travel. Ti's business collapsed. Through a religious society, (Ti was an active Seventh Day Adventist Christian, another trait that was not popular in Hindu majority India) he was able to be sponsored to emigrate to Canada, on the understanding he, his wife and their three children, Mao, Maokang and Stanley leave India with only \$9 each. He arrived in Oshawa and started over, going to work for the Whitby Boat Works of Kurt and Doris Hansen. He was put to work on one of Whitby's best sellers, the 16-foot Albatross. To keep busy on evenings and weekends, he started building copies of the Albatross in his garage. Kurt Hansen found out about this and fired him. Ironically, Whitby had taken some legal heat from Fairey Marine Ltd. that the Albatross was a straight up copy of their own popular Albacore model. Grampian had already paid a licencing fee to build the model in Canada while it seems as if Whitby was helping themselves to a freebie, certainly neither Whitby nor Ouyang seemed interested in any licencing arrangement, was the look of a boat truly even patentable; the name could be trademarked, but not a hull shape. At any rate, Ti decided it was time to go back into business for himself, but the first iteration of Ouyang Boat Works, or at least the first North American version did not prosper, and for all the trouble it caused, his little Albacore/Albatross knock off, which he christened the Cormorant 16, did not sell. A year later, down to his last few dollars, he was able to get his old job back at Whitby. Talented and motivated employees can be problems, but they are also vital for any business, and most likely the Hansen's assumed he had learned his lesson and would behave himself. This lasted for another year before Ti left again over some trivial production dispute over the teak trim on the boat hull. He always had plans to reboot his own business, and rather than copy an existing design, he hired a naval architect named Robert Tucker for what became his first two successes, the Matilda 20 and 23 came out in 1971. The Cormorant brand was bad luck and had been dropped, both in name and boat; no more 16 footers were built, the Matilda owner's website lists a "Matilda 16" but the official list does not mention it, I suspect this is actually the Cormorant.



Ouyang's Aloha 28 Photo Adam Hunt

Ti pushed his children to pursue a university education, particularly in medicine and public health. He also expected at least one of his sons to join him in the boat business. This apparently contradictory but determined desire resulted in the eldest boy, MaoKang, attending Loma Linda University in California for its health program and flying back home during study breaks to work in the shop. MaoKang seemed much more interested in the boat business than working on his Master's degree, brimming with ideas and energy. He convinced his father to rename the brand the Aloha line. The story was that MaoKang had gotten the inspiration from a Hawaiian girl he dated while at school, but in the late 1960's and early seventies, Hawaii and the Hawaiian experience loomed large in the public imagination as an exotic and exciting travel destination where people still spoke English and there was some semblance of law and order. Shows like Hawaiian Eye and particularly Hawaii 5-0 were hit TV shows and constant ads

showing smiling if somewhat underdressed brown skinned women putting a flower garland over the neck of doughy tourists as they got off the plane helped sell the image. Aloha, which means hello and goodbye in the Indigenous language was about sun and warmth and wind and escape, much more appealing than Matilda, named for a poky and under gunned World War II tank, something waltzing in Australia, or the flat, charmless township adjacent to Green Bay, famous for farming and quarries and settled by crabby Scottish people in the 1820's. Never underestimate the power of a brand name. The first Aloha was the 28-footer, added to the line in 1972. The Aloha was a success, but just designing and building these boats was a considerable strain on the small business and no new model sizes were added in the first few years. Worse news was that the heir apparent MaoKang fell ill with hepatoma, a form of inherited liver cancer in 1976 and passed away in 1977 at the age of 29. At that point Ti, now in his late sixties called the other two boys after MaoKang's funeral and explained that he needed them to get involved or else he would close the little factory and retire. Both dropped their career plans and returned to form a true family business. Mao went straight from the hospital where he worked to the Ouyang shop floor. He had never built a boat in his life.

By 1981 there were 22 or more active sailboat factories operating in Ontario alone, in addition to the big three of CS, C&C Yachts and Hinterhoeller. There was still an active market, but was anybody actually making money, or enough money to justify the risk?

Ouyang Boat Works certainly thought so. Initially they had a sensible line of 20-, 23-, 28- and 34-foot yachts. The Aloha 28 came out in 1972, the boat that set Ouyang's fortunes. But it was superseded by the Aloha 27 in 1976, a virtually identical craft. After Maokang's passing, the surviving brothers Mao and Stanley seemed to be bringing out more and more versions of the same basic models. In 1979 they brought out another Aloha 26 and a 32 even though they already had just brought out the large 34 in 1975. Then out came another 34 in 1981 and yet another 26-footer, the 271 in 1983. A new 28 appeared to update the original 28 from 10 years earlier, that at least seemed a reasonable stretch of time for new model year. But as of 1983 they had no less than four different iterations of the 26-footer, the 26, 27, 271 and the 8.2, based on the published specs, all sloops, all fibreglass, all with the same basic configuration, length, beam weight, ballast, and sail size and all apparently being made at the same time.



The Aloha 8.5 Metre, too many similar sized models? Photo Adam Hunt

Sailboat fans may be able to tell the difference, the author certainly can't, and I can't see the justification for the extra expense, particularly engaging a new design each time from either Ted Brewer or Robert Perry. The motorboat companies had a sensible escalating line of product, starting perhaps with an entry level 14-footer with a small engine, then a 16-footer with a larger engine and more seating room, a nineteen-footer with a big engine and plenty of seats, and so on. They might have a special high-speed or waterski or fishing version of a standard model. But for Ouyang the lack of apparent coherence in the product line may have been a harbinger of problems, Ouyang was in financial trouble by 1984. They agreed to a significant buy in from their distributor Canadian Yacht Charters. Disputes arose between Yacht Charters, who were now the majority owners and the Ouyang family who now held a minority interest and I suspect that one of the issues was to straighten out the product line. The Yacht Charters management fired Mao and Stanley and after a bitter corporate divorce, the Ouyang's agreed to a buy out of \$100,000. The family decided to use some of the buyout money to speculate in the Toronto housing market and in 1986, Ti, gripped by some desire to save face and settle the score with his old company, took one last shot at rebuilding his marine empire, with Odyssey Yachts. He hired away some of his old colleagues at Whitby almost three decades earlier, as well as Vietnamese refugees who looking for any sort of job. Odyssey's sole boat was the Odyssey 30, a direct rival to the Aloha 30. Canadian Yacht Charters had never been able to turnaround the boat building business and the challenge from Odyssey was just the final straw and they closed the Aloha line down in 1988. But the Odyssey was not selling either and the Ouyang's, with a failing startup and overextended house investments hit the wall as well, and Ti had to declare personal bankruptcy. He died in 1994.



Ouyang's Aloha 27, from 1979 Photo Adam Hunt