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The thousand faces ship: how Chinese vessels change names mid-voyage

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Shan Mei 7

The latest ship accused of damaging cables off Taiwan had a simple way of changing identity.

Taiwan's coast guard detained a cargo ship and its Chinese crew a week ago. The vessel is suspected of damaging the cable connecting Taiwan to its outlying Penghu Islands.

The Togo-flagged *Hongtai 68* was able to change its name many times as the crews simply replaced three steel plates (pictured) at its stern and on its bow whereby it has also recently traded as the *Hongtai 58* and *Shanmei 7*.

The captain of the vessel – dubbed in local media as the 'thousand faces ship' – had on an earlier occasion been caught entering Taiwan with false documents.

While this Chinese-backed ship shuffled steel plates to create new names, over in Europe efforts to cover up shadow ship identities are often extremely slapdash.

Russian-linked ships often get crews to crudely obscure vessel identities, contravening laws established by the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

Yörük Işık, who describes himself on social media as an obsessive ship spotter along the Bosphorus, has tracked “dozens” of vessels where original names – and even IMO numbers – have been painted over.

Işık told *Splash* last year that Russians increasingly did not care about how the repainted ship names looked.



Yörük Işık

“There are more and more homemade efforts to write names, ridiculously small, crooked, or written by people who are not familiar with Latin letters,” Işık said.

Back in Taiwan, the island blacklisted 52 Chinese-owned ships in January that operate under flags of convenience in the wake of the severing of another subsea communications cable. Taiwan’s National Coast Guard Administration identified a Cameroon-registered cargo ship, *Shunxin 39*, as the suspect in the earlier incident.

Taiwan’s National Security Bureau has said ships which have previously been found to misreport information will be put on a list of ships for priority inspection at ports.

Moreover, if these ships enter within 24 nautical miles of Taiwan’s coast and are close to where undersea cables are, the coast guard will be dispatched to board them and investigate.