

**RUIHAN YU WANTED TO ROW AN OCEAN. AND NOTHING - NOT LACK OF
PREPARATION, FITNESS OR KNOW-HOW - WAS GOING TO STOP HIM.
HUW KINGSTON FOLLOWED THIS MOST UNLIKELY ADVENTURER**

CAPTAIN CALAMITY



he message from Shuping arrived late at night: “Google ‘Chinese man arrives in Israel by boat – without meaning to.’” I followed his instructions and read, on an Israeli news website, how a Chinese man was found unconscious on the beach near a fishing village named Jisr A Zaqra. One photograph showed fishermen crawling over a boat. My old boat. Another was of the man. “This is the first time we encounter something like this,” one of the fishermen said. “We didn’t expect someone to reach us by sea because of Israeli security. It is unusual for anyone arriving illegally to live. This Chinese man is lucky.”

In 2015 I had completed a year-long, 13,000km journey circumnavigating the Mediterranean by sea kayak, foot, bike and ocean rowboat. A journey that started and finished at Gallipoli from Anzac Day to Anzac Day. On my first day back home in Australia, the first email from Shuping Wang arrived. “Is your boat still for sale? My friend is interested.” I replied that yes, *Mr Hops*, the ocean rowboat I had used in the Mediterranean, and which was now in Athens, was still available.

That email began my link with a Chinese man, Ruihan Yu. It was the first of some 400 emails in a tortuous three months of negotiating the sale. He pulled out several times, on one occasion saying he had just days to live. Two days later he felt better and the deal was back on. Back and forth the correspondence went between Shuping Wang (Ruihan’s friend and translator in the US), my friend Dimitris in Greece, my father in the UK, and me in Australia.

In June 2015, during the worst week of the Greek economic crisis, Ruihan arrived in Athens. We tried to ascertain his plans and it seemed he wanted to row the Atlantic. To reach the Atlantic he would first need to row 4000km west across the Mediterranean, something we told Shuping was a near-impossibility. I had little information on Ruihan’s exact plans, and he seemed disinclined to take advice. He eventually bought *Mr Hops* and set about preparing for the voyage. We were not convinced he knew where it would lead.

Finally, in late September, he rowed away from Athens. Days later, less than 50km into his voyage, Ruihan was shipwrecked on rocks near the island of Poros. An emergency flare he fired off set light to vegetation on a small islet, alerting authorities. Elias, a local boatman, rescued Ruihan – who

then spent a month on Poros repairing the damage to both body and boat. Elias told Dimitris that if we were worried at all for Ruihan, we should stop him going further. "Without doubt he will drown before he leaves Greek waters," he said.

In early November 2015 Ruihan set off again. But in mid-December we heard from Shuping that he had travelled not west towards the Atlantic but south-east, to Egypt, where he was given 48 hours to leave. It was early January 2016 when I read that article about the Chinese man shipwrecked in Israel. Ruihan was jailed for some weeks then quietly deported, the Israeli authorities more than a little embarrassed.

Ocean rowing is a minor and esoteric sport. Two thousand years ago the Phoenicians were getting around the Mediterranean in huge galleys rowed by banks of slaves. The Vikings were raping and pillaging from their longboats across Europe from the 8th century. But as a sport, ocean rowing began just over 50 years ago. It is a sport populated by hardy and usually well-prepared individuals who commit to spending months at sea in often miserable and frightening conditions.

I soon learnt from my own experience of ocean rowing on the Mediterranean that these bathtubs of the ocean stall in any sort of headwind or sidewind – pushing a tonne around the water with a couple of sticks is not conducive to speed. And it's hard to get into a pattern of living with never more than a solid hour of sleep. Two hours on, two hours off was the regimen night and day. Too often I fell asleep at the oars in rain or sun and, on a couple of occasions, slipped off the seat. The build plate on *Mr Hops* ominously included the line: "This boat is built for ocean rowing only and is NOT for pleasure use." I could see that plate from the rowing seat and those words shouted to me on every shift.

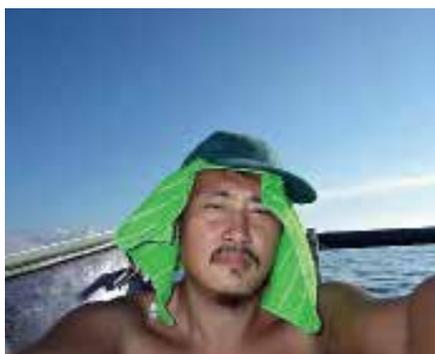
Ocean rowing is a curious endeavour where humans pit themselves against the extreme side of Mother Nature... the barriers to entry are focused little on skill and mainly on raising enough money to purchase the smallest, slowest and simplest type of ocean-going craft any half-sane person would risk going to sea in, enough freeze-dried food to last you months on end, and an ability to put up with extended periods of confined misery and suffering.

Grant Rawlinson, ocean rower, Singapore

Late in 2017 news emerged of a Chinese rower who had been rescued not once but twice off Hawaii. Ruihan Yu was back on the water. For six months he'd slept on the couch of his friend Shup-



Ready or not: from top, Ruihan; inside his cabin; at sea. Opening page, in *Mr Hops* off Athens



ing Wang in San Francisco. "Ruihan rarely moved from my lounge room," Shuping told me. "Mostly he watched movies and ate junk food. He never trained." Ruihan had bought another rowboat, *Limited Intelligence*, and moored it at Point San Pablo Harbor in San Francisco Bay. Harbourmaster Daryl Henline was incredulous at seeing some 200 bottles of Pepsi, cigarettes and energy bars as the only supplies for a journey of so many months.

American Pat Hines, the oldest woman ever to row an ocean, who would later sell Ruihan *Roosevelt*, his third rowboat, told me: "He was the

strangest and most unlikely man to row an ocean. He was overweight and had no concern for safety or interest in training. He only took the safety equipment I was selling with my boat when I threatened to report him to the Coast Guard."

But a common thread was emerging: various people, even those who knew Ruihan's lack of preparation was a recipe for disaster, felt drawn to this man with his limited English and limited diet. "He seemed kind, had a real vulnerability to him," proffered Pat Hines.

No one has stood by Ruihan Yu more than Shuping Wang. They met when rooming together at college in Chongqing, a megacity in south-west China. "Ruihan was from Chongqing, the only child of a father who worked, often overseas, on engineering projects, and a mother who held a senior position in the regional environmental protection agency," Shuping told me.

Ruihan was born in 1983; his parents split when he was young and he was raised by his mother in a family that was well-off and well connected. He didn't excel academically, entering college on the strength of playing volleyball at the provincial level. He studied Japanese – "It was the easy choice, there are many similarities to Chinese. Ruihan didn't want to challenge himself," Shuping said. "Ruihan would go to the deserts of Xinjiang Province [in western China] and told me he walked across those deserts for weeks. But I am still not sure if he ever did." Even Ruihan's closest supporters had doubts about his stories, a thread that continued on his ocean journeys.

"It seemed that ordinary life and the accepted pathways to success in China bored him," Shuping told me. "He worked in construction management for a year or so after college and got married, but that only lasted a year. He seemed to seek something else, not fame or fortune, just to do something. I think he alighted on ocean rowing because he thought it must be easy. He realised that to fly or sail around the world required licences and practice. In Ruihan's mind, rowing an ocean consisted of nothing more than rowing a boat."

Know seamanship and navigation. Know how to be airlifted from a life raft and how to use a VHF radio. Know your vessel – really know her. Know how to fix her, know where everything is in your cabin you would need in the worst-case scenario. In the dark, upside down, water everywhere.

Michelle Lee, ocean rower, Australia

On July 9, 2017 Ruihan rose from his friend's couch and started out from San Francisco on his

second attempt to row an ocean, his first on the Pacific. Little was heard from him in four months; he had no working satellite phone or VHF radio. He did, however, have a GPS-enabled device that he could message from. “50 days ago, boat rudder fracture, drifting to here. Distance maui60km. Ships type. 400kg unpowered canoe. State. Completely out of control. Away from the island.” This was the message Daryl Henline received on November 7 at Point San Pablo Harbor. Henline alerted the US Coast Guard in Hawaii and soon a ship was on its way to tow Ruihan into Maui.

It appears he had broken or lost the rudder on *Limited Intelligence* some two months into his journey. He had then essentially drifted toward Hawaii while watching movies on his iPad and making headway through crates of warm cola.

Following repairs and a restock, Ruihan rowed out of Maui on November 19, intent on continuing his journey. He hadn't gone far when an accident resulted in some badly smashed teeth. This time it was a helicopter that came to winch him up; his rowboat was left behind. Ruihan returned to China.

Bring two methods of fixing anything that can break – your gear, your safety equipment, and your body.

Jacob Hendrickson, ocean rower, USA

It would of course be easy to criticise Ruihan's lack of preparation and knowledge. There is undoubtedly a certain purity in the naive trying of something new without first obtaining the requisite skills. The experience, the attack on the senses, is heightened. We live in a high-tech world that undoubtedly assists the adventurer – but that technology also removes some of the pure connection to our mountains, deserts, rivers and oceans. It gives us a way out, rather than forcing us to rely on animal skills and senses. Skills and senses now buried in most people but ones that, given the chance, often do reappear.

The media often criticises people it considers unprepared and in need of rescue. Too often the criticism comes from a lack of knowledge of the activity, from an urban mentality. But even when justified, it is worth remembering that humans have always tried to help others in distress. Whether trapped in a car on the highway after a crash, or lost in the vast expanses of the ocean.

Last year Ruihan turned up again at Point San Pablo Harbor with another boat and another dream: to row across the Pacific to Australia. “We were totally surprised to see him back after what



Driven: from top, Ruihan after his shipwreck in Israel; locals on his boat; on *Limited Intelligence* in San Francisco



happened in 2017,” Henline told me. Ocean rowing is not a cheap sport. A new boat will set you back at least \$60,000, second hand \$20,000 or more. For a man reluctant to work, I wondered how Ruihan was funding his voyages. “His mother gave him some \$80,000 when he wanted to row the Pacific in 2017,” Shuping explained. “I believe that in 2019 he had sold an apartment in China that he'd been given years before. That would have helped to pay for his final voyage.”

Roosevelt was Ruihan's third boat, proudly displaying the Stars and Stripes on its bow and the

number 88. “That was meant to be a double infinity [symbol],” Pat Hines told me, “representing the lack of boundaries to what humans can achieve.”

Hines was disappointed Ruihan would take no advice. “You women worry too much. How did you row an ocean?” Ruihan joked. “Anyone can finish but not everyone can survive.” Was Ruihan starting to believe he was, after four rescues, invincible? Lia Ditton in San Francisco, another ocean rower, was equally frustrated, equally concerned by and for Ruihan: “I nicknamed him Captain Calamity, but I was fond of him. Fond of his unstoppable drive to row an ocean.”

Whilst ocean rowers watch their character and confidence grow through time spent in solitude on the water, the quickest way to grow skills is to listen to others who have experience of something similar to that for which you are preparing.

Chris Martin, ocean rower, UK

Ruihan's stories, though, were starting to catch up with him, as I discovered from speaking to more people. Stories that he'd been attacked by Somali pirates in the Mediterranean and had thrown dynamite at them. (There are no Somali pirates in the Mediterranean.) That in 2017 his water desalinator had packed up on his row to Hawaii and each morning he had licked the dew from the panels of his boat. (All boats on any ocean become encrusted in salt.) That he had long been married and his wife did not like him doing these trips. (He had been married once, for a year.) That he worked as an atmospheric scientist and had studied chemical engineering. (He had done neither.) That he had a life-threatening illness. (I could turn up no evidence of this.)

Briefly, I questioned whether Ruihan's journeys were figments of his imagination too, but the evidence was there – the rescues, pictures and more. There is certainly a thread in the adventure world of mountains claimed but never climbed, ocean crossings announced but never sailed. Some are delusional from the start. Others, with richly deserved achievements, go on to make untrue claims as their prowess fails and profile wanes. Was Ruihan just a minestrone of contradictions? A man with a fatalistic or devil-may-care attitude, with a drive but an untuned motor, unable or unwilling to take advice, way out of his depth?

The ocean is an unforgiving environment – especially for the solo rower. There are no second chances.

Roz Savage, ocean rower, UK

On July 27, 2019 Ruihan rowed away from California for the second time, this time in *Roosevelt*, stocked with Gatorade drink, Fig Newtons biscuits and Cheetos corn puffs. In two months – half the time it had taken him to cover the 4000km to Hawaii in 2017 – Ruihan found himself close to those volcanic islands once again.

It is not clear whether he originally intended to stop there but, close to the island of Oahu, Ruihan messaged Shuping to say he was worried he would shipwreck or miss Hawaii altogether in heavy seas. The US Coast Guard, which remembered Ruihan well from 2017, wanted him to abandon ship and accept a helicopter lift. Ruihan refused, not wishing to lose another boat.

On October 4, when seas were calmer, a private salvage and rescue skipper named Michael Parker found Ruihan anchored just beyond the surf zone off Oahu. He towed Ruihan into Kaneohe Yacht Club and over the following days helped him out. Parker's part-Japanese girlfriend, Maki Konikson, a film producer, was able to converse with Ruihan in Japanese and hear his stories. Then the couple helped him on his way again. "I towed his boat across the island to a marina near Honolulu, an easier place for him to row out of," Parker said. "Maki and I took some sandwiches for lunch, gave him a big hug and told him we would come to Australia for his arrival. It was the 9th of October when Ruihan rowed out from Honolulu."

When I spoke with Parker, he had just been contacted to assist in the salvaging of *Row of Life*, the boat belonging to Angela Madsen, a paraplegic rower and former US Marine with a string of ocean crossings to her credit. She died in June this year while attempting to row from California to Hawaii. It might sound as though ocean rowing is filled with stories of tragic endings, but in fact Madsen was just the ninth person in more than 50 years of the sport to be lost at sea, a relatively low number given the conditions such rowers encounter and the risks involved. A testament perhaps to the preparation most make.

"We cannot legally stop personal craft from heading off on a journey, however unprepared or unskilled we feel they might be," Petty Officer Matthew West of the US Coast Guard's Joint Rescue Coordination Center Honolulu told me. I wondered if any of Ruihan's friends had tried to stop him. Surely they realised his luck must run out eventually? "I didn't feel I could ask him," was Shuping's answer. Pat Hines messaged Ruihan every day for weeks before he left, imploring him to be better prepared; but she, too, never felt



Premonition: Parker and Konikson with Ruihan; his boat washed up in the Philippines



she could ask him not to go. In 2017 Ruihan's mother had confiscated his passport, but he reported it stolen and got another one. In 2019 she had a premonition something bad was going to happen to her son, though premonitions were hardly necessary given his track record.

A week out of Hawaii, Ruihan rang his mum and told her he was ready to quit, wanted a rescue. Something had got to him, had dented his sense of infallibility. His mother contacted Shuping to organise a rescue, but Shuping felt the stop in Hawaii had knocked Ruihan off-kilter; he let the issue lie fallow for a few days and Ruihan started to feel more positive. And for the next month Ruihan made good progress, before again falling into a slough of despair, concerned about his lack of navigational ability and understanding of the currents. The ever-faithful Shuping contacted Chris Martin, a hugely successful ocean rower, and Martin offered some shore support. On November 27 Ruihan declined the offer.

That same day, in China, Ruihan's mother heard from her son. He reported that his boat had capsized, and that he was inside the cabin and had

drilled holes in the hull for air. Shuping wasn't picking up his phone so she contacted a family friend in Missouri in the US midwest who called 911, telling the operator a Chinese man was in trouble in a rowing boat in the mid Pacific.

Tracking his satellite phone call to his mother, the authorities put Ruihan some 650km north east of Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. A C130 Hercules took off from Hawaii, 75 hours flying time away, and at 6pm located the upturned hull with Ruihan in the water clinging to it; the C130 dropped a life raft before turning for Kwajalein to refuel. The crew alerted all shipping. Ruihan's satellite phone was now dead.

The following day, November 28, a cargo ship and the C130 located an empty life raft, but neither found the rowboat. On November 29 the C130, on a third and final flight, spotted the mostly submerged hull of *Roosevelt*. Two ships searched around the hull but found no sign of Ruihan; neither launched a boat to reach the hull, but sea conditions may well have made such a move unsafe. Was Ruihan inside? Was he alive? Many will recall the case of Tony Bullimore, the British sailor found alive after four days in his upturned yacht in the Southern Ocean. The search for Ruihan was abandoned.

The two biggest dangers in ocean rowing are firstly being separated from your boat and secondly a capsized where you are either injured or the boat does not self-right. Being separated from your boat, far out at sea, is basically a death sentence for a solo rower. However, in the event of capsized where the boat does not self-right, prior preparation, protocols and practice will make a huge difference to the outcome. This is definitely a recoverable situation.

Grant Rawlinson, Singapore

Perhaps, if we put aside his lack of preparation, we can at least appreciate how Ruihan Yu had an admirable and challenging goal and, in his own way, tried desperately hard to reach it. On April 24 this year a barnacle-encrusted rowboat, still showing the double infinity symbol and faded Stars and Stripes, gently grounded on the sand of Kunapusan Island in the Philippines. Inside was a headless body in a wetsuit. Five months after he was last spotted clinging to the upturned hull of this same craft, 5000km away to the east, Ruihan had, in the most gruesome of fashions, finally crossed an ocean. ●

Huw Kingston's book Mediterranean: A Year Around a Charmed and Troubled Sea, published by Whittles, is available from huwkingston.com