

SHIP ARREST IN CHINA (QUESTIONS 1 to 9)

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1. Please give an overview of ship arrest practice in your country.

China is one of the major maritime jurisdictions in the world. It is certainly not a ship arrest haven, but it is a convenient place to arrest a ship at reasonable costs and with relatively rapid speed.

A ship may be arrested either for the enforcement of a judgment or arbitral award, or far more frequently, for obtaining security for a maritime claim. The application can be made either before an action on the merits has been commenced or thereafter. A Chinese maritime court has jurisdiction to arrest a ship that is located within its jurisdiction even if the parties have agreed to refer the substantive claim to a foreign court or arbitral tribunal.

The law governing the arrest of ships is mainly the Maritime Procedure Law, 2000 ("MPL"). According to the MPL, to obtain an arrest order, the claimant must file with the relevant maritime court a written application together with supporting documents and a prima facie maritime claim has to be made out. More importantly, counter security will usually be required. It can be in the form of cash deposit or guarantees issued by local banks or insurance companies. The amount of the counter security is at the discretion of the court and may vary from court to court; it can be 30 days hire of the ship to be arrested or a certain percentage of the claim amount (up to the full amount).

The courts will immediately release the ship when security is posed by the respondent, which can likewise be in the form of cash deposit or guarantees issued by local banks or insurance companies or in other forms acceptable to the claimant.

2. Which International Convention applies to arrest of ships in your country?

China is not a party to the 1952 or 1999 Arrest Convention. However, Chinese law on the ship arrests is generally in line with the provisions of the 1999 Arrest Convention.

3. Is there any other way to arrest a ship in your jurisdiction?

A ship may also be arrested for a non-maritime claim; however, such an arrest will be granted only after the claimant has obtained a final and enforceable judgment or arbitral award. Furthermore, although the application for arrest may be filed with an ordinary court, the arrest shall normally be executed through a maritime court (or its superior court in appropriate cases).

4. Are these alternatives e.g. saisie conservatoire or freezing order?

Arrest of a ship is a special type of property preservation measures. Other measures include the attachment of other properties (tangible or intangible) and the freezing of bank accounts etc. These measures can be applied for alternatively or in addition to the arrest of a ship if the value of the ship to be arrested is insufficient to secure the claim.

5. For which types of claims can you arrest a ship?

The MPL lists 22 types of maritime claims which qualify for the arrest of a ship. These 22 types of claims correspond almost identically to the 22 categories of maritime claims defined in Article 1.1 of the 1999 Arrest Convention. This list has probably included almost all kinds of maritime claims that may be encountered in real life.

6. Can you arrest a ship irrespectively of her flag?

Yes. What flag a ship flies is immaterial; as long as the relevant conditions for arrest are met, the ship can be arrested.

7. Can you arrest a ship irrespectively of the debtor?

Basically, a ship can only be arrested if her owner is the debtor of a maritime claim.

However, there are essentially two exceptions. The first is related to the arrest of a ship under a bareboat charter — such a ship can be arrested if the bareboat charterer of the ship is liable for the maritime claim and is the bareboat charterer of the ship when the arrest is effected.

The second exception is related to maritime liens. In respect of claims which enjoy maritime liens, e.g. claims for crew wages, port charges, salvage, loss of life or personal injury or other claims in tort (e.g. loss of or damage to property arising from a ship collision), the ship which gave rise to the maritime liens can be arrested even if she has changed hands (i.e. in the hands of an innocent party).

8. What is the position as regards sister ships and ships in associated ownership?

Sister ships can be arrested. A “sister ship” means any ship (other than the particular ship giving rise to the maritime claim) which is owned by the ship-owner, bareboat charterer, time charterer or voyage charterer who is liable for the maritime claim. However, the arrest of sister ships is not available to claims with respect to ownership or possession of a ship.

The arrest of associated ships is not allowed, except in the very extraordinary case where the court is prepared to pierce the corporate veil and to find that the relevant companies have lost their separate corporate personalities (i.e. they are in effect one entity).

9. What is the position as regards Bareboat and Time-Chartered vessels?

As to ships under bareboat charters, please see the comments under Question 7. Time chartered ships are normally not subject to arrest.

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SHIP ARREST IN CHINA (QUESTIONS 10 to 26)

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10. Do your Courts require counter-security in order to arrest a ship?

In general, YES. According to Article 4 of the Provisions of the Supreme People's Court on Several Issues Concerning the Application of Law to the Arrest and Auction of Vessels effective as of 1st March 2015 hereinafter as Supreme Court Judicial Note on the Arrest and Auction of Vessels, where a maritime claimant applies for arrest of a vessel, the relevant maritime court shall order the maritime claimant to provide a guarantee.

However, for maritime claimants whose disputes pertain to crew labour contracts or compensation for personal injuries suffered at sea or in waters connecting the sea, the relevant maritime court may NOT request the maritime claimant to provide guarantee /counter-security, as long as the facts are clear and the relationship of rights and obligations are definite.

11. Is there any difference in respect to arresting a ship for a maritime claim and a maritime lien?

Yes. Maritime Liens are NOT extinguished by transfers of the ownership of the ship, except for those that have NOT been enforced within 60 days of a public notice on the transfer of the ownership of the ship made by a court at the request of the transferee when the transfer was effected.

Claimants with a maritime lien may only arrest the particular ship that gave rise to the maritime lien. In contrast, claimants with a maritime claim may arrest any ship of which the liable party is the owner or bareboat charterer at the time of arrest.

12. Does your country recognise maritime liens? Under which International Convention, if any?

Yes. Under Article 22 of China Maritime Code, the following five types of maritime claims give rise to maritime liens:

- (1) Claims for wages and other remuneration, crew repatriation and social insurance costs incurred by the Master, crew and other members on board;
- (2) Claims in respect of loss of life or personal injury which occurred in the operation of the ship;
- (3) Claims for ship's tonnage dues, pilotage dues, harbour dues and other port charges;
- (4) Claims for salvage payment;
- (5) Claims for loss of or damage to property resulting from tortious acts in the course of the operation of the ship.

China is not a party to any conventions on maritime liens.

13. What lapse of time is required in order to arrest a ship since the moment the file arrives to your law firm?

The key elements are Counter-Security, the notarized and legalized POA and certificate of incorporation/good-standing from a foreign party, which are most time consuming and should be considered and well prepared in advance.

It is not a problem for hardworking lawyers to prepare arrest documents, but it does take time for the courts to examine the arrest documentation, to decide on the format & amount of counter-security, and to prepare the arrest order. According to Art. 17 of the Special Maritime Procedure Law of PR China (SMPL), the maritime court, having accepted an application for ship arrest, shall make an order within 48 hours. Where the order involves ship arrest as preservation measure for the maritime claim, it shall be executed forthwith. In practice, an arrest may be ordered and executed within 48 hours in cases of urgent matter even during non-working hours.

14. Do you need to provide a POA or any other documents of the claim to the Court?

Yes, a POA is a must. In addition, Certificate of Identification of Legal Representative and Certificate of Incorporation or Certificate of Good-standing of the applicant is also requested, in practice, so as to prove that the applicant remains active. In addition, the following documents should be submitted to maritime

court:

- A written Ship Arrest Application signed and stamped by the applicant or its agent ad litem;
- Preliminary and basic evidence in support of the maritime claim;
- Original Counter-Security acceptable to the court;
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According to the Supreme Court Judicial Note on the Arrest and Auction of Vessels, the specific amount of guarantee/counter-security to be provided by a maritime claimant shall be equal to the various maintenance costs and expenses that may arise during the arrest of the vessel in question, the losses of sailing schedule due to the arrest, and the expenses incurred by the respondent concerned for the guarantee provided to lift the vessel from arrest.

Since early 2015, a couple of active domestic insurance companies in China launched a new type of insurance named Property Preservation Liability Insurance. Under such insurance policies, it is for the insurer to issue Letter of Guarantee as counter-security for the insured (claimant) to apply for preservation of property, including to apply for ship arrest.

15. What original documents are required, what documents can be filed electronically, what documents require notarisation and/or apostille, and when are they needed?

The Application for ship arrest, notarized & legalized POA and Certificate of Identification of Legal Representative and sometimes Certificate of Good-standing should be submitted in original at the time of arrest application is submitted to court. For urgent matters, however, the maritime court may consider accepting a faxed copy arrest Application and a faxed or scanned copy of signed/stamped POA/COI, provided on that the Original notarized and legalized POA and Certificate of Identification of Legal Representative and Certificate of Incorporation or Good-standing must be submitted to court by authorized PRC lawyers/agent ad litem, within the court requested time, for example, within two weeks or within one month from the date of issuance of the ship arrest order. Counter-Security must be presented in original by the applicant.

16. Will your Courts accept jurisdiction over the substantive claim once a vessel has been arrested

Yes. According to Art. 19 of SMPL, the maritime court that effected the ship arrest may go on to adjudicate the substantive merits of the claim, unless a jurisdiction agreement or arbitration agreement has been reached between the parties. According to the Supreme Court Judicial Note on the Arrest and Auction of Vessels, where the substantive merits of the claim is heard before another competent maritime court, the maritime court that arrested the vessel may continue to enforce the preservation measure/ship arrest.

17. What is the procedure to release a ship from arrest?

The ship under arrest will be released for the following reasons:

- The applicant withdraws his application for arrest;
- The respondent provides security satisfactory to the court;
- The respondent constitutes a liability limitation fund for maritime claims;
- The ship under arrest should also be released or the security provided should be returned to the respondent if the arresting party has not commenced legal proceedings or arbitration proceedings within 30 days from the arresting date.

18. What type of security needs to be placed for the release?

Parties in disputes can negotiate on the type and amount of security at any stage. The court will intervene only where the parties concerned fail to reach an agreement on the type or amount of security. In addition to cash deposit, letter of guarantee issued by a bank or insurance company or other financial institution registered within the territory of PR China is usually acceptable to court. Sometimes a Letter of Undertaking issued by International Group P&I Club may also be acceptable to the claimant.

19. Does security need to cover interest and costs?

Yes. The security amount ordered by the court usually corresponds to the arresting party's requested amount, which almost always includes bank interest and costs.

20. Are P&I LOUs accepted as sufficient to lift the arrest?

Unless agreed by the applicant, PRC courts usually do not accept letters of undertaking issued by foreign P&I Clubs. However, lawyers in China, who represent the claimant now tend to recommend their clients to accept IG P&I Club's LOU, based on the claim amount, the credibility of the Club and PRC lawyers

involved for the matter.

21. How long does it take to release the ship?

Following the provision of satisfactory security, the arrested ship is usually released within 24 hours, provided that the release application is submitted to court by the arresting party. The Release Order has to be served by the court to port authority MSA (maritime safety administration) for sailing permit.

22. Is there a procedure to contest the arrest?

Yes. If the respondents are dissatisfied with a ship arrest order, they may apply for review within 5 days after receipt thereof. The court must come to a decision within 5 days after receipt of the review application.

However, the execution of the ship arrest order will not be suspended during the period of review. Where a ship arrest is contested by an interested party, the court shall examine the objection and lift the arrest if the reasons of objection are justified.

23. Which period of time will be granted by the Courts in order for the claimants to take legal action on the merits?

A ship may be arrested in preservation of a maritime claim for a maximum of 30 days. Where a maritime claimant brings an action or applies for arbitration within the 30 days, or where a maritime claimant applies for arrest of a ship in the process of legal action or arbitration, arrest of the ship is not subject to the 30 days' time limit.

24. Do the Courts of your country acknowledge wrongful arrest?

Yes. However, wrongful arrest is seldom established in practice. There is no specific definition for wrongful arrest under Chinese law. In judicial practice, a wrongful arrest may exist where the applicant has no merit of maritime claim for ship arrest, or the owners of the ship under arrest are not liable for the maritime claim, or the amount of security demanded by the applicant is unreasonably high.

If the claimant's claim ultimately fails and the failure constitutes wrongful arrest, the respondent can bring a claim in tort against the claimant for wrongful arrest requesting compensation for losses caused thereof. Such a tort claim can be secured by the counter security provided by the claimant for ship arrest.

25. Do the Courts of your country acknowledge the piercing and lifting of the corporate veil?

Yes, piercing of the corporate veil is acknowledged by the Chinese courts, namely in Para.3, Art.20 of The Company Law of PRC, which provides that where any shareholder of a company evades debts by abusing the independent legal person status of the company or by abusing the shareholder's limited liabilities, thereby seriously prejudicing the interests of the creditors of the company, the shareholder shall be jointly and severally liable for the debts of the company.

However, no judicial interpretation has been issued by the PRC Supreme Court on how to apply this Article in specific cases. Therefore the standard of its application may vary from court to court. In judicial practice, the Chinese courts adopt a cautious attitude when applying this article, and the claimant bears the heavy burden of proving that the standard of application has been met.

26. Is it possible to have a ship sold pendente lite; if so how long does it take?

Yes. It takes at least a couple of months from the date of ship arrest for a ship to be sold pendente lite,.

If the respondent fails to provide security within the 30 days' arrest time limit, and if it is not appropriate to keep the ship under arrest, the claimant, after having brought an action or having applied for arbitration, may file an application to the maritime court which ordered the ship arrest, for judicial sale of the ship by auction (sale of a ship pendente lite). The maritime court will, after the receipt of a written application for sale of a ship, examine the application and make an order to allow or disallow the sale.

A maritime court that orders the auction of a ship must issue an announcement (public notice) in newspapers or other news media, and the period of announcement must not be less than 30 days. Where a ship needs to be auctioned off again due to the failure to reach any deal higher than reserved price in the first auction, re-auction announcements must be published seven days prior to the date of auction. After two auctions have been aborted, a ship may be sold at the selling price no less than 50% of its valuation.

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*Ms. Zhao is the Managing Partner of HiHonor law firm, she has over 20 years' experience in shipping law. She obtained her LL.B from Shanghai (ECUPL) and her LL.M from Univ. of Southampton. She had one year working experience in FD&D with leading P&I Club in London; she had three months' working experience with prominent shipping firm in Cape Town of South Africa; and practiced with other two leading P&I clubs and top international shipping firm in London in 1998. Her major practice covers all aspects of shipping law including both dry and wet, international trade law and investment. She was selected by All China Lawyers' Association as one of "The Elite PRC Lawyers of International Practice" and attended overseas training course in Spain and Brussels in 2014. Ms. Zhao is a Supporting Member of London Maritime Arbitrators' Association (LMAA); and an Arbitrator of Korean Commercial Arbitration Board.