ASIA TIMES

OPINION

When the American aircraft carrier loses its aura

Rusting hull, broken toilets and a Pattaya shore leave revealed what decades of Hollywood and US Navy publicity had carefully hidden

By HU CHAO
SEPTEMBER 4, 2026



The USS Abraham Lincoln covered in rust. Image: YouTube Screengrab

Most people around the world have probably come to know the American aircraft carrier in much the same way: through US Navy publicity films, Hollywood blockbusters, television news and political debates.

For decades, these images taught us what an American carrier was supposed to look like — and, perhaps more importantly, what we were supposed to feel, and to fear, when one appeared. This time, the cameras kept rolling after the heroic image should probably have ended.



The USS Abraham Lincoln arrived in Thailand on September 2 after more than eight months on deployment, much of it literally at sea. The carrier had spent much of that time supporting US combat operations against Iran.

Its roughly 5,000 crew members finally had the opportunity to go ashore. Many headed for nearby Pattaya, the Thai beach town notorious for its red lights. By then, however, another picture of the carrier had already been circulating.

Families of sailors had reported food shortages, broken toilets, moldy showers and water contamination during the prolonged deployment. Photographs of the enormous hull showed streaks of rust.

Then came Thailand: thousands of sailors finally leaving the ship for shopping, food, drink and the nightlife of Pattaya, a city whose international reputation as an R&R destination was itself partly created by American servicemen during the Vietnam War.

From major newspapers and television networks to the endless feeds of social media, the world was suddenly seeing the American supercarrier almost with the naked eye. Captain America had somehow disappeared from the picture. The brighter the old image had been made to shine, the more glaring the rust now appeared.

I am not a paparazzo. Unlike some international reporters, I have no particular desire to follow American sailors into Pattaya's go-go bars to investigate what happened next. To remain euphemistically polite, readers interested in the details of what awaited them there may consult the BBC.

The sailors themselves deserve no ridicule. After so long at sea, they deserved their rest. What interests me is what had already happened to the image.

Try to imagine Captain America, shield still in hand, emerging somewhat unsteadily from a Pattaya go-go bar. Americans themselves might have no difficulty accepting that even heroes are ordinary human beings who need to eat, drink, sleep, use a functioning toilet and occasionally have a night off.



Reynolds Mixers

Minimize Batch Cycle Tir

We value the relationships and trust we bı
with our clients & work hard to keep them

But this is not the visual memory that decades of Hollywood, military publicity and political theater taught much of the rest of the world. Captain America was supposed to arrive with his uniform immaculate, his muscles tightened and his shield held at the proper angle.

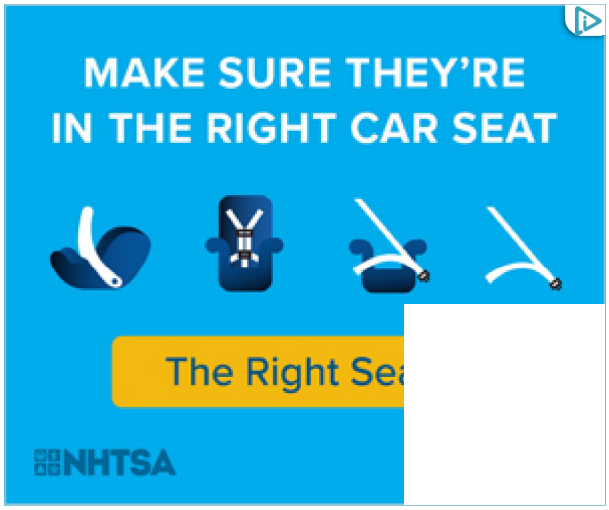
The aircraft carrier belonged to much the same visual world. As an art historian who works with visual culture, I am interested in how remarkably consistent its images have been. Fighter jets roar from the flight

deck. Sailors stand in formation.

The enormous ship cuts through a perfect blue ocean while escort vessels arrange themselves around it in geometrical order. The carrier is almost always given the distance it needs. And that distance turns machinery into monument.

A submarine becomes more dangerous by disappearing. A missile can wait unseen in a silo. An aircraft carrier announces itself. It is enormous, expensive and deliberately visible. It turns abstract military power into a physical object that can be photographed, filmed and sent across the world.

For much of the postwar era, American military superiority, political theater, television and Hollywood reinforced one another so successfully that the supercarrier became one of the most immediately recognizable images of national power on earth. It became a kind of Mount Rushmore at sea.



And Mount Rushmore is not supposed to stumble out of a go-go bar.
Monuments work best from the proper distance. Look too closely, and the image becomes less simple.

This is particularly important for an aircraft carrier because it carries more than aircraft. Its appearance carries an expectation about how the person looking at it should respond. Awe is part of the machinery. So is fear.

Shortly before the USS Abraham Lincoln reached Thailand, a US Navy P-8A Poseidon flew through the Taiwan Strait. The Seventh Fleet said the transit demonstrated America's commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific" and repeated that the US military "flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows."

Operations like this are announced publicly because presence must be visible if it is to become a political signal. I understand that signal perfectly well. I simply find it increasingly difficult to feel its intended

effect.

This is not because the aircraft carrier has suddenly become militarily irrelevant. The Lincoln itself has just demonstrated the opposite. It sustained months of operations at extraordinary distance, supported combat operations against Iran and kept thousands of people and dozens of aircraft functioning through an exceptionally long deployment. As a machine of war and military organization, it remains formidable.



But being formidable and looking almighty are not quite the same thing.
Even the language surrounding the ship reveals something about the grandeur attached to it. In Chinese, an aircraft carrier is hangkong mujian (航空母舰) — something like the “Mothership of Navy and Air Force,” a union of naval and air power in a single name.

The English “aircraft carrier” sounds logistically uncool and almost comically mundane by comparison, especially when the words themselves are so strangely unpompous: a carrier carries things, while craft can be something made by hand.

Read too literally, the mightiest warship in the world begins to sound like a mule carrying a load of little wooden birds made by a folk craftsman. Chinese has somehow given the American warship an additional layer of grandeur in translation. Yet even linguistic assistance cannot protect an image forever.

This is what makes the Lincoln episode interesting to me. Rust by itself means almost nothing. Ships rust. Broken toilets do not change the balance of naval power. Food shortages do not make fighter jets stop flying. Sailors needing a shower and a night ashore is hardly evidence of imperial decline. Nor does a visit to Pattaya make the carrier’s aircraft any less lethal.

But images accumulate. The rust matters because the ship was supposed to gleam. The toilet stories matter because the floating city was supposed to look almighty. The shortages matter because abundance is part of the visual language of power.



Treefrog Treasures

Mcdonnell Douglas F-15A Eagle - 5th Fig Interceptor Squadron "Spittin Kittens," Tactical Air Command, USAF, Minot AFB, North Dakota, 1985

The exhausted sailors matter because military spectacle normally turns thousands of ordinary human beings into disciplined figures arranged across a flight deck. And Pattaya matters because, after all those other images, the camera finally followed those human beings all the way out of the monument.

The sublime and the ridiculous suddenly found themselves uncomfortably close.
The United States can still decide where an aircraft carrier sails, what aircraft it carries and, when necessary, what targets those aircraft attack.

What it cannot control quite so completely is what happens to the image once it enters everybody else's screens. The object can still arrive exactly where Washington intends but the feeling does not necessarily arrive with it.

Awe requires distance. Get close enough to almost any monument, particularly military ones, and eventually you find rust, bad plumbing and tired people who would rather be somewhere else.

Pattaya alone did not destroy the aura of the American aircraft carrier. That would give a Thai resort town far too much geopolitical responsibility. The erosion has been slower and much less dramatic.

But after the rust, the shortages, the overflowing toilets, the moldy showers and the exhausted human bodies, the sight of thousands of sailors finally heading into the neon lights felt like the last straw.

Hu Chao is a Singaporean art historian and curator based in Guangzhou, China. His research focuses on the intersection of material culture, technology, and geopolitics in Asia.



William Tang

September 15, 2026 at 12:13 AM

The king is dead, long live the king.

Log in to Reply



Bilejones

September 8, 2026 at 10:14 PM

What sort of mental and moral cripple do you have to be to sign up to murder people half way around the world because some piece of political filth in Washington says so?