

Sailing on a Neoliberal Sea: Multinational Seafarers on Container Ships

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Abstract

Containerization has revolutionized not only shipping, including its operation, organization and productivity, but also the economic geography of production, trade and consumption since the late 1950s. After the economic crises in the 1970s, the incessant neoliberal quest by shipping businesses has also “containerized” seafarers, the vanguard transport workers at the core of economic globalization. Working at sea for their livelihood at home is a moral dilemma that entraps seafarers in the second-best choice, leaving them with virtually no alternatives. Restricted contact with home, denial of shore leave, lowered manning scales and single-person tasking have all exacerbated the sense of isolation at sea. Subject to constant loading, unloading and reloading of their bodies, seafarers of different nationalities are drifting in the market until they leave the industry or until they are finally scrapped. The exigencies of the neoliberal system, as manifested in industrial discipline and allied networks of control, enforce relative harmony among nationalities on board. This research on seafarers challenges the logic of area studies in social sciences and, at the same time, permits rethinking of the vastly facilitated mobility of our times.

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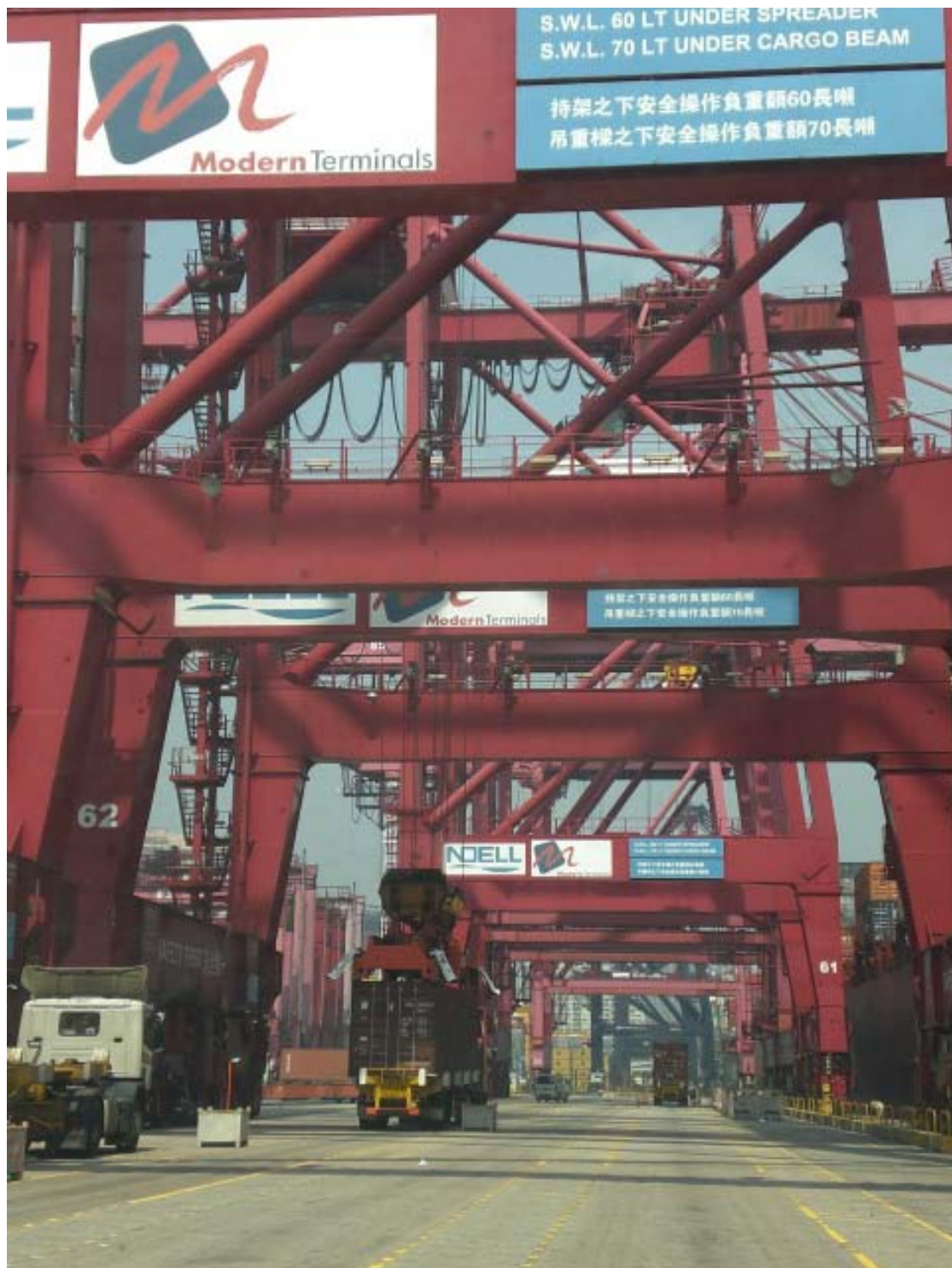


Photo 1: Port cranes for loading and unloading of containers between ships and trucks at the Hong Kong Kwai Tsing Container Terminals, 7 October 2007

Introduction

Ninety per cent of world trade is conveyed by the international shipping industry, of which ocean-going container ships are responsible for carrying most of the manufactured goods and products that we consume on a daily basis. On board these gigantic container vessels in the labyrinth of international trade are navigators, engineers and caterers. They are predominantly male seafarers, otherwise known as merchant mariners or seamen, of virtually every nationality (The Round Table of International Shipping Associations 2010b).² Seafaring and shipping are some of the most globalized industries in the world, as the Maritime Knowledge Centre of the International Maritime Organization, a United Nations specialized agency, illustrates in its publication *International Shipping and World Trade: Facts and Figures* (2008: 26):

Shipping is perhaps the most international of all the world's great industries. The ownership and management chain surrounding any particular vessel can embrace many different countries; it is not unusual to find that the owners, operators, shippers, charterers, insurers and the classification society, not to mention the officers and crew, are all of different nationalities and that none of these is from the country whose flag flies at the ship's stern.

Notwithstanding its economic significance, the shipping industry has a relatively low public profile. The name "seafarers" seldom hits the headlines with the exception of Somali piracy.³ I started this research to reveal the life of these industrial workers and over four years, conducted fieldwork in the Hong Kong Kwai Tsing Container Terminals, one of the busiest container ports in the world, which handled over 16 million TEUs (Twenty Foot Equivalent Unit) in 2006 (Hong Kong Shipowners Association 2007: 25).⁴ Further interviews were carried out with off-duty and retired seafarers, staff and representatives of ship owners, seafarers and other shipping organizations, vendors at the ports, students from maritime education and training institutes, and seafarers and staff at seafarer centres.

The Revolutionary Box Boat

Since antiquity, sea transport has been a part of human history. The use of "boxes" to contain shipments has also existed for millennia. The modern container is, however, an invention in the second half of the 20th century, when the design of

² Female seafarers constitute 1-2% of the global seafaring population. 94% of them work on passenger ships and only 6% on cargo vessels (International Labour Organization 2003). For simplicity's sake, seafarers in this article refer to male seafarers.

³ Towards the end of this research, piracy off the coast of Somalia had already raised international alarm. Since the early 21st century, the seas off the African coast have been plagued by piracy because of complex reasons of upheaval in Somalia, with internal economic, political unrest and environmental destruction by foreign vessels etc.

⁴ "TEU" stands for "Twenty Foot Equivalent Unit." It is an international measurement unit for the trade volume of containers and it represents the standard twenty-foot container (Hong Kong Shipowners Association 2007: 36). Complementary fieldwork around port areas was done in the Embarcadero of San Francisco, the United States in November 2008 and the port of Kaohsiung, Taiwan in December 2008.

Malcolm McLean went international. After a period of initial adjustments, break-bulk cargo of liner trade was unitized⁵; vessels and ports were purpose-built; interchangeability between modes of transportation in intra- and intercontinental shipping was developed.⁶ Containerization since the late 1960s has revolutionized not only shipping, including its operation, organization and productivity, but also the economic geography of production, trade and consumption (Levinson 2006). After the Second World War, dismantlement of trade barriers has helped create a global economy with unprecedented integration and exchange, and with it, growing international trade and freight rates. Rising world population and demand, and continuous techno-economic developments have all provided the shipping industry with a long-standing impetus.

A typical container ship functions through departmental administration. The three departments, deck, engineering and catering, specialize in their scopes of operation and are internally hierarchical. Seafarers in the hierarchy are ranked as officers and ratings. Officers are licensed, qualified seafarers holding senior job positions, while ratings are unlicensed, qualified seafarers holding junior job positions. To ensure that the ship in operation plies for long durations of voyages, most seafarers work by a shift system called “watch keeping,” under which each seafarer is assigned regular periods of duty within a day, separated by regular off-duty periods to “recharge” themselves. An officer on watch, for instance, may be navigating on the bridge all by himself for hours before he is let off-duty and another seafarer takes his place. Single-person tasking is common and many seafarers return to their individual cabins after hours of demanding work. All crewmembers take shifts around the clock on board so that enough hands are always available when needed. Although the work patterns of the catering department are usually different from the other two departments, nearly all seafarers eat, work and sleep in a very routine manner.⁷

Table 1 is the crew list of a Liberian-flagged ship operated by a Korean shipping line and berthed at Hong Kong Kwai Tsing Container Terminals on 14 August 2006. It is not representative of all container vessels but it exemplifies the typical hierarchy on board. Part of the list is made blank to conceal the identities of the seafarers and the shipping company. The distribution of nationalities over different job ranks is also

⁵ Cargo can be categorized into bulk and non-bulk. Bulk cargo is homogenous and, by definition, bulk in size e.g. iron ore, coal and sand. These are usually raw materials and semi-manufactures while break-bulk cargo, as a type of non-bulk cargo, is usually packed and can be handled individually (Hong Kong Shipowners Association 2007: 33). Today, break-bulk cargo is almost non-existent due to containerization of general cargo which is usually semi-manufactures and manufactures. Other than container ships and bulk carriers, merchant vessels also come in a variety of forms: tankers, cruise ships, fishing vessels etc. depending on the type of shipments they carry.

⁶ The modern truck-size container is made of metal with two common ISO sizes: 20-feet and 40-feet. The standardized, intermodal container among rail, trucks and ships is sealed in transit. The introduction of the container to the shipping industry was slow at the beginning due to large-scale infrastructural modifications and resistance from labour unions etc. But its great cost-effectiveness proved its expansion inexorable (Levinson 2006). “Containers brought convenience, speed and other advantages. Previously, there were all sorts of loading problems. For example, the weight of a box had to be balanced. If not, they would topple,” said a Danish ex-seafarer. Before the age of containerization, cargo loading and unloading was done mostly by longshoremen by hand. It was time-consuming, costly and labourious with a high rate of wastage.

⁷ The introduction of automated machinery spaces has freed many engineers from keeping watch. Yet, they are still required to carry out day-working complement and residuary maintenance in most cases (Alderton et. al. 2004: 23).

shown in the list: among the 25 seafarers, 20 (80%) are Filipinos, 2 (8%) are Germans, 1 (4%) is Austrian, 1 (4%) is Polish and 1 (4%) is Ukrainian. All ratings i.e. Bosun, Fitter, AB, OS, Oiler, Wiper, Chief Cook, Steward and Messman are Filipinos. The officers and the ratings, respectively, make up 32% and 68% of the whole crew. At a mariners' centre, a group of seafarers described their route to their designated ship: "I guess we just arrived here in Hong Kong at 10:30 in the morning. The company gave us air-tickets to fly to Hong Kong, where we would board our ship to work. The agents picked us up and drove us from the airport to the ship, and dealt with immigration." Foreign seafarers are often brought together in this way to board the ship that their employers assign for them. As a new crewmember introduces himself to his teammates, he becomes incorporated into the team and goes to his sentry post as the ship sails away. He works, lives and socializes with his co-workers in the same shipboard space for weeks or months on end before he finally signs off or goes on another voyage.

		2. Port of Arrival/ Departure		3. Dates of Arrival/ Departure	
		Pusan		14.08.2006	
4. Nationality of Ship		5. Port Arrived From		6. Nature and No. of Identity Document	
Liberia		Xingang			
7. No.	8. Family Name; Given Name	9. Rank or Rating	10. Nationality	11. Date and place birth	Passport
1	(Concealed to preserve confidentiality)	Master	German	(Concealed to preserve confidentiality)	(Concealed to preserve confidentiality)
2		Chief Offc.	Polish		
3		2nd Offc.	Filipino		
4		3rd Offc.	Filipino		
5		Chief Eng.	Austrian		
6		2nd Eng.	German		
7		3rd Eng.	Filipino		
8		ETO	Ukrainian		
9		Bosun	Filipino		
10		Fitter	Filipino		
11		AB	Filipino		
12		AB	Filipino		
13		AB	Filipino		
14		AB	Filipino		
15		OS	Filipino		
16		OS	Filipino		
17		OS	Filipino		
18		Oiler	Filipino		
19		Oiler	Filipino		
20		Oiler	Filipino		
21		Wiper	Filipino		
21		Wiper	Filipino		
23		Ch.Cook	Filipino		
24		Steward	Filipino		
25		Messman	Filipino		

Table 1: Occupational hierarchy on board a Liberian-flagged ship at the Kwai Tsing Container Terminals on 14 August, 2006.

The International Labour Market

For the majority of maritime history, seafarers set off as nationals on their nationally-owned ships, flying their national flags. During their voyages, these national crews would probably mix with new recruits from different ports and become polyglot:

Even where nineteenth-century ships set sail with single nationality complements, crewmembers that became sick or injured, who died or who simply signed off, were frequently replaced with whoever was available in foreign ports, regardless of nationality. Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of polyglot crews in international shipping since the fifteenth century . . . it is only since the 1980s that modern-day practices of international recruitment came to be formalized on a world scale (Alderton et. al. 2004: 96).

The shipping industry stumbled during the 1970s because, “a slump in world trade and a glut of ships produced a spate of intense competition and the inevitable accompanying drive to cut costs” (*ibid.*: 2). A British spokesperson for a ship owner organization, who was a former seafarer, recounted the restructuring process of the international shipping industry:

The seafaring life continues to change. I was at sea in the 1960s. And when I was at sea, we had a shortage of seafarers. In the 1960s, early 1970s, I was led on one ship by a second mate with a broken leg. He had to be lifted onto the ship by crane. The guy came to the sea with such labour shortage. . . . And then we went through a period of contraction of the industry, from the early 1970s and right until the 1980s. . . . We had a lot of seafarers in the old days. And when the great contraction came, a lot of people had to come to shore. I was one of them who went to shore. . . . And then when the market started picking up again, we found many other seafarers being employed from Eastern Europe and Asia. . . . Of course we went through many years of low liquidity. Very, very difficult business. Extremely difficult period. And because of that, we really had to look for any saving we could. We became very, very cost-orientated. As we always grumped and mumbled, the accountants were running the business and they were looking at every penny that had been spent. Under great cost pressures and since the industry was not earning any money, we started seeing crews being employed more from Asia because they were cheaper. Ship managers, crewing managers would look at any crew source that could be cheaper, because cost was so important. And if you didn't have cost control, you were out of business.

As shipping businesses competed to survive and thrive in the recession, they looked for solutions to cut their production costs under the umbrella of economic democracy and neoliberalism.⁸ One of these solutions was to outsource shipping

⁸ Government withdrawal from active intervention in the market has been identified as following the principle of “neoliberalism” which can be defined as “an ideology emphasizing the market as the ultimate arbiter of value, and advocating minimal restriction of the market by the state” (Mathews 2008: 18).

management to third parties who, through networks of manning agencies, assisted them in the recruitment of cheaper, qualified seafarers from unfamiliar regions of the world.⁹ Another one was flagging out their ships to flag-of-convenience (FOC) states and second registers in order to avoid stringent regulatory regimes of primary registers such as taxation, maintenance and crewing requirements.¹⁰ These business practices compelled others to follow suit if they were not to incur economic disadvantages. As a result, the supply of laborers from embedded maritime countries is surpassed by an inflow of people from developing countries including Asia and Eastern Europe, leading to the formation of an international labour market. In fact, “nearly 150 nationalities are recorded on seafarers’ supply lists. Over 40 per cent come from the Far East, 30 per cent from Eastern Europe, over 10 per cent from South Asia and the Middle East, while the traditional maritime countries contribute 13 percent” (Wu 2002). As listed in the following table (Ellis and Sampson 2008: 23), the top 10 nationalities working on general cargo or container ships are:

Rank Order	Nationality	Percent
1	Philippines	23.9%
2	Russia	9.3%
3	Ukraine	8.0%
4	China	4.9%
5	India	4.8%
6	Turkey	4.5%
7	Indonesia	4.1%
8	Poland	4.0%
9	Myanmar	3.2%
10	Germany	2.2%
	Other (n=102)	31.0%
	Total	100%

Table 2: Percentage of nationals working aboard general cargo ships (Ellis and Sampson 2008: 23).

Although the role of states in business operations can never be neglected in reality, the essence of neoliberalism holds in today’s world and it is well exemplified by the shipping business: in a global market that is venerated as the ultimate arbiter of value, ship owners and shipping operators flexibly extract and deploy their business capital on an international scale to their best advantage.

⁹ To sustain the stability of the labour market, specialist ship-management companies establish connections with labour supplying countries, often reaching to their MET institutes and sometimes involving themselves in the training of officers and ratings. (Alderton et. al. 2004: 21).

¹⁰ Each ship flies a flag known as a civil ensign, which denotes its country of registration i.e. flag state. Theoretically, the ship operates under the laws of the flag state and international maritime conventions that the state has ratified. Based on both internal and external factors, flag states outline their own maritime laws and exercise various degrees of stringency in their administration. This phenomenon leaves room for ship owners to register under flags that they see as most economically favorable. Nowadays, the flag of a ship does not act as an indicator of the crew composition on board, nor does it correlate with the nationality of the ship owner or operator. “It’s not about national pride, it’s just about money. When it’s no longer profitable to run under a flag, ship owners change to another one,” said an Austrian spokesperson for seafarers. According to this informant, the ship flag is nothing more than a symbol of economic immediacies that is not relevant to seafarers’ identities. The linkage of a ship’s flag to its ownership is opaque, causing considerable difficulties in jurisdiction. To counteract the FOC, some States have created second registers with relaxed regulations to recapture registry (Alderton et. al. 2004: 29).

When compared with the aforementioned polyglot crews, a unique idiosyncrasy of today's mixed-nationality crewing is its conscious formulation. Practically, the development of mass transportation has also made the movement of people easier and less costly. Nowadays, it is common to find an ocean-going container ship flying a foreign flag, and manpowered by temporal, contract-based people of different nationalities. The exact permutation of seafarers on board is neither totally random nor simply imperialist, but an outcome of managerial preferences, colonial heritage, nationalism and other environmental factors. In general, seafarers are educated and trained in their home countries, and assembled internationally through networks of agencies and management companies to work on board.

Containerized Sailors



Photo 2: Stacks of containers lashed on the deck of a ship at the Hong Kong Kwai Tsing Container Terminals, 4 September 2008.

Although isolation has always been a key feature of the sea life, I argue that the process of containerization has “containerized” seafarers and exacerbated their isolation. It is by working in the globalized industry that this vanguard of transport workers is de-globalized from much of the to-and-fro of the world.

To begin with, ports, which are the bridging zones between ships and the larger shore world, have their landscape, locations and nature altered under containerization. Traditional ports such as San Francisco Bay were once hubs of commercial activities

and shore-ship interactions. Their positions were overtaken as their infrastructure became obsolete in the face of new technologies. Ports were relocated and new ports were built in metropolises around the globe, which were usually hinterlands with plenty of waterfront areas privatized for infrastructure and storage of containers. Given the progress in shipbuilding and design, faster and bigger ships that are built but left idle mean wasting money; the need to reduce time cost in seamless intermodal transportation is vital for businesses. "Ships are technically sophisticated, high value assets (larger hi-tech vessels can cost over US \$150 million to build), and the operation of merchant ships generates an estimated annual income of over US \$380 billion in freight rates, representing about 5% of the total global economy" (The Round Table of International Shipping Associations 2010a). Other logistic developments such as just-in-time inventory control and door-to-door delivery have also drastically reduced turnaround time. From days to hours at port, berthing time is one of the busiest times for seafaring work:¹¹

On top of the normal everyday routine work on board for all crew members, there is also additional work that has to be undertaken in port, mainly by senior officers. This includes dealing with visitors (including immigration and customs officers, PSC [Port State Control] inspectors, cargo surveyors, flag states and class surveyors), loading/unloading cargo, lashing and unlashng cargo, dealing with cargo plans, bunkering, crew changes, taking stores as well as the many additional engine and maintenance tasks that can only be done while the ship is stationary and in port (Alderton et. al. 2004: 106).

The important responsibility of regulating incoming vessels is handed over to the port states. On top of the time pressure for transshipping, seafarers are obliged to fulfill the requirements of port security. Port state controls possess the rights to make unannounced inspections on board, cite a ship for deficiencies and detain it until rectifications are made. Influenced by the events of 9-11, the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS) came into effect on 1 July 2004 to improve maritime security. On the negative side, it has burdened many seafarers with more procedural routines. Some nationalities have even been stigmatized as "more dangerous," especially those who are Muslim. A Hong Kong seafarer commented, "We may understand the virtues and necessities of this kind of convention. But with extra paperwork, sometimes the pressures are high, as it makes us focus too much on minute details. We shoulder a mission to protect the world but are at the same time treated as potential terrorists."

One may also assume that the advancement of communications technology has enabled seafarers to keep in touch with their friends and relatives. Indeed, telegraph fax, Global Positioning System, electronic distress and safety communications known as GMDSS (the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System), Inmarsat (the International Mobile Satellite Organization) have all enhanced the communication between the ship

¹¹ The ship as a technological means of transportation also carries its operators on board. Today, notions such as "working on ocean-going ships takes you around the world" and "seafaring is a career which enables you to travel" are still marketed as an attraction by some recruiters. Mass transportation, tourism and mass media are, however, disenchanting this romanticisation. Those who are employed in the seafaring industry also found out soon that restricted shore leave is a reality that all nationalities face.

and management on shore.¹² Yet, satellite phone calls with home are not affordable for most seafarers. "Satellite is very expensive. We can't use it normally. In case of emergency at home, the company will send you a telegram. Then you ask the captain for permission to make a contact home by satellite. He may or may not allow you to do so, though," said a Russian seafarer, explaining how news from home would pass through bureaucracies. Internet services, which have compressed and distanced time-space horizons of many shore-based people (see Inada and Rosaldo 2002), are also not readily available at sea and, if provided, are often restricted to administrative and officers' use. A Polish seafarer told me:

I use the Internet mostly when I go on shore, if it is available there. In that case, I don't need to worry about the captain or my company reading my mails. We had Internet connections on my last voyage but the computers are public. I prefer to use my personal phone to send text messages to my family and friends since it is more private and it is not so expensive.

Many seafarers can afford mobile phones and the rates for long-distance phone calls are less expensive than before. Still, there is only network coverage near coastal areas but usually not out at sea. The aim of increasing profit margins, mechanization, automation, integration technology in the shipping industry, and the subsequent productivity gains through capital substitution have led to reduced manning scales and changed shipboard structures.¹³ This further limits seafarers' socialisation opportunities. Working and living on board, seafarers are constantly disciplined: all crewmembers are under the supervision of the captain, who acts as a representative for their employer. Communication channels, including oral reporting, regular meetings, and walkie-talkie conversations, follow chains of command along the shipboard hierarchy. Nationality and job position, instead of personal name, are common references used to identify and address people on board. When a job position is called upon, a hierarchy is implied. The higher-ranked seafarers supervise the lower ranked ones and all workers are supervised by shipping management. A ship in this way constitutes an integrated system of power, as a port vendor revealed:

Captains write reports on individual seafarers as records for their companies. These records are crucial in determining their career prospects. Once a seafarer receives bad comments from the captain, he may be blacklisted by the company and would need to change his employer. So onboard performance is important. Now promotion is

¹² Satellite communications were first introduced to the shipping industry in the late 1970s. Inmarsat was formerly established by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as the International Maritime Satellite Organization but was later privatized and listed on the market (Alderton et. al. 2004: 96).

¹³ One significant change brought by automation is the automated engine room. An ex-engineer who had worked in the shipping industry from 1975 to 1987 said, "At the later times of my employment, we already had automated ships with unattended machinery space. They called it UMS. For these ships, engineers worked together during the daytime. After 5 p.m., the alarm panels were switched to our own rooms. Of course we needed to go downstairs and patrol sometimes, for example, before we went to bed. If anything happened when we were sleeping, the alarms went directly to our rooms and we arrived at the engine room to fix the problems." The bridge also evolved from the traditional wheelhouse to an electronic control centre for all the main shipboard functions, from monitoring the cargo and engine conditions to weather forecast. From then on, scientific management of shipboard equipment became a basic requirement for contemporary seafarers, a significant component of their seamanship.

different from the past. It is more difficult. They usually have to graduate from maritime schools and apply for licenses. The decision on whether one can be promoted also depends very much on the seafarer's skill in managing affairs, both technical and social. This is true with regard to today's labour market. As the pool of labour is large in countries like the Philippines and the competition is high, only those "high-quality" seafarers, for example, friendly guys causing no disturbances to onboard operation, can join and continue to work in the seafaring industry.

As each worker is measured by his job performance, a common ground for personal comparison across nationalities is formed. Each subordinate becomes describable and analysable in the captain's report. The results of examined seafarer bodies are useful to management, as they indicate their use values. Non-docile workers can therefore be punished and differentiated from docile ones. Through their internalisation, the result is collective obedience by multinational seafarers (see Foucault 1977). As a Ukrainian seafarer said, "the captains are observing us: how we are doing our jobs. That's why we have to work hard. They are doing some evaluations. They are giving us grades for that and the grades will be passed to our company. And then our company will have to decide whether to promote us to a higher position." Maintaining working qualities with a good attitude and without making significant mistakes is important. Obedience at work does not necessarily mean that seafarers like to be amenable per se, but it can be a strategy to secure continuous employment and enhance one's chances of promotion in the face of a competitive labour market.

Shipboard alienation can cause seafarers to suffer from both claustrophobia with a small number of shipmates and agoraphobia on the open oceans.¹⁴ On some of the so-called "finest" container ships, seafarers described themselves as living in "a prison," or "a prison with nice facilities."¹⁵ Although ship owners and operators are increasingly aware of the need to maintain the morale of the crews in order to guarantee productivity, reduce accidents and retain qualified seafarers, the sense of entrapment that the sea life entails is overarching.

¹⁴ Some believe that seafarers work at sea to get away from the encumbrances of shore life, usually with visions of sea adventures. But this is usually not the case for seafarers with financial needs for themselves and their families are urgent, who make up the major seafaring workforce nowadays. Although some seafarers do appreciate experiencing changes of the sky, sea surface, as well as voyages and shipboard amenities, many of them have gotten used to these. Weather is often not something to be appreciated, but endured. As a Croatian seafarer said, "The waves were high and we needed to work at the same time. You spent more energy then. When there were stormy waves, I get tired. I needed to do the daily routine while spending energy to deal with the bad weather." Seafarers said they had to be prepared for occupational hazards and harsh conditions such as sailing in typhoons, under a snowing sky, through rough seas and other extreme physical conditions as well as emergencies such as piracy, in addition to the long-term separation from the shore and their families.

¹⁵ Most seafarers agree that the standard of facilities on board has improved over the decades: from housing in the forecastles to one-person cabins with independent showers and toilets, from boilers manipulated by shovels and muscles to remote-controlled and computerized engine rooms (Kaukiainen 1993: 164). The improvement of amenity standards, e.g. soundproof cabins and the provision of air-conditioning on many ships was generally regarded by my informants as an advantage of shipping development. Modern ships are furnished with recreational facilities that supposedly serve social needs. However, heavier workloads and duty shifts of the reduced-size crew mean that seafarers often do not have enough opportunities, time and energy to utilize these facilities. The sealed cabin compartment further limits socialization among coworkers while facilitating the management on board.

Breadwinners Away from Home

Seafarers performing the same job and of the same job rank are paid different wages according to their nationality, or more precisely, their citizenship at the time of their enrolment. Nash and Fernandez-Kelly (1983: ix) write, “the advantages afforded by large international wage differentials are as important, from the point of view of industry, as the capacity to achieve increased control over workers and to counter demands for higher wages and so-called fringe benefits.” Through multinational crewing with international wage differentials, shipping management attains the benefits of sourcing the most economically competitive labour. When asked if he was facing any competition from other nationalities, a Filipino cadet said, “Yes, China. But also India. There’s a competition from Chinese because they have a lower salary than we do. We can get around 500 dollars.¹⁶ They get around 150 dollars.” Multinational seafarers are aware that being paid on different wage levels, no one can ever be altogether secure in employment.¹⁷ And since most seafarers are contract-based, those who are no longer considered as seaworthy do not receive a renewal of their contracts. A Taiwanese seafarer said:

A lot of us seamen are employed contract by contract, despite the fact that some of us are working for the same companies again and again. My contract, for example, has been renewed in the past couple of years. I have good records in the company and I am qualified. But I am getting old. I am afraid that my company will stop renewing my contract one day and replace me with a cheaper crewman from another country.

Such precarious employment deprives many seafarers of job security, but there is little they can do to change the situation. An Austrian working for the welfare of seafarers pointed out:

There are generally good wages for seafarers. But labour is still exploited by agents; some seafarers need to pay a whole month’s salary to their agents to pay commission owed upon successful employment. Seafarers recruited by agents are usually on a contractual base; agents want short contracts so that they can earn money each time a seafarer signs up. Some

¹⁶ Dollars in this article are in U.S. Dollars.

¹⁷ Not only are seafarers paid differently, the terms of their contractual employments are also different. A German engineer admitted, “I have one month working and another whole month on holiday. The company is the best out there. This is different from the Filipinos. For example, they work for nine months before they have the holiday. We have two systems. . . . Yes, it’s unfair.” On the surface, it may seem that seafarers from developing countries are more exploited since their contracts last longer and so they have to spend longer periods at sea. But the issue is more complicated than that. For example, the Filipinos mentioned above requested prolonging their contracts in order to earn more income. When a German seafarer and a Filipino of the same job rank carry out the same job responsibilities, the former usually earns more than the latter in an absolute sense. But in the relative sense, as compared with their counterparts in their home countries, “a Filipino chief mate can have a gardener, a domestic helper and a car at his house. A German captain may not be able to do so,” said a person in charge of a seafarer organization. At a separate interview, a Filipino seafarer emphasized that currency differences and exchange rates needed to be addressed in considering the different wage levels payable to seafarers of different nationalities. It is not only the absolute amounts of wages that are determinant in evaluating the labor conditions of employees in this international industry.

seafarers who break the rules are blacklisted and also have their information passed onto other agents who cooperate to get rid of disobedient seafarers. Shipping companies, however, want to keep the agents as it saves recruiting costs and because agents can offer them cheap labour as well.

In this regard, Whitfield (2007) also discusses the lack of official support for seafarers:

To whom can they turn? The flag state? Not very likely, given the money it earns from shipping companies. Their own country? Even if there is some form of representation in the foreign port, it is going to be a long bureaucratic process. The port state? Its main interest will be in collecting port dues and moving the vessel on. The ship owner's own country of residence? The system is designed to disguise its identity. The crewing agency, which the seafarer may have paid in order to get the job in the first place? A risky strategy, as the seafarer could be blacklisted – and never get another job.¹⁸

One may be forced to conclude that the job nature of seafaring is not very appealing to many people. But its wages can still bring much upward socioeconomic mobility for people who make up the major sources of labor in the industry. A Filipino seafarer said during an interview:

It would be hard to deny that seafaring has a high salary, a very high salary. As a cadet we have around 500 dollars per month. Those 500 dollars are already much if you spend it in the Philippines. But if you talk about the salary of the chief engineer, each month about 10,000 dollars. That's a lot of money for us to live on in the Philippines.

Filipinos, the largest nationality group in the industry, have one common reason to work at sea: to support their families. The job search, learning the job, collecting funds for enrolment in maritime education and training, and contacting crewing agencies, is a process that often takes years to finish. It is clear that these seafaring applicants invest time, energy and money in the hope of earning the higher wages offered by seafaring jobs, and change their families' economic conditions. A Filipino seafarer detailed:

On the father's side of my family, there are eleven people. He has 10 siblings: 3 sisters and 7 brothers. All of them are fishermen. That's why when I was young, when I was just 5 year-old, they wanted me to be a fisherman. . . . But I found a way to change that kind of lifestyle. I didn't want to be a fisherman for all of my life. That's why I have to make a change and become a seafarer. . . . But it's an advantage to me that my family members are fishermen as I know how to swim. Every time I go on

¹⁸ International bodies such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) have been working for the welfare of seafarers. However, the world-wide scale of the industry poses challenges to its regulation.

board and then to the sea, I am not scared. . . . We came from a very poor family though.

Filipino seafarers' remittances make important contributions to their national economy, accounting for as much as 10% of the total overseas Filipino workers' remittances (Evangelista 2002). For a Filipino seafarer (and many other nationalities as well), a minimum 80% of his wage is remitted to a bank account in the Philippines. There are very few opportunities for seafarers to spend money on board, as their food and accommodation are provided for. Most of the money earned by Filipino seafarers goes directly to their families. Filipino seafarers together with other overseas Filipino workers are acclaimed by their government. In his working paper entitled "At Home on the Move: Filipino Seafarers and the Making of a Transnational Ethnic Niche," McKay (2004: 2) points out that "the Philippine state . . . in its attempt to harness the resources of the Diaspora, has helped construct the Filipino seafarer as both pliant cheap labour and nationalist hero." The Filipino seafarers are portrayed as "cheap labour" to attract more foreign shipping companies to employ them, which helps relieve the unemployment issues in the Philippines and bring in foreign currency. Filipinos are also employed for their marketable seafaring qualities, skill including English proficiency, marine and technical experience.

Aside from Filipinos, many contemporary seafarers' major motivation to work in the industry is quite different from that of seafarers in the early stages of containerization. According to Sherar (1973: 15), American seafarers, for example, were sociologically marginal people who could seek psychological job security and satisfaction in their occupational choice. As she writes, these seafarers "tend to be lonely people, many of them come from broken homes, or homes torn by internal strife and tension. Many have no families, or have only sporadic communications with those at home." In contrast, many contemporary seafarers exhibit obvious familial orientations.¹⁹ A survey carried out for the International Transport Workers' Federation revealed that 55% of seafarers provide financial support for two to four people and 23% for five or more (as quoted in Kahveci 2000).

Even so, some former seafarers found it necessary to go ashore, especially when the long-term separation from home became unbearable. Family can be a pull factor for seafarers to enter the industry as well as a push factor for them to leave it. While some seafarers work with the hope of moving up the hierarchy and staying in the seafaring industry for as long as they can, others treat their employment as a short transitional period in life. A Hong Kong seafarer said, "Wages are one of the reasons for to me to choose this career: to quickly earn some money. Afterwards, I can come back to look for a shore job." Talking about promotion, a Filipino seafarer said:

It should take around 5 years to be promoted to junior engineer. After one year as a cadet, we have to get a board examination. If we pass the exam, it will upgrade our qualification, and then we will be able to

¹⁹ The meanings of seamanship are not an unvarying generality, but negotiable significations that change over time. "At different periods in history, the profession has been regarded in different ways. In ancient times seafaring meant involvement in commercial activities; at the time of the discoveries seafarers were in the forefront of progress, and today it is still a profession that can provide a better way of life for families, especially for the sons and daughters of seafarers from developing countries" (Veiga 2005). From the trader to the discoverer to the breadwinner, the seafarer sails in the evolving context of meanings of seamanship.

apply for becoming an engineer, 4th engineer. But this doesn't happen to everyone. I feel pity for some other seafarers who weren't able to pass the exam. They are already 40 but still, they are not senior engineers. They are still oiler, wiper. . . . It doesn't mean to say that they need to graduate from university. It depends on how you work, your exam results and on the captain.

The International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watch keeping for Seafarers (STCW 1978/1995) sets universal standards of competence for seafarers in different parts of the world. In reality, its implementation is subject to many local factors and absolute standardization of qualification for seafarers is difficult to achieve. Financial conditions can also be a factor affecting a seafarer's job prospects, as some seafarers lack sufficient funds to upgrade their qualifications. "Fair" promotion in the seafaring industry has opened doors for seafarers of many nationalities. However, multinational seafarers of different origins have different visions of their career paths based on their financial conditions, shipping companies' policies, their starting points and other factors. On the whole, the seafaring workforce is relatively fluid as promotion and dropping out is considerable. New blood from different countries is pumped in while some seafarers drop out before they receive promotions.²⁰

Shipboard Camaraderie



Photo 3: A rating's cabin, Hong Kong Kwai Tsing Container Terminals, 23 November 2006. Seafarers bring their own belongings to their cabin, a temporary dwelling place on board.

²⁰ An overview of the industry suggests that it does not lack supplies of labor resources for "general-purposes", but skilled and specialized individuals with high qualifications and in-depth skills on specific ship types (Obando-Rojas 2003).

The de-ethnic shipboard environment is not encouraging multinational seafarers to experience their multinational environment. Generalisations are still likely to be drawn by seafarers on the behavioural patterns and mindsets of others to negotiate differences and uncertainties. English is the industrial language for international shipping but not the first language for seafarers. They may know technical and traditional nautical terms well, but when it comes to non-official topics, such as telling jokes, which often require contextual inside knowledge of certain cultures, seafarers may encounter difficulties in communication. "By nature of their upbringing, their culture, seafarers of different nationalities have different jokes, they have different mentality," said an Italian seafarer highlighting the concept of "differences." A Hong Kong seafarer agreed, "I think nationality is more important as a factor of social division on board than job rank. Because people of the same nationality have more common topics, their cultures are the same, what they celebrate are the same, their backgrounds are the same."

Essentialist stereotypes are rarely expressed explicitly, though they can be a cause of minor social divisions on board. Such divisions are tolerated as long as there is no serious antagonism that hinders shipboard operation. They are explained and rationalized by thinking "they are like that. That's why they cannot get along with us." To the contrary, social harmony can be maintained since blame is diverted from the personal to the "unchangeable" national or ethnic. Yet when seafarers of different nationalities mingle well, the explanation is attributed back to the personal that the personalities of these seafarers are agreeable and nationality is no longer a "barrier." Besides, seafarers often responded that they would "go with the flow," "don't do anything wrong," "play it safe," and "don't start any fights" despite occasional disagreements. "It will do you no good to offend somebody on board, especially officers. That will only make your life on board even more difficult, since you're going to stay with them in the same ship for some time," said a Chinese seafarer. In times of social incompatibility, social distances are kept to avoid disputes and maintain the common good: "getting the work done." "Most of the time, it's been peaceful. If a person doesn't like others on the ship, he can go to his room and ignore them," said a German seafarer. Another German seafarer remarked, "The majority likes to be with people. But some people are loners. They lock themselves up." The individual cabin is the private space on board where seafarers can avoid social interaction and potential trouble after work.

Most seafarers have come to accept the logic of their life at sea. Occupational socialisation and enculturation into the seafaring world often starts before seafarers joined the industry, through education and training at institutes and during job screening. Regulations and norms in the workplaces are explicitly laid down in written rules and implicitly understood as the way things are done in the company, on the ship and within the shipping industry. Even if one's seafaring experience is shaped by job rank, nationality and many other factors, the nature of the seafaring industry invariably governs and affects everyone employed in a more or less common way. Making constant adaptations to new ships and new crewmembers is an example. Although they may not know each other personally, they find each other "familiar" as they face similar working, living and social circumstances that help them reconcile differences in a world of familiar strangers:

Regardless of crew nationality, a fundamental feature of modern ships is that, although they do not house organic communities marked by population or social network continuities, crews of complete strangers

nevertheless find familiar, integrating social mechanisms. The familiar and limited number of shipboard roles, the boundaries of permissible variation in role performance, the simplicity of formal and normative rules patterning shipboard conduct are universal and, therefore, create the essential conditions for making the transfer of people between ships possible – a necessary requirement in the context of discontinuous, casual employment contracts and mixed nationality crews of unpredictable permutations (Alderton et. al. 2004: 97).

Each worker is provided with a job title and this is how his role is defined; individual seafarers, regardless of their nationalities, are largely replaceable in the seafaring industry. One knows the scope of one's job responsibilities, and the whole ship with three departments operates as a functional organisation when enough workmen of different job ranks are present. New crewmembers can easily familiarise themselves with their tasks in the new, but familiar shipboard environment during each voyage. Idiosyncratic characteristics, other than working qualities, are irrelevant to the basic functionality of a ship. Other commonalities such as sea sickness, homesickness, threat of pirate attacks, increased workload, physical and mental fatigue and pressure, and boredom from the monotony of work also form the foundation for seafarers to relate to one another, building a sense of camaraderie through the crucible of sea life. A crew who maneuvers the ship is also liable for accidents and it is indeed a matter of life and death to cooperate on board.

At times when seafarers choose to socialise with shipmates, there are common strategies they employ. "Sometimes I listen to other shipmates when they tell me seafaring stories. Sometimes we talk about work matters and past experiences. We don't talk about personal things unless we feel very close to each other," said a Thai seafarer. Seafarers tend to avoid topics such as religion and politics that are regarded as "too sensitive" in the confined shipboard context. "We don't make unreasonable commands to our subordinates. We cannot discriminate against our crewmembers. We need to work with people of different cultures in this industry. We know our job," said a Greek captain. One of the few opportunities of shipboard socialization can be found during meal times. Food on board, as in many other social contexts, is rich in symbolic significance. Dining is regarded as an important social ritual of the day. It does not only buffer the routine of work, but is also an official occasion for communal gatherings and social interactions. Other than that, most seafarers seek social gatherings even if they are occasional. On one ship, a number of seafarers proudly showed me photos of them fishing together. Playing music and singing karaoke are some other examples of communal activities. In this respect, the captain and senior officers play an important role in initiating social mixing among a crew, as a Dutch seafarer said:

We have barbeques on board. I sometimes help to prepare the potatoes. On special days, for example, the birthday of a crewmember or Christmas, we have parties. Some of us fish. I sit around, watch DVDs, play cards and play table tennis with others. The captain sometimes invites us to the pool. He's like "hey, let's go," and we drink beer together.

Crossing nationalities to make friends and establishing affinity are not rare in the seafaring industry, regardless of all the potential economic and cultural tensions among mixed-nationality crews. Nevertheless, there is usually a limit to every friendship made and also every incompatibility encountered. The crew forms an isolated society once a

ship sets sail. The membership of a ship is decided every time it calls at a port, when there may be new seafarers who sign in and old seafarers who sign off. Then this newly formed seafaring group stays unchanged for days, weeks or even months before the ship calls at another port, and another round of compositional change will probably take place. The odds are that co-workers employed on different contracts may never meet each other again in their lifetime after one voyage. In other words, shipboard encounters are “contractual” as well and can rarely replace social support from home.

Conclusion

A container ship is a unique anthropological field site, for it is mobile yet bound, global yet local, diversified yet unified, and a potent symbol of globalization and de-globalization.

The economic and technological developments of the shipping industry and the ensuing rise in seaborne world trade in the late 20th century have been mixed blessings for seafarers. Both the demand and supply sides of the labour market have led to onboard demographic changes, as part of the restructuring process in the shipping industry. In the neoliberal epoch, ship operators strategically deploy business capital to gain economies of scale. Workers, on the other hand, do not enjoy a similar degree of flexibility as their employment terms are subject to their citizenship and conditions in the labour market.

Containerization, as a breakthrough technology in modern logistics, revolutionizes both the tangible and intangible operations of the global shipping industry. Container ships are instruments of international trade with their shipboard space optimized and isolated for business operations. The containerised seafarers, like containers, are always being transported according to their job orders and constantly being checked until they leave the industry or until they are scrapped. Once employed on board, seafarers avoid being blacklisted and seek to keep their high-income job for as long as possible, usually with the aim of supporting their families. Cooperation between seafarers of different nationalities in many shipboard spaces is, in this sense, not only a result of industrial controls but also instrumentally maintained by the seafarers themselves.

Characterized by discontinuities, the social relationships on board, harmonious though they may seem, are usually ephemeral. From familiarity to acquaintanceship, to even friendship till the end of the gangway, multinational seafarers work in cycles of arrival, departure and isolation, until finally they are unloaded from the ship to land in their own separate worlds.

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