Dr Minghua Zhao, assistant director of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre, samples life with a crew of 27 nationalities.

Ne striking feature of cruisships today is that they are becoming increasingly larger and can carry more and more passengers. The very word "community" or "society" consists primarily of two groups: the passengers and the seafarers. But there is a new element in this form of "society" or "community" that has emerged from the Synopsis of the seafarers’ labour market in the past two decades. Although most senior officers and managers remain male and are of traditional maritime nationalities, seafarers in subordinate positions are increasingly recruited from Asia and eastern Europe. Women, as SIRC’s global labour market database has found, make up about 25 per cent of all seafarers on cruisships, although the figure varies on individual ships.

This spring, I had a voyage on a not-very-modern cruise ship in the Atlantic. This nine-decked ship carried more than 1,200 passengers who were served by about 440 seafarers. All the passengers were from one western European country, but the seafarers were from 27 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and America – in fact from all parts of the world.

The two million seafarers employed on ships on their shoulders – the Greek captain and the Indian hotel manager. The heads of the 11 departments were from seven countries: Britain, Bulgaria, Canada, Indonesia, the Philippines, Poland, and Singapore. Sixty-seven per cent of all different nationalities served in the ship's three restaurants, including the newly promoted Bulgarian restaurant manager, were functions as very popular Thai head waiters and the five new seafarers from four different countries used as "buffet runners."

At the bottom of the ship, as well as at the bottom of the ship's hierarchy, is the laundry, where a single nationality is most likely to be found, in most cases Chinese, Filipinos, or Indonesians. Nine young men, all Asians but from three different countries, laboured in the ship's washing, drying, ironing and folding thousands of sheets, towels, tablecloths and all the other textiles used on board. Sometimes they were found, as usual, working side by side, which is merely normal compared with most ships’. For seafarers from developing countries, it also means a relatively high wage package, although it also means longer separation from families and a challenge to their English language competence.

Some seafarers, of course, have other reasons for their preference. The Indian hotel manager, for example, said: “I prefer a multi-national ship because it is easier to keep the ship’s hierarchy, which is necessary to make the ship operate efficiently. In an Indian-only context it’s difficult for me to distinguish my public role from my private role.”

Similarly, seafarers have different reasons for preferring to work in such a mixed-crew. One thing, however, seems certain: this highly mixed crew is easier for seafarers to assess, as it is not so much a ship crewed by a single nationality. This is certainly true when seafarers are working. When the ship was at sea I dropped in on several departments and observed the interactions of seafarers during their duty hours. In the hotel manager's office the Greek captain was discussing the guests for the captain’s table with the Indian hotel manager. In the galley, the sous chef from Barbados was teaching the Indian chef de cuisine an alley in the evenings. The Thai seafarers, in- including the deckhands and the engine-hands, were of the same nationality. My private role.”

What, then, is the bond that holds multi- national crews together and makes them function? What holds multi-national crews together and makes them function? The reason is, I believe, that seafarers have a clearly shared goal: their financial needs and their profound love for their families. This is true regardless of seafarers’ gender, nationality and position on the ship.

One striking feature of multi-national ship crews is their mix of nationalities. It is interesting this didn’t happen to pick up food from the European mess. It is interesting this didn’t happen to pick up food from the Asian or Indian messes. It is interesting this didn’t happen to pick up food from the Asian or Indian messes. Generally, only the Greek officers and the Polonians always dined there. The four-grade-stripe hotel manager, for example, said he preferred to have Indian food, and the three-grade-stripe British chief purser her meals in the mess hall be- cause “in the officers’ mess, you only have Greeks and they are all men”. Both the staff and the crew messes were side by side in the sea area on deck four where the entertainers, the casino staff, the representatives of the travel agents etc had their cabins.

Seafarers extend their love beyond their families. Their shared goals and experiences, their sea surnaiture love and solidarity among seafarers themselves. No matter which countries they come from, what kind of ships they sail on, or which part of the world they meet, they feel a sense of kinship as soon as they learn from each other that they are seafarers. In Agadir, I came across a large fleet of Chinese fishing ships and found with a captain and his men who were all from Shanghai and had been away for nearly two years. The 51-year-old captain told me that he and his crew had experienced even worse than on merchant vessels. He “chose to do the job because he wanted to buy a taxi for his unemployed son and to support his sec- ond son through university.

Back on “my ship”, I mentioned this to the captain. He said very little, but quietly pre- pared a large gift bag full of cigarettes and bot- tles of alcohol. He wrapped it up in a dragon-patterned gift bag and asked me to deliver it to the Chinese captain and his men. An hour later, the Chinese captain saw me to the cruise ship's gangway and handed me the bag and asked me to deliver it “to your cap- tain”. Inside were a carton of Da Zhonghua cigarettes, a bag of green tea leaves. The two had never met. They live on different sides of the globe, they speak different languages, eat different foods and sing different folk songs. But their hearts are linked as they share the same seas and oceans.

Unity and diversity at sea

My interview with him he dwelt on how cute he had raised his boy with her mother, so she could earn enough for the family to move into their own flat. The shadow of the clearing job because he found his previous $90 monthly salary wasn’t enough to support his daughter and the new baby. Linda, the 30-year-old Filipino cabin stewardess, had left her research job in a laboratory in Osaka and left her 10-year-old boy with her mother, so she could earn enough for the family to move into their own flat. The 28-year-old Polish housekeeper, a small but tough woman in her late forties, was inspecting the cabins on the lower deck. I asked her if she knew the ship and then to talk to the stewards or stewleeservants from Bulgaria, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Roma- nia, and the Philippines, she was from the sun deck, the two seafarers, a Filippino and an Indonesian, were from the officers’ mess. I asked the location of this corresponded with seafar- ers’ status in the ship hierarchy and they were straitified by seafarers’ nationality and gen- der. The officers’ mess was on the top deck. Theoretically, all officers and staff with three or more stripes could have their meals there. In reality, only the Greek officers always dined there. The four-grade-stripe hotel manager, for example, said he preferred to have Indian food, and the three-grade-stripe British chief purser her meals in the mess hall be- cause “in the officers’ mess, you only have Greeks and they are all men”. Both the staff and the crew messes were side by side in the sea area on deck four where the entertainers, the casino staff, the representatives of the travel agents etc had their cabins.

he staff mess was mostly used by the managers, supervisors or other personnel, such as the receptionist, the cooks, the bar staff and airline tickets etc. The staff mess was therefore sometimes referred to as the European mess. The deck, the chief stew, the purser and the Indian manager generally, lower-ranked seafarers of the same region or nationality would dine in the had officer status. Although I was told that the east Europeans would always pick up food from the Asian or Croatian messes, I never noticed such a phenomenon happening in reverse – Asian seafarers never went up to pick up food from the European mess. The ship’s stewards hold multi-national crews together and make them function so well as a unit, despite their ethnic or national diversity? The reason is, I believe, that seafarers have a clearly shared goal: their financial needs and their profound love for their families. This is true regardless of seafarers’ gender, nationality and position on the ship. The ship's messes for the crew, the officers’ mess, the staff mess, the crew mess, the officers mess, and the line messes, and this location of the ship’s hierarchy and they were straitified by seafarers’ nationality and gender. The officers’ mess was on the top deck. Theoretically, all officers and staff with three or more stripes could have their meals there. In reality, only the Greek officers always dined there. The four-grade-stripe hotel manager, for example, said he preferred to have Indian food, and the three-grade-stripe British chief purser her meals in the mess hall be- cause “in the officers’ mess, you only have Greeks and they are all men”. Both the staff and the crew messes were side by side in the sea area on deck four where the entertainers, the casino staff, the representatives of the travel agents etc had their cabins.

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