Seafarers: the first global villagers?

T he 20th century was exceptional in human history owing to the creation of so many new things, such as cars, aeroplanes, the space-shuttle etc. It may be difficult to agree on the most important invention because the importance varies from one to another. For me, however, no change is more significant than the emergence of the “global village”.

The term village is usually applied to a “small rural population unit” containing a normal community. The phrase “global village” first emerged in Marshall McLuhan’s book, The Gutenberg Galaxy, in which he argued that electronic technology was shrinking the planet, suggesting that “time has ceased and space has vanished”. Since then, use of the term global village has mushroomed in political debates, among public media, and even in commercial advertisements, because it encapsulates our feeling that the world is indeed getting smaller as a result of the rapid development of transport systems and information technology, in particular.

Like any newly-fashioned term, global village is used by different people to relate to different things. While some people would like to use it to promote their business in the global marketplace, others may consider issues of common values, responsibility, and action, against the “global pillage”. Despite its various interpretations, one thing seems clear: global village is not equal to the notion of the “united nations” because the concept of nation is a political identification, which is mainly manipulated by a few politicians “on behalf of you”. Instead, the idea of the global village is largely based upon fully shared understanding so that all residents can make their own decisions.

To design and build a global village mansion many things need to be known in advance: how many potential residents will move in? Which families (culture systems) do the potential residents will move in? How many of them are in Asia, 12.4 per cent; in Africa, 17.0 per cent; in Europe, 29.0 per cent; and in the Americas, 17.0 per cent. Of these, 58.4 per cent of them are in Asia, 12.4 per cent in Africa and 8.4 per cent in Latin America. At the beginning of the new century, it is urgent that all potential residents know each other before a formal meeting is held for negotiating “village affairs”.

T he development of the global village is an on-going process. Notwithstanding, the international merchant fleet may be described as the first citizens of the new village although they still hold national passports. The transition from national citizens to global citizens cannot be separated from the transformation of the international shipping industry from national flag registration to open registration in the late 20th century. In this sense, the maritime industry is the first factory built in the global village, while seafarers can be said to be contributing to, or helping to construct the first global village mansion.

Of many indicators reflecting the progress of the global village project, multinational crewing patterns may be an important one. According to a recent survey conducted by the Seafarers International Research Centre on the global seafaring labour market, about 38 per cent of the international merchant fleet has adopted multinational crewing patterns which are defined as three or more nationalities onboard. By contrast, only one third of ships maintained single-nationality crewing patterns. In answer to the question, who settles in this global village, nearly 150 nationalities are recorded on seafarers’ supply lists. Over 40 per cent come from the Far East, 30 per cent from South Asia, 20 per cent from East Europe, over 10 per cent from South Asia and Middle East, while the traditional maritime colonial-villages contribute 17 per cent.

While seafarers may be said to be the first group to settle in the global village, many questions need to be asked of them. For example: What do you feel about your new accommodation, compared with the “old houses” of your home town? Are you happy with your “new family”? Do you have a village commit- tee which deals with village affairs, and allows you to take part in vil- lage management? Do you think that the new village is a happy one? Our understanding of democracy on ships.