Who’s who in the world’s cruiseship crews?

The number of seafarers in the cruise industry is growing by leaps and bounds, but where do they come from and what are their lives like? Bin Wu of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre describes recent research to find out.

The Queen Mary 2, which was launched in January 2004, brings a new meaning to the term “luxury”. She took five years to build, cost over US$1 billion, and is one of the roomiest vessels in the world. With a gross tonnage of 150,000 gt, she can host 2,620 passengers (full罗). The number of cargo seafarers: from fewer than 20,000 two decades ago to over 35,000 today, accounting for about 13 per cent of the total number of world seafarers. And, with new cruise ships being launched every year, the development of world cruise seafarers has become increasingly important to the cruise industry.

As shown in the chart, over 30 per cent of the world cruise seafarers are female, and in some ships the female participation is over a third. This is in contrast to over half of women in the cargo sector being female, with the domination of the cargo sector by Asian and Latin American seafarers.

Developed countries are more likely to work for the guest services like the casino, shop, and photography and beauty departments. This contrasts with the domination of the galley, bar and food departments by Asian and Latin American seafarers.

Furthermore, seafarers from the developing world occupy three-quarters of senior ranks and over half of middle ranks. This is in contrast to over three-quarters of ranks being filled by seafarers from the developed world (see chart, left). An unusual feature of cruiseship crews is the number of women. The SIRC survey shows that about one-in-five cruiseship crew members are female, and in some ships the female participation is over a third.

Furthermore, seafarers from the developed world are more likely to work for the guest services such as “to enjoy the sights, taste the foods, and meet the locals wherever your ship stops”, the reality is that these will largely depend upon the position you hold on board. Some ships have little chance of sunshine while others are behind bars in cramped quarters, a clause, in a cabin, or living in crowded conditions by ship, with the developed world. For the majority of cruise seafarers who are from the developing world, and who work at ratings level, the term “luxury” simply does not apply. Rather, “sweatship” may be a more suitable description for their situation.