

# Liverpool and its Chinese Seamen



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## World War Two

### Our Fathers the Chinese Seamen

During World War Two there were many thousands of Chinese seamen in the British merchant marine and Liverpool was where they were based.

From 1939 to 1945 Alfred Holt and Company (Blue Funnel) and Anglo-Saxon Petroleum (Shell) ran their Chinese Seamen's Reserve Pools out of Liverpool. London's Chinatown almost disappeared but Liverpool's Chinatown was revitalised.

There were some 15,000 to 20,000 Chinese seamen based in the city. The Chinese made up almost 15% of the entire manpower of the merchant fleet.

For many of us our fathers had arrived in the city. But where did they come from?

Holt recruited its men in Hong Kong and Shanghai but predominantly at this period from the Chinese mainland rather than from the British colony. **Anglo-Saxon Petroleum got its men from Singapore with both organizations taking the men on two-year contracts.** Our fathers seem to have been mainly Singaporeans and Shanghai men.

Now that they were in Liverpool, how did their pay compare with the British seamen?

The contracts our fathers signed entitled them to free repatriation back home once completed. But those contracts paid them significantly less than British seamen. If they worked for Holt their basic pay per month was £4.13.9 (£4.69p) a month. For the greater danger of working on Anglo-Saxon's oil tankers, they were paid £5.15.0. (£5.75p) per month. In contrast, the basic pay under National Maritime Board rates for a British seaman was £12.12. 6. (£12.62p)

As the War went on, casualties mounted in the merchant fleet. By September 1940 about 100 Chinese seamen on British ships had been killed. However, all attempts to obtain compensation for the relatives of the Chinese men killed at sea on a scale comparable to that paid to British seamen had failed.

With this background, the inequality in pay began to cause more and more problems. In particular, the issue of War Risk money.

The War Risk Bonus paid to British seamen had steadily increased from the earliest days of the war. In contrast payment to Chinese seamen was at the complete discretion of the shipowners and varied from company to company.

But poor pay was not the only cause of grievance amongst Chinese crews on British ships. Nor was it the major one.

In 1942 the Chinese Ambassador, Wellington Koo, in a letter to the Minister of War Transport, Lord Leathers, protested about the violence and loss of life of Chinese seamen on board British ships.

Notoriously the Master of the tanker Silverash had shot and killed a Chinese seaman during a dispute in New York. At the trial he was found to have no case to answer.

The situation appears to have become so bad that Anglo-Saxon Petroleum had to officially reinforce the message that they would not stand for any physical violence against Chinese ratings.

The British Government's treatment of our fathers and their colleagues was equally brutal. For example, a dispute that began in September 1940 was brought to an end in April 1941 with men being imprisoned and deported.



Not surprisingly this action is said to have only succeeded in creating a collective sense of grievance amongst the Chinese. This continued unabated for the duration of the war.

The sense of distrust and antagonism was mutual. The Chinese seamen were for the rest of the war seen by the British Government, the shipowners and the ship's officers as a constant source of trouble.

As you will see later, it played a significant part in the forced repatriation of our fathers at the War's end. Particularly for those of our fathers who had been active in the Chinese seamen's unions.

### **The dispute in 1942 - relationships are further soured**

Japan entered the War in December 1941, invaded both Hong Kong and Singapore and began the internment of British subjects in Shanghai. The option of simply deporting those of our fathers and their colleagues seen as troublemakers had gone.

It also meant that the Chinese seamen were now firmly based in the UK. They were faced with UK costs on a wage that was only a fraction of the pay received by European seamen. Coupled with all the other injustices they had suffered Chinese discontent grew.

Soon men who were paid off after completing their contract were refusing to re-engage. Their ships could not be sailed without them. The men were now in a strong position. What is more, they were getting organised.

There were two unions claiming to represent the men. One was the Chinese Seamen's Union. This was, in effect, a branch of the Kuomintang government in China and with officials nominated by that government. This seems to have attracted few Shanghai and Singapore men.

The other was the Liverpool Chinese Seamen's Union. This was closely linked to the Chinese Communist Party in Liverpool. We believe that some of our fathers were active in this union.

Communist influence was strong. Even the Kuomintang union was, apparently, infiltrated and influenced by them. Plus, it seems that men of apparently Shanghai origin held a number of its key roles.

The seamen's dispute dragged on through the early months of 1942. The British Ministry of War Transport and the owners would not negotiate with either of the unions to settle the dispute. They would only talk with Chinese Government officials. This despite the fact that the men had little confidence in them. Even one of the officials at the Chinese Consulate in Liverpool was telling the men to ignore the Kuomintang officials and continue the strike.

Negotiations continued from February 1942 to April 1942. During this time the strike remained solid. According to Mr. Dao, the Chinese Consul at Liverpool at the time, only one out of 600 time-expired ratings accepted the companies' offer.

The bitterness of the dispute was not helped when the Liverpool police broke up a Union meeting; violence broke out and several Chinese were imprisoned.

The men's sense of injustice grew. They were not seeking money as such. They wanted equality of treatment with the British sailors. They were exposed to the same dangers as the British seamen. They wanted this acknowledged.

Finally, the dispute was settled. Under the London Agreement of April 1942 Chinese seamen got a £2 per month flat increase in their pay. This brought their pay per month to £7.15.0 (£7.75p) for those working for Anglo-Saxon Petroleum and £6.13.9 (£6.69p) for those employed by Alfred Holt.

They were also given the same War Risk pay as the British - £10 per month. And it was this more than anything that they sought.

But they did not get real equality of treatment. At the end of 1942 British seamen were awarded a further increase in pay. The Chinese were not offered any increase. It was not until 1944 that the Chinese were to obtain any further increase - £1.2.0 (£1.20p) per month. Even then their pay remained below that of British seamen doing the same work.

By now some of the men had settled down with local girls. We were beginning to arrive on the scene

### **The War ends - Chinese pay is slashed**

As the War moved to its end, British shipowners became increasingly concerned about the competition they were likely to face. In particular from the American shipping companies. They would not recognise the cosy agreements amongst the British shipowners that had been operating in the shipping industry before the War.

Alfred Holt and Company became very anxious to cut costs. They also wanted to deal with what they saw as the militancy of their crews. Particularly the Shanghai men. They wanted to get rid of men who had sailed with them during the War. Most especially all those they saw as 'troublemakers'. They wanted to recruit more men from Hong Kong rather than Shanghai, as had previously been the practice.

As soon as the War ended Holt slashed the wages for Chinese seamen from £17.17.0 (£17.85p) to £7.17.0. (£7.85p) The War Risk money was removed from the Chinese. But, the War Risk money was kept for the British seamen.

The impact on our parents can easily be imagined. We have the pay slip of one of our fathers. As a Boatswain he was earning less than half the pay of an ordinary British rating. Little more than £11.00 per month. On this he had to keep his English wife and his five children.

Butterfield and Swire, Holt's agents in China, wrote to Holt telling them that this was bound to cause trouble. That trouble began when Chinese crews in Sydney, Australia struck at the end of 1946 over the removal of the War Risk Bonus. They had discovered that British crews were still getting the money.

Holt had cut pay rates to a level at which it was impossible to live in either Hong Kong or Shanghai. And they were being told this by both Butterfield and Swire and by their own local senior staff.

If the pay were insufficient for living in China, small wonder that it was insufficient for existence in the UK. As you will see later, our parents simply could not exist on the money. And this was to be acknowledged by British Government officials.