

Chinese Seamen and Chinese Communities Abroad, 1900-1945

Oyen, Meredith (欧阳梅)

Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center for
Chinese and American Studies, Nanjing, China

This paper will discuss the history of China's "floating population," merchant marine sailors, and their interactions with overseas Chinese communities. China has a long maritime tradition, and even in years when the Chinese government was not actively sending its own fleets abroad, Chinese sailors were engaged as seamen on British and American ships. It is this history that forms the basis of this paper, discussing the ways in which involvement in international fleets helped to bind Chinese communities to each other and to China. The travels of these seamen allowed them to have a unique impact on Chinese communities in Hong Kong and Singapore, but also helped to create the Chinese community in Liverpool, England and sustain the communities in New York and San Francisco. Over the course of the first half of the 20th Century, Chinese seamen in international merchant marine shipping transitioned from being considered coolies or an expendable source of cheap labor to being skilled workers demanding equal pay and treatment, as the Chinese government itself transitioned from being a weak power to a wartime ally. Part migration history, part labor history, and part diplomatic history, this paper draws upon recent research in the Republican Chinese archives in Nanjing and Taipei, along with shipping records in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and London to explore the rich history of Chinese merchant sailors.