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The ‘Yellow Danger’? Global forces and global fears in the North Sea and beyond (1600–1950)

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Matthias van Rossum

Global fears

In February 1926, the editors of *De Uitkijk*, the journal of the seamen’s section of the social-democratic transport workers’ union in the Netherlands, agitated on the issue of international competition between sailors in the article ‘De Chineezestroom’ – which can be translated as ‘the stream of Chinese’.¹ Confronted with increased recruitment of Chinese, Indian and Indonesian sailors to the Dutch merchant fleet, the Centrale Bond van Transportarbeiders (CBTA) initiated a racist campaign against the presence of Chinese sailors on Dutch ships later that year.² The article opened up with the claim that ‘Dutch shipping companies intentionally increased the unemployment of Dutch sailors!’.³ Despite the ‘courage and perseverance’ of Dutch sailors during the ‘tough [First World] War years’, the article contended that ‘Dutch sailors were laid off and hundreds of Chinese were put in their place as cheap labour’. The editors continued with a long complaint against the ‘approximately four thousand Asians on the Dutch fleet, depriving four thousand Dutch sailors, with thousands of family members, of their means of subsistence’. Chinese sailors were singled out as being dangerous and unreliable, claims that were supported with references to fights, opium use and refusals to work.

1. ‘De Chineezestroom’, *De Uitkijk* (6 February 1926), 1–2. All quotes in this paper have been translated from Dutch to English, unless stated otherwise. **[AQ: 4]**
2. *Het Kleurlingenvraagstuk op de Nederlandsche vloot* (Rotterdam, 1927). Matthias van Rossum, *Hand aan Hand (Blank en Bruin). Solidariteit en de werking van globalisering, etniciteit en klasse onder zeelieden op de Nederlandse koopvaardij, 1900–1945* (Amsterdam, 2009), 128–30. **[AQ: 5]**
3. ‘De Chineezestroom’, *De Uitkijk* (6 February 1926), 1. The article referred to ‘Hollandsche reeders’ and ‘Hollandsche zeelieden’.

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Towards the end of the year, the union journal agitated with an even stronger tone in the front page article ‘The Yellow Danger’.⁴ It claimed that the ‘question of the Chinese on the Dutch fleet was growing’, complaining not only about the employment of Chinese sailors, but also about their presence in Dutch port cities. They were, using a Dutch metaphor, ‘locked in boarding houses like herrings’, resulting in ‘shockingly unhygienic situations’ with ‘a severe danger of fire and infection’. Furthermore, the editors warned, there was the ‘danger of infecting white people in the gambling mania and love for opium of the Chinese’. In a tone dripping with irony, the editors explained why the Dutch shipowners were to blame:

They have brought the Chinese on their ships, they have brought them in the port cities as a [labour] reserve, out of pure love for the fatherland and ... for the Dutch sailor.

You see, the white sailor is physically less capable to sail in the tropics than the Chinese. The shipowner is, really, not concerned with the financial benefits. The only thing that made him do this, was the love for – or, as you wish, the pity with – the Dutch sailor.

Of course, after the honest shipowner had tried everything, no other options were left then, in the interest of the white sailor, to spare him the misery at sea and ... leave him unemployed.⁵

The Dutch social-democratic sailors’ union, just as historians would later do, portrayed the internationalisation of maritime labour markets in the 1920s as a unique moment; as one of the first occasions when Asian and European sailors were confronted with each other.⁶ This was accompanied with more or less racist arguments about (perceived) physical differences between European and Asian sailors. The editors of *De Uitkijk* argued that Europeans were less well suited for work ‘in the tropics’. Similarly, British labour unions argued that Asian sailors were less able to work in cold climates.

More importantly, many of the European sailor organisations claimed it was problematic how Asian sailors were used to frustrate the attempts of the European labour movement to improve working conditions. Already, in 1911, the editors of *De Uitkijk* stated that:

‘the Chinese’ is a ‘social being, who as a human still had to be brought to being human. They are only hungry for money and for their own gain, and they let themselves be used, ignorant and joyful, to oppose and damage the interests of the European worker.’⁷ **[AQ: 1]**

Although the explicit racism of the Dutch seamen’s union was not repeated everywhere, both the sense of a new moment of global competition and the fear of non-European sailors were European-wide phenomena. The editors of *De Uitkijk* referred to Asian sailors as being used as a ‘labour reserve’ in 1926. The CBTA, together with British unions,

4. ‘Het gele gevaar’, *De Uitkijk* (19 November 1926), 1.

5. ‘Het gele gevaar’, *De Uitkijk* (19 November 1926), 1.

6. Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c.1870–1945* (New Delhi, 2012).

7. ‘Het gele gevaar!’, *De Uitkijk*, 3, No. 31 (November 1911), 1.

made the ‘Asian sailors question’ an issue within the International Transport Workers’ Federation. There it was concluded that ‘the employment of non-European crews under the present conditions must be condemned and withstood’. Of course, it was recognised that ‘non-European seamen have a right to equal working conditions and treatment as all other seamen’, but just as important was the argument that ‘non-European crews are used by the shipowners, contrary to the interests of the crews themselves, to debase wages, and in case of necessity as blacklegs in the struggle against the seamen’s unions and their demands’.⁸

Globalisation in perspective

The statements in journals and reports presented a clear picture: increased globalisation in shipping and maritime labour markets would have created a unique situation in which European and Asian workers were for the first time confronted with each other. In this confrontation, cheap Asian sailors were used by shipowners as a labour reserve with the intention of depressing wages and undermining European workers’ organisations. Amongst European seamen’s unions, the dominant reaction seems to have been a racist fear of being overrun and replaced.⁹ For Asian sailors, it has been argued that they, as lascars, remained in a ‘coolie’-type of labour relationship until they increasingly organised and transformed themselves from ‘coolies’ into ‘workers’ through a series of strikes in the late 1930s.¹⁰

This moment, however, was not as unique as presented in this picture. The 1920s, or even the 1910s, were not the first instances in which connections were created between different labour markets around the world, and seafarers from different continents were confronted with each other. Maritime trade connected the world several centuries before unions started their campaigns against Chinese sailors. Over the course of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the connection between Asia and Europe had slowly intensified through the increasing volume of direct shipping between the continents.

The dominance of European maritime power and the link between European overseas expansion and the opening up of direct seaborne connections between Europe and Asia might lead to the explanation, as has often implicitly been assumed, that European expansion resulted in the development of maritime labour markets in Asia. This was not the case, however. In Asia, just as in Europe, maritime labour markets had developed well before the arrival of European merchants in the Indian Ocean. Wage labour seems to have been the most common way to organise maritime labour in both regions.¹¹

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8. ‘Report on the employment of non-European labour on European ships’, *Newsletter of the ITF*, 8, No. 10 (October 1930), 110–12.
 9. Van Rossum, *Hand aan Hand*; H.J.J. Wubben, *Chinezen en ander Aziatisch ongedierte: Lotgevallen van Chinese immigranten in Nederland 1911–1940* (Zutphen, 1986); Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea. Merchant Seamen in the World’s First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill, 2011).
 10. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, 263.
 11. Matthias van Rossum, ‘The Rise of the Asian Sailor? Inter-Asiatic Shipping, the Dutch East India Company and Maritime Labour Markets (1500–1800)’, in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed., *Towards a New History of Work* (New Delhi, 2014), 180–213.

Increasing intercontinental shipping resulted in entanglements between European and Asian maritime labour markets. Ever since direct shipping routes between Europe and Asia had opened up, these maritime worlds had been related. This did not completely determine, however, *how* these worlds would be related. This article will explore how these global connections shaped encounters between European and Asian sailors on (intercontinental) shipping in and from the North Sea region, and how it affected the positions and reactions of its workers. Such questions are important, as the North Sea region did not develop in isolation. Encounters between European and Asian sailors in the 1920s, therefore, can only be understood through the way they were shaped by global developments long before the twentieth century.

This article will analyse the long-term developments by looking at three elements: first, the changing connections between European and Asian maritime labour markets; second, the changing nature of European and Asian maritime labour markets and its influence on the position of sailors; and third, the changing relations between European and Asian sailors and their effects on reactions and interactions in a globalising maritime labour market.

From Europe to Asia – and back¹²

The maritime labour markets of Europe and Asia became increasingly entangled from 1500 onwards. This was not a one-sided process that radiated from Europe outwards. The internationalisation of labour markets developed independently in different parts of the maritime world. For early modern Europe, three regions have been distinguished by the way their maritime labour markets functioned.¹³ First, there were regions where maritime labour was employed through the international recruitment of ‘free’ labour, as best exemplified by the Dutch Republic’s use of sailors from northwest Europe.¹⁴ Second, there were regions where sailors were mainly employed from within ‘national’ boundaries, sometimes with small augmentations of international labour. This was the case in Denmark, France, England and Spain, where recruitment was mainly free, except during wartime. Third, there were regions where both free and unfree recruitment took place from within and without ‘national’ borders, to be found mainly in the Baltic and Mediterranean regions.¹⁵

Similar recruitment patterns developed in Atlantic shipping. In the Atlantic, however, perhaps due to the long distances involved, the levels of international recruitment were higher than in European shipping, especially for vessels sailing from northern European ports in Denmark, Hamburg, Prussia and Bremen.¹⁶ French, Spanish and English vessels

12. This paragraph can also be found in the chapter ‘Changing tides – maritime labour relations in Europe and Asia’ (see ‘Author note’).

13. Jelle van Lottum, Jan Lucassen and Lex Heerma van Voss, ‘Labour markets and national identity, 1600–1850’, in Richard W. Unger, ed., *Shipping and Economic Growth 1350–1850* (Leiden, 2011), 309–52.

14. Jelle van Lottum, *Across the North Sea. The impact of the Dutch Republic on international labour migration, c. 1550–1850* (Amsterdam, 2007), 136–7.

15. Van Lottum, Lucassen and Heerma van Voss, ‘Labour markets’, 336–8.

16. Matthias van Rossum, Lex Heerma van Voss, Jelle van Lottum and Jan Lucassen, ‘National and International Markets for Sailors in European, Atlantic and Asian Waters, 1600–1850’,

were often still manned with ‘nationals’, but here as well there tended to be more non-natives on board. National regulations, such as the English Navigation Acts (from 1651) and laws for the Spanish Carrera de Indias (1658), officially limited the number of ‘foreign’ sailors that Spanish and English shipowners were allowed to employ aboard their ships. These regulations were often ignored or circumvented in practice, leading to the recruitment of Portuguese, Italian, Flemish, Dutch and German sailors.¹⁷ Shipping in the Atlantic was marked by another important development. Besides the international recruitment of ‘white’ European and American sailors, there was increasing recruitment of crew members of African or African-American origin. Sometimes these sailors were slaves working for their owners aboard ship; for example on vessels from the Caribbean, North America and Brazil.¹⁸ Often they could be free ‘black’ men, sometimes freed slaves, earning a living with maritime work on the Atlantic.¹⁹

Developments in maritime Asia did not, as could be argued for the Atlantic, only result from European expansion and developments in European shipping. Recruitment of maritime labour from beyond ethnic or national (group) boundaries was not an exclusively European phenomenon, but seems to have been common in Asia as well. Before the arrival of the Portuguese, the VOC and other European trading companies, traces of internationalisation in Asian maritime labour markets are difficult to find, leaving much scope for future research among scant sources. Nevertheless, the various regions of maritime Asia were obviously connected by intensive long-distance shipping long before the arrival of Europeans. There is evidence that the same can be said for the maritime labour markets. Recent studies indicate that shipping with crews of mixed origin was a common phenomenon in Asia, especially in long-distance trades and the regional routes of the Indonesian archipelago and Indian Ocean.²⁰

The maritime labour markets of Europe and Asia were related from the moment that structural maritime connections between the two regions came into existence. With European maritime expansion, however, maritime labour markets throughout the globe increasingly became entangled. The changing character of the relations between these markets can be roughly divided into five stages. Partly overlapping, these stages range from more or less separate maritime worlds around 1500 to almost completely interconnected markets. The stages are:

in Maria Fusaro and Amelia Polonia, eds., *Maritime History as Global History*, Research in Maritime History, 43 (St. John’s, 2010), 47–72, at 57.

17. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1987), 19–20, 80; Pablo E. Pérez-Mallaína, *Spain’s Men of the Sea: Daily Life on the Indies Fleet in the Sixteenth Century* (Baltimore, 1998), 56–7. The opposite occurred as well: see Andrew Little with his work on British sailors on board Dutch men-of-war in the seventeenth century **[AQ: 6]**
18. W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks. African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (London, 1997), 22–3; Emma Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors and their Captive Cargoes, 1730–1807* (Cambridge, 2006), 84–6.
19. Christopher, *Slave Ship Sailors*.
20. Van Rossum, ‘The Rise of the Asian Sailor?’; Van Rossum, Heerma van Voss, Van Lottum and Lucassen, ‘National and International Markets’.

- A. Before 1500: almost entirely separate labour markets in maritime Europe and maritime Asia;
- B. 1500–1750: increasing connection between Asian and European maritime labour markets as a result of the introduction of European labour supply and demand into Asian maritime labour markets. European and Asian markets became intertwined *in* Asia; only very small numbers of Asian slaves and sailors reached Europe, mainly through Portuguese shipping;
- C. 1700–1800: increasing integration in intercontinental shipping between Asia and Europe, especially from the early eighteenth century onwards, through the recruitment of Asian sailors for shipping from Asia to Europe by the East India Companies, and the settlement of Asian sailors in, especially, London; the VOC was rather late in employing Asian sailors for intercontinental shipping and put up barriers against the settlement of Asian sailors in the Dutch Republic;
- D. 1800/1830 onwards: increased and accelerated internationalisation of the recruitment of maritime labour in shipping in Asia (from the late eighteenth century onwards) and in intercontinental shipping (from the 1830s onwards), the simultaneous breakdown of barriers to the employment of ‘foreign’ crews, and increased regulation of colonial recruitment, ensuring the supply of (increasingly cheap) Asian maritime labour;
- E. 1870/1890 onwards: near complete integration of the European and Asian maritime labour markets, and the movement and widespread settlement of Asian and European sailors in both Asia and Europe.²¹

Changing labour, changing relations

Although marked by strong linguistic and cultural variations and differences, the increasingly connected maritime worlds of Europe and Asia shared some things in common. In the long run, however, global developments gradually reshaped maritime labour markets in Europe and Asia, and drove apart the positions of its workers, thus creating strong differences and inequalities between Asian and European sailors. This change was composed of three key elements. First, the initial situation in which both regions were characterised by more or less casual maritime labour markets. Second, the improving position of European (or Western) maritime labour through tighter regulation of recruitment and better welfare provision, combined with the increasing impact of labour organisation. Third, a simultaneous decline in the position of Asian (or non-Western – especially ‘colonial’) maritime workers because of increasing control, mediation and coercion in their recruitment and employment.

21. Numbers on the amount of Asian and European sailors on European merchant fleets are available in Matthias van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld. Globalisering, arbeid en interculturele ontmoetingen tussen Aziatische en Europese zeelieden in dienst van de VOC, 1600–1800* (Hilversum, 2014), beginning of chapter 3.

From early on, labour in long-distance shipping seems to have been characterised by waged labour and internationalisation.²² As one of the first global companies with investment in shipping within Asia – the so-called ‘country trades’ – as well as shipping between Europe and Asia, the VOC serves as an interesting case, highlighting the spread of wage labour markets. The VOC found it rather easy to recruit sailors in various Asian regions. In different periods, the company recruited in and around Java, Formosa (present day Taiwan), Malacca, the Coromandel and Malabar coasts, Bengal and Surat.²³ It employed these sailors on contracts, sometimes for as long as three years or more. By the time the VOC operated in maritime Asia, Asian sailors often referred to themselves – on ships of European companies, but also explicitly on Asian ships – as being ‘hired’ men, having ‘engaged in the service’ of a captain, etc.²⁴

Other European companies and private traders, as well as Asian merchants, engaged crews throughout maritime Asia. Crews of Chinese vessels in the Indonesian archipelago, for example, could consist of Chinese and Javanese sailors. Javanese sailors could be found on ships from India and elsewhere. Not much is known (yet) about recruitment in early modern Asia, but the available evidence seems to indicate a situation in the labour market that was marked more by casual than by heavily mediated solutions. Recruitment was often by voyage, and conflicts arose when payment or the time or place of discharge seemed contrary to agreement.²⁵ Asian sailors could be hired as individuals, possibly directly by European or Asian ships’ officers, being engaged mainly for wages. This seems to have been the case in Surat as well as in Bengal, Malacca, Batavia and other parts of Java.²⁶ Wage levels for European and Asian sailors were comparable, and their bargaining positions did not show strong differences – and were sometimes more favourable for Asian sailors.²⁷

This all changed rapidly from the early nineteenth century onwards. Increased European colonial interference in Asian societies and especially Asian labour markets resulted in changing recruitment patterns, weaker bargaining positions, lower wages and deteriorating working conditions for Asian sailors. Diverging wages, and therefore diverging labour costs, drastically altered the relationship between European and Asian sailors. Colonial intervention in labour markets compromised the independence of Asian

22. See for example: Paul C. van Royen, Jaap R. Bruijn and Jan Lucassen, eds., *‘Those emblems of hell’? European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market, 1570–1870* (St. John’s, 1997); Van Lottum, *Across the North Sea*; Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld*; Van Rossum, ‘The Rise of the Asian Sailor?’.

23. Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld*; Matthias van Rossum, ‘A “Moorish world” within the Company. The VOC, maritime logistics and subaltern networks of Asian sailors’, *Itinerario: International Journal on the History of European Expansion and Global Interaction*, 36, No. 3 (2012), 39–60.

24. Van Rossum, ‘The Rise of the Asian Sailor?’

25. See for example the conflict preceding the mutiny on an Asian vessel in 1784: Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld*, 360–2.

26. Van Rossum, *Werkers van de wereld*.

27. M. van Rossum, ‘Claiming their rights? Indian sailors under the Dutch East India Company (VOC)’, in Maria Fusaro, Bernard Allaire, Richard Blakemore and Tijn Vanneste, eds., *Labour, Law and Empire* (London, 2015), 263–7.

sailors and bolstered the position of employers and intermediaries and, consequently, their control over the work force.²⁸

On the rapidly expanding British merchant fleet, for example, Asian sailors were required to be engaged under so-called ‘Lascar Articles’ from the 1820s onwards. These agreements contained very distinctive conditions, including contracts extending to several years, and strict prohibitions against being discharged in Britain. Furthermore, recruitment practices in British India were re-organised through (colonial) recruitment offices, reinforcing the employers’ interests. Simultaneously, colonial maritime employers were successful in ‘reinventing “traditional” recruitment practices’ to exert control of their (colonial) labour force, producing traditions that had not been around in this form during the ‘more than two centuries [in which] “lascars” had been employed on European vessels’.²⁹ Thus, under the growing influence of colonialism in the early nineteenth century, maritime recruitment patterns in Asia seem to have changed from ‘casual’ to ‘mediated’.

This is the process by which Asian sailors were transformed from ‘workers’ into ‘coolies’ (or lascars). This chapter of the story, occurring before Balachandran’s history of the development from coolies to workers, should be studied further. It is an important history not only for the study of maritime workers, but also for labour and social and economic history in general: it might explain the occurrence of highly unequal labour relations in the nineteenth century, and in particular the declining position of Asian sailors.

Global workers

The developments outlined above have had a direct impact on sailors’ lives. As global workers, they faced most directly the consequences of globalisation. Among other questions, this prompts us to ask how sailors have dealt with these continuously changing labour markets? What have been the reactions – and the resulting relations and interactions – of various groups of European and Asian sailors to subsequent waves of internationalisation?

It is important to note that representing one’s own ‘group interests’ is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Through petitioning, strikes and other forms of collective action, workers in different parts of the world have dealt with commodified and other labour relations throughout history.³⁰ Collective action, however, did not only confront workers with the question *against* whom such actions were directed, but also *with* and *for* whom they were meant. Definitions of ‘group’ and ‘interests’ were not fixed, but relative to the perception of oneself, of one’s position, to changing group identities, and to the perception of material and social interests. The presence of workers (or groups of workers) divided by different social, economic, cultural and geographical factors could lead to informal or implicit competition.

28. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*; and this author’s review of it in *Indian Historical Review*, 41, No. 2 (2014), 357–60.

29. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, 18.

30. J. Banaji, *Theory as history. Essays on modes of production and exploitation* (Chicago, 2011); M. van der Linden, *Workers of the world* (Leiden, 2011). On Asian and European sailors working for the VOC see van Rossum, ‘Claiming their rights?’, 263–7.

Despite integrating the various maritime labour markets, the presence of European and Asian sailors – and the implicit competition between different groups of workers for the same work – did not automatically lead to large-scale (racial) conflicts. Competition between groups seems to have become explicit only later, and seems to have been related to two important historical factors. First, the destructive effects of colonialism on (maritime) labour markets, actively breaking down well-established norms and undermining the position of colonial workers, transforming them from ‘worker’ into ‘coolie’. Second, the creative and destructive effects of mass ideologies – in this case colonialism – creating colonial ‘subjects’, who are made into ‘cheaper’, ‘inferior’ and ‘less capable’ workers. Class ideology creates a clear division between workers and employers, pushing for solidarity amongst divided groups of workers; but at the same time it brings into question the role of groups of workers that might obstruct this struggle.

Strategies and conflict

Two important questions remain here. First, why did this explicit attention to the problem of global competition, created *in* an increasingly connected labour market and *on* increasingly unequal conditions, only spark off in the 1910s and 1920s? More directly, in framing responses to it, was racism really the only answer?

Although European and Asian sailors worked together on the same ships and clearly co-existed in the same labour markets from the sixteenth century onwards, and although colonial intervention and regulation radically altered their respective positions in the earlier nineteenth century, it was only the *dilemma of organisation* introduced by the new wave of class consciousness and collectivism towards the end of the nineteenth century that made the relations between these groups of sailors an explicit problem.

In the Dutch case, attempts to control and improve working conditions for seamen were initiated by unions around 1900. By this time the Amsterdam-based syndicalist sailors’ union *Algemene Nederlandse Zeemansbond* (ANZB, 1900) [AQ: 2] posited and tried to maintain a standard of employment conditions labelled as the ‘Amsterdamse voorwaarden’. These were not yet – as happened after 1911 – agreements between employers and workers’ organisations, but informal standards that had to be maintained through continuous direct bargaining by seamen at the point of recruitment. The need to maintain these conditions not only required union men to keep a close eye on seamen’s engagement, but also simultaneously created a division between the ‘ingroup’ of men that could be reached, mobilised and controlled, and the ‘outgroup’ that could not be prevented from signing on for lower wages or inferior working conditions, effectively breaking the so-called Amsterdam conditions. Competition between groups of sailors therefore became *explicit* rather than *implicit*, drawing new lines of conflict between *organised* and *unorganised* sailors.³¹

At first, the Dutch syndicalist Amsterdam sailors’ union and the ‘modernist’ rival in Rotterdam, *Rotterdamsche Zeemansvereniging Volharding* (Volharding, 1909) [AQ: 3], focused on the ‘threat’ from unorganised sailors in general, specifically targeting groups such as fishermen, sailors from the ‘islands’, urban poor and European foreign sailors (mainly Germans). From 1911, however, the active

31. This is studied in detail in Van Rossum, *Hand aan Hand*.

employment of Asian sailors by shipping companies to break union solidarity shifted attention to Asian sailors, who now became the most visible and targeted 'outgroup' and 'threat'.

Class ideology created a clear division between workers and employers, but at the same time problematised the role of groups of workers that did not (yet) organise or participate in this struggle. Colonialism, at the same time, had made Asian sailors into colonial 'subjects', who were paid less and were perceived to be 'inferior' and 'less capable' workers. The colonial and global capitalist nexus pushed Asian sailors into a specific position.

The consequent *explicit* competition between Asian and European sailors resulted in two distinct coping strategies. European labour unions, especially the ones with a social-democratic signature/character, opted for nationalist strategies in which Asian seamen were cast in the role of obstructers of Europe's more 'developed' class struggle. This resulted in explicitly racist campaigns against Chinese and Indian sailors in the 1920s.³² Through political alliances between 'modernist' unions and social-democratic political parties, attempts were made to introduce new health and safety regulations that would make it more difficult for foreign, especially Asian, seamen to work on European vessels. In some cases, the plea was heard to exclude non-European sailors from the fleet.

Other groups, often revolutionary organisations of European and Asian sailors, opted for the opposite strategy of internationalist solidarity by attempting to cultivate links between the two groups. International centres for seafarers irrespective of nationality and race set up in important port cities such as Rotterdam and Hamburg. In the principal Dutch port cities, Rotterdam and Amsterdam, radical European union leaders also tried to bridge the divide by directly contacting and organising Chinese and Javanese sailors. In the second half of the 1920s, these attempts were outpaced by initiatives aimed at self-organisation by Asian sailors and organisers, such as the communist Indonesian sailors' union *Sarikat Pegawei Laoet India* (SPLI).³³

The conflicts created by the employment of these different strategies reverberated until the Second World War. The war quickly disrupted this landscape in which nationalist and even racist strategies of exclusion were mainly employed by social-democratic unions and parties, while revolutionary and communist organisations aimed at more internationalist strategies of inclusion. After the war, the scene changed again, drastically, as the result of decolonisation, changing regulation, but also maritime industries going footloose through the construction of the flags of convenience.

Conclusions – global forces, global fears

Forces of globalisation reshaped the maritime landscape of the North Sea region long before globalisation accelerated through the rise of steam shipping and global

32. Van Rossum, *Hand aan Hand*; Laura Tabili, 'The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925', *Journal of British Studies*, 33, No. 1 (1994), 54–98; Wubben, *Chinezen en ander Aziatisch ongedierte*.

33. Van Rossum, *Hand aan Hand*.

communication networks. The moment of globalisation was not as unique as presented by Dutch ‘modernist’ labour unions in their racist campaigns against Asian sailors. The 1920s, or even the 1910s, were not the first moments in which connections were created between different labour markets around the world and sailors from different continents worked side by side. The stages of globalisation and integration can best be categorised according to the degree of connectedness of labour markets. Differing stages can be explained not only by technological developments, but also must be related to regulatory regimes and the actual recruitment practices that underpin these markets.

It is important to note that other parts of the picture painted by European unions are deceptive as well. Asian sailors were portrayed as cheap and unorganised, employed in coolie-type relationships, and used by shipowners as a reserve force of labour with the intention to depress wages and hinder the organisation of European workers. By the time European and Asian sailors were pitched against each other in the globalised maritime labour markets of the early twentieth century, Asian sailors were indeed in a different position than Europeans. This, however, was not consequent upon backward, underdeveloped Asian societies – which supposedly were ripe for modernisation according to colonial narratives – and nor were Asian workers ignorant of labour markets, organisations and the representation of labour’s interests. More likely, it was the actual consequence of the combined influences of high colonialism and capitalism that actively worsened the position of Asian maritime workers during the nineteenth century.

It follows from this that the resulting conflict was not born of some kind of inherent ‘popular racism’ among European workers, but rather that it stemmed from the growth in organisation among European seafarers at the turn of the twentieth century which turned *implicit* competition between workers into *explicit* competition between unionised and non-unionised.³⁴ This conflict became racially inflected only in the aftermath of the international seamen’s strike of 1911. Seamen and their organisations were thus left with two options: one of *conflict*, fighting against unorganised (and in this case Asian) seafarers; or one of *solidarity*, trying to reach out and promote the spread of unions.

Author note

Some parts of this chapter can also be found in the paper ‘Changing tides – maritime labour relations in Europe and Asia’, presented at and possibly to be published in the volume of the workshop ‘Economic Institutional Change and Global Labour Relations’ (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, September 2014).

34. Versus the explanations of Tabili and Wubben.