



## Chinese women seafarers: A case study of the women cadets in Shanghai<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

In the maritime sector, seafaring has been predominantly a male industry. The industry had developed its own culture which denied or precluded women's participation. This paper draws on the data and analysis of the Gender, Empowerment and Multi-cultural Crew (GEM) Project, an international study aiming to examine seafarers' welfare, focusing on gender issues arising from a multi-cultural crew environment in three countries: China, Nigeria and the UK. The main research findings, which relate to China, are reported under the headings of motivation, training, employment opportunities and barriers, and career prospects for women. The paper concludes with a discussion on an important new state policy concerning gender equality in university recruitment and with recommendations to move things forward.

### 1. Introduction

In shipping, seafaring has been predominantly a male industry. The traditional demarcation between men and women has developed a division between the 'attributes and arenas of each gender' [1]. The maritime industry had developed its own culture 'which denied or precluded a female presence', as Appleby notes in his historical study *Women and English Piracy, 1540–1720* [2]. In many coastal towns and villages, people are traditionally superstitious about women on board, as many believed that women would be a 'potential source of malevolence or bad luck'. For example, some folklore asserts that if a man meets a woman while on his way to his fishing boat, he will not catch any fish [3]. Indeed, such superstition against women remains in some fishing and seafaring communities in the 21st century. For instance, Zhao et. al. report in a study of women's role in English fisheries that even women fisheries officers themselves are still cautioned 'not to touch the fisherman's boat' for fear of 'bringing bad luck' to his trip [4].

China is no exception. Traditionally, women were not allowed to attend a new ship's launch, or even touch it because it was believed that women would bring bad luck to the ship and the crew. This old tradition was challenged in the early 1950s when Mao and his communist comrades came to power, bringing a new ideology which

promoted equality between men and women. Mao has a world-renowned saying on gender equality: '(T)he time has changed. Now, men and women are equal. Whatever men can do, women can also do' [5]. Following this, in the early 1950s, maritime colleges opened their doors to women. The mid-1970s witnessed the heyday of Chinese women seafarers and in 1976, *Fengtao*, the world first and only ocean going ship crewed entirely by female officers set sail for Japan, attracting a huge amount of media attention and admiration from around the world [6].

The world has seen China rising as an economic power since the late 1970s. However, many of the values held high in Mao's time have been abandoned, and Mao's famous promotional remark on gender equality, as noted above, no longer attracts attention. Chinese women have quickly withdrawn from many of the occupations where they had advanced into in Mao's time under the planned economy (1950s–1970s). Shipping, maritime education and training (MET) facilities closed their doors to women. In 1995, China bid farewell to the country's last woman captain when Captain Wang Jialing retired from the Yangtze. This apparently closed the chapter on Chinese women's sailing history in commercial shipping [7].

This clearly was in sharp contrast to the international movement during the same period, which highlighted women's roles in and contribution to the world economy and promoted gender equality

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and empowerment of women across economic sectors. Indeed, the promotion of gender equality has been a goal of the United Nations (UN) and its specialised agencies, including the International Maritime Agency (IMO). In 1995, the same year in which China bid farewell to women seafarers, the UN held the Fourth World Conference on Women, highlighting the urgency for ‘action for equality, development and peace’ [8]. In 2000, the UN adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Amongst these ‘goals’, MDG3 aims to ‘promote gender equality and empower women’ [9]. In 2000, responding to the UN MDGs, the IMO started a process to establish regional support networks for women around the world and announced its plan to develop a ‘Global Strategy for Women Seafarers’ in order to improve the diversity of seafarers [10].

In all this, the sharp contrast between the international dynamics in promoting women's participation in seafaring and China's restoration of conservatism towards women in shipping during the same period led this research team to ask some important questions: Have Chinese women really withdrawn from seafaring? Has China been isolated from the global initiatives and dynamics which advocate women's participation in employment at sea? If yes, why? If not, what is the situation, the process and the prospects?

This paper attempts to explore and answer these questions. It draws on the data and analysis of the Gender, Empowerment and Multi-cultural Crew (GEM) Project, an international study aiming to examine seafarer's welfare, focusing on gender issues arising from a multi-cultural crew environment in three countries: China, Nigeria and the UK [11]. The rest of the paper will, first of all, briefly discuss the lack of literature on this subject matter, and then describe the methods employed in the collection of the empirical data. The main research findings will be reported along the lines of motivation, training, employment opportunities and barriers, and career prospects for women. The paper concludes with a discussion of an important new state policy concerning gender equality in university recruitment, and with recommendations to move things forward.

## 2. Literature review

There is a serious lack of scholarly studies on the Chinese women seafarers. Both English and Chinese were employed as language tools when surveying the relevant literature. In the review of the Chinese database, this research team found that most publications on Chinese women seafarers are largely historical studies making reference to women's sailing experiences up to mid-1990s [12]. A small number of papers calling on gender equality at sea in today's shipping are carried in Chinese academic journals. These are written by lecturers in maritime colleges or universities. Unfortunately, these papers tend to make statements without the substantive support of empirical evidence including, for example, Zhao and Pu's short paper ‘Opening the Door of Seafaring for Women’ (2005) and Fu's enthusiastic position paper ‘Our Time Calling for Women to Go to Sea’ (2003). Articles promoting women's participation in seafaring are also found in media reports, in newspapers and magazines and some industry on line sources [13].

Our survey of the English publications and other sources found a small number of publications on the subject, but these were nearly all written by Zhao and Zhang, authors from the team from SSU. This includes, for example Zhao's study of women seafarers in China reported in *Women Seafarers: Global Policies and Practices* [14] and Zhang and Zhao's research on the same subject matter in their paper ‘Chinese Women Seafarers: Past, Present and Prospects’ carried as a chapter in Momoko Kitada et al.'s *Maritime Women: Global Leadership* [15]. These are likely to be the only major scholarship on Chinese women seafarers, although research has been found on women seafarers in Hong Kong and Taiwan [16,17].

Critically, Zhao's study was carried out 15 years ago, when the Women Cadets Programme in Shanghai had just started, hence it was unable to gain profound knowledge and insight into the women cadets

involved. Zhang and Zhao's recent research provides more details about the recruitment and training of these women cadets, the focus being nearly exclusively on the campus rather than the on-board aspect of the training and the issues involved. Neither of these studies provides an in-depth examination these female cadets' sailing experiences.

## 3. Methodology

The research was conducted in Shanghai between 2015 and 2016 with Shanghai Maritime University (SMU) as the main research location as in China this university has been the only facility out of the 75 MET institutions, where women cadets are recruited for maritime courses (only navigation). The Shanghai Maritime University is the only MET institution in China which has officially opened its doors to and recruited women to study nautical courses between 2000 and 2016. The University is under the administration of Shanghai Municipal Government, which is more open, liberal and efficient compared to most other Chinese cities. This grants the University a certain degree of flexibility and autonomy in decision-making. The Women Cadets Programme has been running in this context, against the national mainstream which has banned women from joining maritime colleges and universities, until very recently when a new policy was introduced in the summer of 2016 (to be discussed later in this paper).

A wide range of stakeholders in Shanghai were interviewed, including shipping companies, both in state-owned and in private sectors, trade unions, manning agencies, ship management companies, government officials, port welfare suppliers and others. Both qualitative and quantitative methods, a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were employed in primary data gathering and analysis.

During our study in 2015/2016, a total of 121 cadets participated in the questionnaire survey. They included males and females, between the age of 18 and 24. The cohorts include 58 (F19, M39) without training experience at sea, and 63 (F16, M47) with sailing experience on training ships, as shown in [Table 1].

At the same time, the research team conducted 26 in-depth interviews with female cadets and women seafarers, male and female maritime lecturers, including some in senior positions; managers of shipping companies (two Chinese and one joint-venture and in government agencies in charge of seafarers' training and regulation. All these interviews were carried out in Chinese at offices except one which was conducted in a restaurant at the request of the interviewee who preferred not to have the interview in his office. [Table 2] shows the distribution of these interviews according to gender and sector.

Clearly, the focus of these interviews was on women seafarers. A small number of shipping and crewing managers, from four companies, with crew recruitment experiences also participated in the study. They were all male, well reflecting the gender-biased nature of the maritime industry where the male is dominant not only in numbers but more so in managerial and other senior positions.

The Chinese government has strict procedures in place for officials to receive and talk to ‘foreigners’. Usually, there is no problem if ‘technical’ issues concerning science, technology, economy, finance, history, fine art and so on are on the agenda. Many officials welcome interviews of this nature and they are usually open in sharing experiences, observations and opinions in the interview. Issues of the social scientist's concern such as ‘seafarers welfare, work and employment conditions’ ‘seafarers rights’ and other ‘human factors’ tend to be a

**Table 1**  
Cadets covered in the survey (2015/2016).

Cadets category	Female	Male	Total
Cadets (Pre-Sea Training)	19	39	58
Cadets (Post-Sea training)	16	47	63
Total	35	86	121

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