

Repatriation of Chinese seamen

Issue

This report was commissioned as the result of an undertaking given by the Immigration Minister in a Parliamentary adjournment debate in July 2021, during which Kim Johnson MP raised the issue of the enforced repatriation of Chinese seamen from Liverpool at the end of the Second World War, some of whom left behind British families who have never been able to find out what had happened to their relatives. The Minister committed the Home Office to searching for any further information available that could be provided to relatives, and to reporting back to Parliament in due course.

Methodology

Archival research has been carried out at The National Archives, the School of Oriental and African Studies, and the Maritime Museum, Liverpool. In addition to consulting Home Office files, these searches have also included shipping companies' and shipping agents' papers, and the files of other government departments. These sources were used to provide an overall historical context for the repatriation of Chinese seamen.

In an effort to trace the movements of some of the repatriated individuals who were married to British-born women, a list of marriages was compiled from Liverpool marriage registers of marriages between Chinese seamen, resident in Liverpool during and immediately after WW2, and British women. These were then cross-checked with ships' manifests giving details of Chinese seamen repatriated as passengers between 1945-1949. Relatives whose fathers or grandfathers had been repatriated also provided some names.

Whilst considerable efforts have been made to find information and to track down any available documentation, there are multiple gaps in the record. Many government files have been destroyed, including individual case files. Other documents are missing from company archives. No agency involved in repatriation efforts made lists of seamen who were to be repatriated, nor were the names of those allowed to remain in the UK on the basis of marriage systematically recorded. It has only been possible to identify some of the ships used to repatriate Chinese seamen (again, no contemporary index exists). Passenger lists for the vessels that can be identified as having been employed in the repatriation process are themselves incomplete and not necessarily accurate: the transliteration of Chinese names follows no agreed standard, either in ships' manifests or in contemporary marriage registers. Further, there is no way of identifying through official records those seamen who, whilst in long term relationships with British-born women, did not marry; these men, and any partners and children they may have left behind, remain unaccounted for in any official records.

Summary of findings

- The repatriation of Chinese seamen from Liverpool was part of a large-scale post-war repatriation effort, beginning in 1945, that affected thousands of Allied ex-servicemen and refugees

- Until July 1946, a marriage to a British-born woman that had taken place during the war did not provide foreign men with a route to settlement in the UK
- Chinese seamen were targeted for repatriation because their presence in Liverpool was seen as disruptive, because there was pressure to man ships for war operations in the Far East, and because this supported shipping companies' ability to maintain a pool of cheap labour
- Deportation Orders (DOs) were used in only very few cases to enforce repatriation of Chinese sailors; however, other forms of coercion, including the threat of DOs and lack of employment, were applied to persuade seamen to depart
- Loss and destruction of records make it very difficult to make definitive findings on the overall numbers or individual identities of married men repatriated, whether voluntarily or as a result of coercion. However, there is evidence from contemporary official and media sources that some married men were required to depart
- Despite searches of marriage registers and passenger lists, it has been possible to identify by name very few of the Chinese seamen who married British-born women who were repatriated
- No effort was made to allow those married men already repatriated, who wished to do so, to return to Liverpool after the policy was changed in July 1946 to make wartime marriages grounds for settlement in the UK.

The Historical Context

Post-war repatriation and the problem of married men

The British government began making arrangements for the repatriation of both refugees and Allied service personnel in 1945, before the end of the war in Europe. The expectation that 'aliens' would return to their country of origin on demobilisation or the end of hostilities applied to all nationalities equally, although exceptions were made for US and Polish ex-service personnel in certain circumstances.

This policy was intended to apply irrespective of any ties formed by those who had either served or taken refuge in the UK during the War, including any foreign men who had married after September 1 1939. At the time, while marriage to a male UK citizen automatically conferred British nationality, and the right to settle in the UK, on a foreign woman, the same did not apply to foreign men who married British women. Marriage to a British-born woman conferred neither nationality nor the right to settle on a foreign husband. It followed from this that a British woman who married a foreigner would lose her UK citizenship and become a national of her husband's country; she would be expected to take up residence in his country of origin on repatriation.

The gradual implementation of repatriation led to a steady stream of inquiries from both representatives of Allied Forces and interested individuals, suggesting that foreign servicemen and refugees who had married British-born women during the War should be allowed to settle and seek work in the UK. Despite Home Office efforts to maintain and broadcast the line that marriage did not provide any such entitlement, French, Dutch and Belgian authorities (and possibly others) who were managing the demobilisation and

repatriation of their troops were said to have been advising those servicemen who had married British-born women that they would probably be allowed to settle and look for work in the UK.

Whilst officially maintaining that only pre-war settlement entitled foreign men married to British-born women an automatic right to remain, and that others who wished to make a home in the UK must return to their country of origin and apply for a work or visit visa, discussions in contemporary documents indicate that there was a general awareness that this policy was both unenforceable in practice and possibly ethically questionable, at least on the grounds that requiring such men to leave the country could be said to be leaving any children of the marriage fatherless, should a British-born woman not choose to leave with her husband.

Some refugees and ex-service personnel applied for naturalisation, a route to settlement that would normally have been open, but that was not an operable solution during the initial demobilisation and repatriation phase, as consideration of naturalisation applications had been paused in November 1940, and did not recommence until November 1946.

The principle of repatriation of all foreigners, whether ex-Allied Forces or refugees, was at least in part a response to dire economic circumstances: depleted by the war effort, facing severe shortages of food, housing, petrol and other essentials, it was widely stated, in Parliamentary debates for example, that the country could ill afford that work or services be taken up by immigrants. Despite a counternarrative on the debt owed to those who had fought and on the continuing obligation to offer refuge to those who faced persecution or destitution in Europe, and labour shortages in some key sectors, the underlying tenor of Home Office responses to requests for leniency toward individuals or cohorts suggests that foreigners of all sorts were seen primarily as a burden on the state, and that ex-servicemen were as a class considered potentially disruptive, being no longer subject to military discipline once demobilised. A contemporary minute discussing the matter of men who had married British-born women frames the issue as predominately a problem of ineffective sanctions:

“if these men hang on long enough, [the office dealing with demobilised foreign ex-service personnel] will no doubt have difficulty getting rid of them...”¹

Pragmatically, the official line was to defend the status quo, despite an awareness that what were referred to as “mixed marriages”, whether involving ex-servicemen or refugees, posed a complicated problem that could have ethical dimensions:

“...It would be useful to have a pointer on the treatment of ex-members of the Allied Forces who have B[ritish]/B[orn] wives. If the giving of a pointer would be premature at this stage there seems to be no alternative but to continue to make threatening, but ineffective gestures...”

¹ HO minute of 8 March 1946. TNA file HO213/1499: ‘Position regarding aliens in UK serving in Allied Forces who have married British women and wish to remain in the UK after demobilisation.’

“...In peacetime practice it has always been found difficult to maintain the separation of a husband and wife and however undesirable an alien has been, if his wife refused to leave the UK, he usually found means of returning by hook or by crook and we were eventually compelled to accept him. It may be that recognising this human law, we shall have to allow refugees who have acquired British wives and wish to make their home here to remain, but there is strong objection to dealing with isolated groups of refugees piecemeal, and requests for an assurance in the case of individuals or groups however strong their claim have been refused.”²

These considerations, of ethics and practicality, eventually resulted in a significant change in policy. On July 5, 1946, the Home Secretary announced that any foreign man who had married a British-born woman after the outbreak of the war, but before the date of his announcement, would be allowed to settle in the UK, provided he was a desirable immigrant.

The regulation of foreign seamen's employment

The immigration position of foreign merchant seamen during WW2, when numbers expanded exponentially in response to the needs of wartime, remained governed by the Merchant Seamen Acts, which worked to ensure that foreign seamen discharged from ships in the UK were landed on conditions that gave no route to settlement; their stay was by definition temporary, until such time as they transferred to an outbound vessel. While many seamen, including those of Chinese or Indian ('Lascar') origin, might have had rights as commonwealth British subjects, these were overridden by merchant seamen legislation.

The limitation on immigration thus effected was possibly a secondary consequence of a system that had been assembled primarily to ensure that the lower wages paid to Chinese or Lascar seamen could be maintained. This differential was essential to the operations of the main shipping companies who managed the ocean-going and European shipping routes, including those to the Far East and the Americas; at the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, a Lascar or Chinese seaman's articles of employment entitled him to rates of pay that varied between 25% and half the rate of a British seaman signing on to UK articles. This disparity in pay and conditions continued during the first years of the war, despite disputes and strike actions on the part of both Lascars and Chinese seamen. Only after the Japanese occupation, which meant that uncooperative Chinese seamen could no longer be threatened with deportation to their home ports in Hongkong, Singapore and China, did the Chinese have an effective bargaining position against the shipping companies. The change led to a settlement in April 1942 that raised wages significantly (although not to the level of their British counterparts) and added an entitlement to the War Risk bonus that had previously only been paid to UK seamen, or had been paid at a much lower rate.

The expansion of foreign seamen numbers between 1939-45 was managed in part through the creation, after the wages settlement of 1942, of a reserve pool of labour, the members of whom were on looser contracts that did not guarantee continuous employment but

² HO minute of 26 April 1945. TNA file HO213/1499: 'Position regarding aliens in UK serving in Allied Forces who have married British women and wish to remain in the UK after demobilisation.'

allowed members a limited right to reject a posting to a ship. Two shipping companies, Holt's (or Blue Funnel) and Anglo-Saxon Petroleum (Shell) managed their reserve pools out of Liverpool at this time. The increased wartime demand for crews thus led to an expansion of the Chinese population of the city, made up in part by members of these pools, by an estimated 2-3000.

Repatriation of Chinese seamen from Liverpool

The repatriation of Allied ex-servicemen was already underway when discussions were initiated on the repatriation of seamen based in Liverpool who were, or would become, surplus to wartime requirements. However, because war operations in the Far East continued through much of 1946, the focus of the Ministry of War Transport (MoWT), which managed ship movements during the war, was on maintaining manning levels for ships needed in this arena, as well as on achieving repatriation. MoWT's hope was that seamen who had been reluctant to sign up to ships could be persuaded to do so once Allied control of Hongkong and China had been reinstated and the threat of deportation for those who did not comply with their landing conditions could once again be used as a lever, thus addressing an acute manning shortage in UK ships bound for operations in the Far East. The shipping companies' primary concern was that seamen were signed on at Chinese article rates, rather than at the higher UK rates, in order to protect their business model, which depended on the availability of a pool of cheap labour.

By November 1945, Holt's communicated the parameters for post-war employment of Chinese seamen to their shipping agents in Hongkong, Butterfield and Swire: in order to enable Holt's to reinstate wages at a pre-war level, it was proposed that all existing crews be repatriated and replaced by fresh recruits from amongst seamen who were currently in Hongkong and Shanghai, at a much lower basic wage rate. This plan was designed both to ensure the viability of the company's business and to solve what Holt's saw as a discipline problem caused by individual "undesirables" against whom there had, for the duration of the Japanese occupation, been no effective sanction. Butterfield and Swire, in response, noted that there were legitimate causes for dissatisfaction, including the disparity between Chinese and white crews' remuneration, and the fact that the latter were still receiving the War Risk Bonus, which Holt's had stopped paying Chinese crews (the bonus was discontinued for Chinese seamen from November 1945, but was still being paid to white crew two years later). Holt's did not acknowledge the legitimacy of any such argument.

Methods of repatriation

How to effect the repatriation of Chinese seamen is the subject of official meetings and correspondence in the UK beginning in late 1945. Holt's essentially colonialist view of Chinese crews, as natives in need of a reimposition of discipline, set the tone for how the repatriation process was managed in Liverpool. Whilst the main movers in the efforts to get Chinese seamen onto ships that would pay off their crew in Hongkong, Singapore or mainland China appear to have been the MoWT and the shipping companies, the operation was planned with considerable involvement of and cooperation from the Liverpool police and the Home Office.

The language used to explain and justify the proposed operation to repatriate surplus members of the Chinese pool is clearly racially inflected and prejudicial, although it also echoes that of the discussion on the need to repatriate foreign Allied ex-service personnel:

*“...the Chinese population of Liverpool has swollen from some 200 to 2,000, largely as a result of Chinese seamen coming to this country and becoming unemployed or unemployable. They have caused a good deal of trouble to the police, but it has not hitherto been possible to get rid of them. Now [that repatriation to China is possible] ...it is proposed to set in motion the usual steps for getting rid of foreign seamen whose presence here is unwelcome.”*³

The need for repatriation—and the importance of providing crews for wartime operations in the Far East—is not really in question in these discussions. The primary focus was the best, most effective means to these ends. All parties were aware that many concerned did not wish to leave, whether because of ties in the UK or because China was in a state of upheaval and danger, but as with the wider repatriation effort, the underlying assumption was that ridding the country of foreigners was necessary in the national interest.

The willingness to countenance wide-scale coercion, however, seems more present in this context than in comparable memoranda on demobilisation of European Allied troops. MoWT inquired of the HO what “means of compulsion” could be applied to those who, while claiming to be willing to return in the longer term, did not wish to do so at the moment due to prevailing conditions in China. Both MoWT and the shipping companies pressed the HO repeatedly on the feasibility of providing large numbers of Deportation Orders for Pool sailors who refused to sign on to ships discharging in the Far East. Despite wishing to support the repatriation effort, the HO was reluctant to use the provisions of the Alien Orders wholesale for this purpose. However, officials agreed that although non-reporting (to the police) and older breaches of landing conditions were not in themselves offences that should incur deportation action, if landing conditions were to be varied to require departure on a particular date, a subsequent breach, such as a refusal to board a ship sailing on that date, could justify deportation.

Preparations for the first wave of repatriations, from November 1945 to January 1946, are documented in some detail in surviving Home Office files. Those identified as “undesirable” were targeted for the initial sailings, and plans were made for the men identified to be interviewed by the HO’s Immigration Branch officials and their landing conditions varied; those who did not go aboard voluntarily would be “rounded up” by Liverpool police, with Deportation Orders used to enforce departure if necessary.

Repatriation began in late 1945 and was in full swing in 1946. After the first three ships identified by the MoWT sailed between December 1945 and January 1946, there are few further details in Home Office files of subsequent sailings. But Holt’s records give some insight into the kind of arrangements made to overcome the shortage of available berths: in March 1946, they were allowing captains to exceed normal “boatage” limits, and

³ Memo to Secretary of State, ‘Repatriation of Chinese Seamen’ 22 October 1945. TNA file HO 213/926:

accommodate men in cargo holds “without additional fittings” in order to speed up repatriation.

The result of these efforts is clear; a significant proportion of the mass repatriation intended had already been achieved by mid-1946. Home Office figures in July 1946 give a total of just under 5000 repatriations to date, 3,569 of whom had been signed on for discharge in the Far East (ie. as crew), and 1962 repatriated as passengers. Repatriations continued, albeit at a slightly slower rate, for several years after the war ended; in correspondence with their shipping agents in Hongkong in December 1948, Holts were still speaking of the need to continue the process of shifting seamen off UK articles until such time as all Chinese sailors were based in Hongkong and Shanghai.

It is not possible to be precise about how many Chinese merchant sailors were deported for failing to comply with their landing conditions, as the records do not always specify the grounds for deportation, but of a total of approximately 50 deportations of Chinese nationals from November 1945 through 1948, about half were on criminal grounds, and the remainder for having not met landing conditions or failing to have the right paperwork. This would indicate that in the overwhelming majority of cases, seamen were repatriated without resorting to implementation of Deportation Orders, with men being “persuaded” to sign on as crew for discharge in the Far East, or to leave as passengers.

Searches of passenger manifests in the National Archives were undertaken in an effort to identify those Chinese seamen who were repatriated as passengers.⁴ This search identified 28 sailings from 1945 to 1949 where Chinese seamen are listed as passenger repatriates. This will include most, but not all, of the ships used for passenger repatriations. While many used for this purpose were Holt’s-owned, several other companies’ vessels were also often involved on what appears to have been an ad hoc basis, making identification of every voyage very difficult.

This exercise identified by name some 2143 of the Chinese seamen who were repatriated from Liverpool as passengers from 1945 to 1949; the majority are identified by a Pool number—either as Holt’s or Anglo-Saxon pool members—while a few are from other shipping companies⁵, not all of which were based in Liverpool. Of the total identified in this way, approximately 1295 left the UK during or before July 1946 (compared to the total given by contemporary Home Office records of 1362), with a further 848 identified as having been repatriated as passengers in subsequent years.

Extrapolating from these figures, it is possible to estimate that, allowing for those voyages not identified, the total number repatriated as passengers from Liverpool amounted to approximately 2,300. Given the fluctuations in shipping requirements post-1946, the total number of crew repatriates remains very uncertain. An additional factor rendering all

⁴ No such attempt was made in relation to those who joined ships in Liverpool as crew, on Chinese articles that would have required their discharge in the Far East. This would not have been feasible: crew lists do not necessarily specify employment terms; single records can cover multiple, often very short voyages that might have been interim stages in a ship’s passage to ports in China or Singapore, and the records are very difficult to decipher with any certainty due to varying levels of legibility and preservation.

⁵ Including Ben Line, Hall Line, and Counties Ship Management (CSM).

estimates approximate is that both crew and, to a lesser extent, passenger lists could include the names of those who had been repatriated on more than one occasion.

	HO reported figures 12/45-7/46 (as stated 7/46)	Passenger repatriates 12/45-7/46 (traced 1/22)	Passenger repatriates 8/46-5/49 (traced 1/22)	Total passenger repatriations identified 12/45-5/49 (traced 1/22)	Estimated total repatriations
Crew	3569	-	-	-	c.6000
Passenger	1362	1295	848	2143	c.2300

Table 1: Numbers repatriated as crew and passengers: comparison of official contemporary figures and current estimates

Chinese seamen married to British-born women

By summer 1945, the specific issue of Chinese men married to British-born women began to surface, with Holt's asking the Home Office what their policy was in these circumstances, as these men, according to Holt's, were refusing to sign up to ships unless their discharge to the UK at the end of their voyage could be guaranteed. In many ways, the Home Office response to this question was similar to that on foreign demobilised ex-servicemen; Chinese seamen were being treated no more harshly than other foreign men so positioned: "white aliens [who have married British-born women] have been given no encouragement to decline repatriation." Again, there is concern from both Home Office officials and Holt's that this policy should be publicised, for fear that otherwise the idea would spread that marriage could be a route to settlement.

But despite the claim to equal treatment, the evaluation of marriages entered into by Chinese sailors is racially inflected. Negative racial stereotyping is evident throughout these discussions: Chinese seamen who are reluctant to sign up for discharge in the Far East are characterised *sui generis* as not merely an employment problem but as members of a criminal underclass containing,

*"two or three hundred hardened offenders...who are responsible for most of the rackets in the Chinese community in Liverpool i.e. opium, gambling, black market etc...it is important that these men be rounded up and got away to sea in order that the social evils for which they are responsible should be eradicated."*⁶

The British-born women who had entered into relationships with Chinese seamen were also routinely denigrated as often of "the prostitute class". Given these assessments, it is not surprising that both men and women in this situation were considered likely to be

⁶ Letter from MoWT to Home Office, 14 March 1945 TNA file HO 213/808 Chinese Seamen Marriages

particularly prone to entering into marriages of convenience if to do so were to enable settlement.

Nonetheless, as the repatriation operation began, Chinese seamen who claimed to have been married to British-born women were excluded from the initial round of repatriations. Figures given by Liverpool Police's Alien Registration Office suggested that there were, according to official records in December 1945, 117 men who had married; while their landing conditions were still to be varied in line with other seamen identified as inactive members of the Pool and so a priority for repatriation, they would not be required to board a vessel pending an investigation into their "desirability" and that of their wives.

No details as to when marriages had taken place are provided, but given the expansion of the Chinese seaman presence in Liverpool during the war, it is reasonable to assume that most if not all would have occurred after September 1939. That marriages were to be taken into account in this way might appear inconsistent with the official line that marriage during the war years would not amount to a bar to repatriation, but in practice it did work as a lever in the man's favour: the existence of a family in the UK was understood by Home Office officials as a factor that needed to be considered on a case-by-case basis before any enforced repatriation took place. That the repatriation in question would be, in all probability, to mainland China, and that British women and children were involved, was an additional element that officials suggested should be taken into account compared to 'white aliens' in the same situation, an instance where colonialist assumptions might be said to have worked to the advantage of those affected:

*"A point for consideration as regards mixed marriages where Chinese and other Orientals are concerned, however, is that British-born dependants can hardly be expected to take up residence in the country of the husband."*⁷

These investigations into the suitability of the participants and the genuineness of marriages were carried out by local Special Branch officers in Liverpool and the results remitted to the HO, but no trace of these investigations remains, so it is not possible to determine how many of the marriages were considered valid, or how many avoided repatriation on these grounds.

Where a marriage was judged to be valid and the parties involved desirable, there remained the question of how the Chinese seaman concerned was to be enabled to remain in the UK. A strict interpretation of the immigration provisions did not allow for seamen, married or not, to be landed in order to seek shore employment: they were, at least in theory, expected to continue to sign up to ships; in addition to the reluctance to admit of marriage as a means to settlement, it was also emphasised by MoWT that married men were not exempted from what was seen as their duty to continue to contribute to the war effort.

The difficulty of finding suitable work for married seamen became particularly pertinent after the Home Secretary's announcement in July 1946 changed the rules for eligibility for settlement for foreign men married to British-born women. Compared to the original total

⁷ Minute of 30 August 1945 TNA file HO 213/808: Chinese Seamen Marriages

of 117 marriages that had been identified in late 1945, HO files indicate that in summer 1946 officials were aware of 79 unresolved cases of men married to British-born women liable for repatriation under the old eligibility rules, 22 of whom were said to wish to return to China, while the remaining 57 wished to settle in the UK.

There is explicit discussion in Home Office files on how to proceed in these changed circumstances, and it is noted that “in order to avoid any appearance of discrimination against Chinese seamen” they should be treated in the same way as any other foreign national who had married a British woman. This would imply that marriage at any time up to the time of the Home Secretary’s announcement would render a suitable applicant eligible for settlement; and this was reflected in the revised instructions issued to immigration officials in August 1946. However, a number of completing practical and political considerations would appear to have impacted the extent to which this change altered the reality on the ground for married Chinese seamen.

Firstly, Holt’s practice in relation to Chinese seamen married to British-born women did not make any allowance for marriage: they continued to put married men in the Pool who refused to repatriate or sign on for discharge in the Far East “off pay”, in an effort to force them to sign on the new Chinese articles that did not provide sufficient income to support a family in the UK. Efforts on the part of the Liverpool Immigration branch to find berths for married Chinese on UK ships, thus allowing both discharge in the UK at the end of a voyage and a higher rate of pay, had been unsuccessful, reportedly because the larger shipping companies (presumably Holt’s in particular) applied pressure on others not to employ Chinese labour under British conditions.

Secondly, it was felt that any change in approach to married Chinese seamen could potentially cause embarrassment to those who had driven the repatriation project in Liverpool to date, resulting in the repatriation of some married men: the shipping companies, but also local immigration officials and the police. In addition, it was noted that in response to representations to the Home Secretary in December 1945 from Bessie Braddock, then the local MP, it had been stated that no concessions to defer repatriation would be made on the basis of marriages that had taken place since repatriation had been a possibility.

Pressure to resolve the issue was briefly increased by the publication of an article in the News Chronicle in August 1946, in which a local woman, Marion Lee, claimed that 150 women and their children married to Chinese seamen had been left destitute, without recourse except “enforced deportation to a foreign land to which we do not want to go” by the compulsory repatriation of their husbands. In response to this article, it was proposed that a solution might be found to the lack of employment opportunities for married Chinese seamen through a meeting of the parties concerned, and that pressure be brought to bear on MoWT to enable the fulfilment of the new rules by finding employment for these seamen on British ships. However, when it became clear that this article, and Mrs Lee’s application to the Lord Mayor, had not sparked further media or Parliamentary interest, the matter was allowed to rest. Although officials were well aware that some men who had been married at a time that would retrospectively make them eligible for settlement had

already been repatriated, no action was taken to identify these cases, or to enable them to return to the UK, should they wish to do so.

Was repatriation voluntary or enforced?

In response to previous representations about enforced repatriation of Chinese seamen married to British-born women, the Home Office has consistently maintained that there was no such enforcement, often quoting the denial made in the files in response to the publication of the article in the News Chronicle in August 1946:

“no Chinese seaman married to a British-born woman has at any time been forcibly repatriated under the provisions of the Aliens Order apart from one or two who were deported after conviction for criminal offences.”⁸

This claim may well be strictly true, but it depends on a narrow interpretation of the meaning of “forcibly repatriated,” for it implies that only repatriation that is enacted through the implementation of a Deportation Order counts as enforced. As noted above, very few Deportation Orders were actually used during the repatriation process in Liverpool, but that does not mean that all those who left did so voluntarily. Men had their landing conditions varied to require that they leave on a certain date, and usually on a specific ship; particularly in the first tranche of repatriations, they were threatened with Deportation Orders should they not comply, and were subject to attempts by the local police to “round them up”; that the overwhelming majority of men complied under these conditions—either by signing on as crew or by agreeing to repatriation as passengers—says very little about how voluntary was their participation.

Many seamen will have in fact have sought repatriation willingly—it was traditionally a condition of their terms of employment that they be entitled to return to a home port at the end of their contract. And there is evidence that some men married to British women went voluntarily, in the expectation that their British-born wives and dependants would follow them; for example, an article in the Liverpool Echo describing a sailing of the *Menelaus* on 21 May 1946 presents repatriation in an entirely positive light:

“When the Blue Funnel liner Menelaus sailed from Birkenhead, this morning, she took with her 130 seamen from Liverpool’s Chinese colony, who were being repatriated after a long exile...”

“A number of the repatriated Chinese were married here, but their wives and families cannot go with them yet due to shortage of shipping accommodation. Meanwhile, in preparation for their new life, their children are receiving instruction in Chinese in Liverpool.”

Other sources give a different picture. For example, the Hartlepool Northern Echo of February 2nd, 1946, states: “Only 12 of 200 English girls married to Chinese seamen at Liverpool during the war have asked to be sent to China to join their husbands.” Bessie

⁸ Minute 20 August 1946, TNA file HO 213/926

Braddock MP, in an adjournment debate in December 1945, presented the issue as that of women left without recourse because of enforced repatriation:

“There are many cases in this country, and particularly in the ports, where women have married foreigners and the men have now returned to their ports of origin, leaving no trace...In Liverpool there were a tremendous number of Chinese seamen when the war broke out and their home ports were closed. The Maritime Agreement made it imperative that those men should be returned home as soon as their ports of origin were open.

They have been in Liverpool and other seaport towns for some four or five years. They have legally married Englishwomen, and these women have perhaps two or three children. Now that the ports of origin of these men are open, they are being compelled by the shipping companies to return to their ports of origin, the shipping companies having no further obligation to pay the men maintenance while they remain in port. The women who are left with two or three children have no possibility of getting any sort of maintenance from the men they have married.”

In light of these contemporary accounts, and the evidence of relatives since, it seems highly likely that, whilst married men were not routinely or systematically repatriated against their will without some consideration of the possibility of their being entitled to remain in the UK, some would have been coerced, either by means of threatened deportation or by the non-availability of work in the UK, to leave.

Whilst the repatriation procedures in Liverpool can be seen as broadly consistent with the wider series of repatriations taking place in Britain at the time, and were arguably legal impositions of immigration control, to claim that all Chinese married men who left did so voluntarily is disingenuous. Given that it was acknowledged in official papers that some seamen married to British-born women had already been repatriated by July 1946, and might well wish to return should this be possible, it is very likely that amongst the hundreds who were made to leave by the various forms of persuasion or coercion used were some who were married, but whose marriages did not meet the criterion originally in place, that a marriage should have taken place pre-war, or who were not judged desirable immigrants.

Further, the refusal of the main shipping companies to allow married men to sign onto British ships, and thus earn a wage that could sustain a family in the UK, worked as another means to coerce men to leave, and this situation is likely to have continued after the policy on the date of marriage was changed. No attempt appears to have been made after July 1946 to investigate whether men who had already left but who might be eligible for settlement, might have wished to return.

Tracing relatives

Estimates of the numbers of women and their dependants who were affected vary in accounts given at the time, from the 200 women quoted in the Northern Echo and the 150 given by Marion Lee. As Home Office files note, some of these referred to relationships outside marriage, so were not included in any official tally.

A major concern of those whose relatives were repatriated has always been that they disappeared without warning, and that there is no documentary evidence of what happened to them. Despite further research, including attempts to trace any extant Special Branch records of the investigations carried out into marriages, it has not been possible to find any additional papers giving details of who was investigated, and whether or not they were subsequently repatriated.

A search of Liverpool marriage registers for 1939-1946 identified 197 Chinese men employed on board ships who married British women after the outbreak of war in September 1939.⁹ These names were then checked against the passenger lists for all ships that could be found to have repatriated Chinese seamen as passengers.

Date of Marriage	Number
Sept 1939-August 1945	107
September 1945 - June 1946	48
July - December 1946	42
Total	197
Partial matches	33

Table 2: Marriages between Chinese seamen & British women identified from Liverpool marriage registers September 1939 – December 1946

Very few definitive matches have been found. In addition to the inevitable gap in the record represented by those who were in relationships that were not regularised, there are multiple possible reasons for this:

- It was only possible to check marriage records against passenger lists, but the majority of Chinese seamen, at least in the period from late 1945-July 1946, left Liverpool as crew; crew lists were not cross-checked as part of this exercise
- Due to the absence of any extant lists of ships that were used to repatriate seamen as passengers, it is likely that some ships were omitted from the checking process
- In a few cases, seamen were not listed individually on manifests, but as an unnamed group, viz. “100 Chinese repatriates” whose biographical details were not recorded
- The lack of consistency in how Chinese names are transliterated, and the use of different names in some cases, renders matching very uncertain
- A few seamen returned to Liverpool after repatriation and married their partners after 1946, outside the scope of the matching exercise.

⁹ The total figure will include a proportion who were not subject to the repatriation exercise. The search was based on a trawl of Chinese names, so will have picked up some individuals who were not members of the reserve pools who were seen as surplus to post-war requirements, or indeed recent arrivals in Liverpool. Marriage registers do not specify the nationality of the participants, and while occupations of both bride and groom are given, no information is provided as to the exact status of the groom, i.e. whether he was a member of the reserve pools or employed on a different basis. It is likely that some of the men identified in this search were long-standing members of the Liverpool Chinese community, and had British citizenship; in a few cases, occupations suggest that the men served in the Royal Navy, rather than as merchant seamen. The search was limited to marriages that were registered only in Liverpool South and Liverpool North districts; any marriages involving Liverpool residents that took place elsewhere will not have been picked up.

Of the 33 possible matches, listed in detail at Annex A¹⁰, only four can be said to be definite, based on a close match of name, age and occupation. Three of the four relate to marriages that took place after the end of the war in Europe, but before the Home Secretary's announcement of an extension of eligibility in July 1946. This finding, while limited in terms of the number of married men identified as having been repatriated as passengers, is consistent with the likelihood that marriages conducted during this period were viewed as potentially not genuine by investigators, since they took place after repatriation was planned or in progress.

In the remaining possible matches, there is insufficient evidence to make a determination, often because no occupation is given on the passenger list, or because ages and/or names, as recorded, differ to varying degrees. However, because of the many uncertainties introduced by transliteration, and by widely divergent ways of recording age, some of the more likely matches have been included in the annex.

¹⁰ This version of the report does not include the annex containing individual data matches.