

Indefinite transits: mobility and confinement in the age of steam*

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Abstract

The increased regulation of mobility that accompanied its late nineteenth-century expansion and acceleration is widely recognized. Regulatory practices reached out to distant shores and on board ships, heightening uncertainties and reshaping meanings of voyage and transit, especially for non-white passengers and crews. Travel and mobility are common themes in historical and other literatures. But less is known about experiences of uncertain or thwarted arrivals, involuntary departures, and indefinite transit resulting from practices governing steam-age mobility. People in transit illuminate the conditional openings and closures in such tropes as mobility, transit, and destination. Few spaces embodied and actualized ‘transit’ better than ships, and this article focuses on the role of ships as vessels of confinement. In equal parts about passengers and crews, it explores experiences of nominally free persons uncertainly afloat in a world marked otherwise by assured or accelerated oceanic mobility in three contexts that illustrate physical, political, and cultural constraints on maritime mobility in the age of steam. They are the 1914 voyage of the Komagata-maru, British merchant vessels employing Indian crews, and wartime subjection and resistance of Chinese crews on British and Dutch vessels.

Keywords Asian steamship crews, desertions, governing mobility, *Komagata-maru*, maritime travel, racial exclusion

It is now a commonplace that the late nineteenth-century expansion of mobility was accompanied by intensified restrictions and regulations. While some countries imposed checks on departing nationals, entry regulations (which by contrast often resulted in expulsions and deportations) are more relevant to my interest here in maritime transits. Entry regulations were geared towards many objectives, from monitoring ‘undesirable’ aliens to policing the movement of ‘vagrants’ and unskilled, destitute, physically weak, or disease-carrying

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travellers.¹ They were also notably racial and targeted whole groups – for example, ‘Asiatics’, Jews, and ‘people of colour’ – while overlapping literatures draw attention to contestations over belonging, citizenship, and sovereignty through which borders and boundary anxieties infiltrated the ‘nation’.²

Restrictions affected patterns and outcomes of mobility, on which they can offer interesting perspectives. This is no less true for mobility across oceans, where research can tend to be destination-centric or more prone than studies of terrestrial mobility to assume prior destinations. While irreproachable in many contexts, such conventions notably obscure itinerant or ‘vernacular’ pathways of mobility.³ Itinerant mobility was particularly common between densely trafficked ports in the Indian Ocean rim. It expanded in the late nineteenth century as sea passages became shorter, more predictable, and more affordable, to embrace pilgrims, religious mendicants, preachers, pedlar-entrepreneurs, workers, or often merely curious wanderers.⁴ Local circulations of newly arrived Chinese, Japanese, and Indian labourers and petty entrepreneurs along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts or across land borders between Mexico, USA, and Canada were also pronounced enough to seem ‘uncontrollable’ to US and Canadian officials, and to shake their ‘sense of security and confidence’.⁵ To some extent, such anxieties traced expanded circulatory pathways improvised by mobile Asian subjects probing an evolving and uncertain regulatory environment.

In the era of steam, political, racial, and cultural barriers to some extent replaced barriers falling to technology or human ingenuity. A metropolitan response to expanding mobility, particularly from Asia, was to establish or reinforce tiered arrangements of racialized ‘biopolitical borders’ reaching into ships and foreign ports. Such arrangements were far from total; some room for play remained. Yet for those who risked being excluded, let alone those who actually were, mobility, transit, voyage – even spaces such as ships – consequently came to signify different experiences and meanings. Ships could sometimes resemble ‘camps’, or, in Paul Kramer’s words, ‘spatial exceptions’, where states (and employers) could exercise ‘extraordinary power’: common emblems of mobility, and often of freedom, steamships could rather less visibly also become spaces of confinement.⁶

People in transit illuminate the conditional openings and closures that continue to mark mobility, and the cultural codes and conditional possibilities implicit in such tropes

1 Alison Bashford, ‘Immigration restriction: rethinking period and place from settler colonies to postcolonial nations’, *Journal of Global History*, 9, 1, 2014, pp. 26–48.

2 Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible subjects: illegal aliens and the making of modern America*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004; Mary Ting Yi Lui, *The Chinatown trunk mystery: murder, miscegenation, and other dangerous encounters in turn-of-the-century New York City*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.

3 Devleena Ghosh, ‘Under the radar of empire: unregulated travel in the Indian Ocean’, *Journal of Social History*, 45, 2, 2011, p. 498.

4 G. Balachandran, ‘Atlantic paradigms and aberrant histories’, *Atlantic Studies: Global Currents*, 11, 1, 2014, pp. 53–9; Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: the religious economy of the west Indian Ocean, 1840–1915*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Ghosh, ‘Under the radar’; Clare Anderson, ‘Subaltern lives: history, identity and memory in the Indian Ocean world’, *History Compass*, 11, 7, 2013, pp. 503–7.

5 Yukari Takai, ‘Asian migrants, exclusionary laws, and transborder migration in North America, 1880–1940’, *OAH Magazine of History*, 23, 4, 2009, p. 35; Kornel Chang, *Pacific connections: the making of the US–Canadian borderlands*, Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 2012; Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the lost histories of South Asian America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013; Seema Sohi, *Echoes of mutiny: race, surveillance, and Indian anticolonialism in North America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

6 Paul A. Kramer, ‘Power and connection: imperial histories of the United States in the world’, *American Historical Review*, 116, 5, 2011, p. 135.

as mobility, transit, and destination. Sandwiched between departures and destinations, 'transit' can represent journeys from one place to another where origins and destinations lay several days apart. Though mostly now anachronistic, this usage offers a helpful reminder of the term's compressed common, contemporary meaning. In relation to travel, 'transit' rarely any longer encompasses a whole journey. Instead it refers to 'passing through' particular spaces such as airline hubs. Partly, as travel times have shortened, transits have shrunk. Yet this compression prefigures and accompanies the release of other conceptions of transit (and the vehicles, vectors, spaces, and times associated with transit) to make them available as a more general condition.

Few spaces embody *and* actualize 'transit' better than ships: in other words, that indeterminately suspended state of stasis through which some mobile subjects experienced conditions of enhanced mobility. This article is therefore about ships' seemingly paradoxical role as vessels of confinement. It is in equal parts about both passengers and crews. Passengers arriving by ship could be refused landing for reasons other than quarantine. Landing restrictions were generally enforced on individual passengers or groups; only rarely were they applied to all or most passengers of a vessel. Nevertheless, instances of such embargoes can provide clues to lives on ships that were now essentially 'camps', and how those voyaging to no immediate or intended destination dealt with uncertain journeys and prolonged transits.

The expanding employment of Asian and colonial crews on European and US merchant vessels multiplied restraints on their mobility. Regulations covered a spectrum, from binding year-long or two-year engagements that commenced and terminated at a home port (as opposed to single-voyage agreements typical for Western crews) to restrictions on shore leave enforced by governments, employers, or ships' officers. Uncertainties over whether, when, or where they might be able to go ashore transformed Asian crews' experience of the ship. Varied, porous, uneven, unpredictable, and at times arbitrary, such regulations and restrictions elicited a spectrum of crew responses ranging from adaptation and negotiation to resistance.

The effects of travel, especially on the self, are a well-established theme across a range of historical and other literatures. But we know relatively little about experiences of indefinite maritime transit, uncertain or thwarted arrivals, and unceremonious, involuntary departures, especially those attributable to emerging, or soon to become established, practices for governing accelerated steam-age mobility. This article therefore attempts to tease out some aspects of the experiences of nominally free persons uncertainly afloat in a world otherwise marked by assured or accelerated oceanic mobility. It does so in three contexts which illuminate physical, political, and cultural constraints on maritime mobility in the age of steam. A longer first section explores transits and transformations on the *Komagata-maru*, which was turned back from Vancouver with 350 British Indian passengers in 1914. The second section explores how Indian crews employed on British merchant vessels prepared, negotiated, and experienced the prolonged periods of shipboard confinement that sometimes fell to their lot. The third section discusses Chinese crews' wartime resistance and desertions at US ports in protest against their condition of subjection on British and Dutch vessels. The conclusion summarizes the article and, drawing on these illustrative experiences, suggests some broader perspectives on maritime transit in the age of steam.

'Let him drift along with the rest:' transits and transformations on the *Komagata-maru*⁷

Under charter to Gurdit Singh, a Sikh businessman based in the Straits Settlements, the *Komagata-maru* left Hong Kong on 4 April 1914. After stopping en route at Shanghai, Moji, and Yokohama to pick up passengers and supplies, it reached Vancouver on 23 May with 376 passengers on board, all British Indian subjects, mostly Sikhs. By now Canada had succeeded in curbing Chinese and Japanese arrivals through a combination of immigration laws and intergovernmental agreements. From 1908 it required immigrants to make their way to Canada only 'via a through ticket and by continuous journey from their country of birth or origin'. This seemingly general rule was targeted at British Indian subjects, its racial intent underscored by selective application.⁸ The Indian and Canadian governments had joined hands before 1908 to discourage shipping agents from 'tout[ing] for Indian passengers'. They came together now to dissuade steamship companies from introducing direct services that would challenge the new rule.⁹ To qualify for entry, Indians were also required to carry 200 Canadian dollars.

Struck down by a Canadian court in November 1913, the 'continuous journey' rule was reinstated and reinforced with extraordinary swiftness in January 1914, yet not too soon for swirling rumours that Canada was open again to Punjabis.¹⁰ Gurdit Singh's plans for chartering a ship to transport willing British Indian subjects to Canada took concrete form during this period, with efforts by colonial officials in India and elsewhere in Asia to stop the voyage, delaying but failing to derail it.¹¹ Whether Gurdit Singh saw the *Komagata-maru* as a commercial project with political intent or a political venture with commercial possibilities, or whether such speculations were meaningful under colonial rule, are subjects beyond the scope of this article.¹² His announcement of the charter of the *Komagata-maru* explicitly anticipated a long legal tussle in Canada (all the way 'till the Supreme Court'), political tussles with London, and, should everything fail, a return to India to 'lay the full report before all Indians'. Hence his decision was to charter the ship for six months: 'when we have our own steamer, she can remain' at the foreign port as long as necessary. Should the first voyage go smoothly, however, there was to be a second one from Calcutta on 8 July.¹³

Recognizing the *Komagata-maru* as a challenge to its exclusion laws and potentially a pilot for a direct shipping line from India, the Canadian government refused entry to all but twenty-two returning residents.¹⁴ For nearly two months the vessel lay in anchor in

7 The quote is from the Vancouver politician H. H. Stevens's speech to the Canadian House of Commons: British Library, Oriental and India Office (henceforth OIOC), L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601.

8 Radhika Vyas Mongia, 'Race, nationality, mobility: a history of the passport', *Public Culture*, 11, 3, 1999, pp. 540–1.

9 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1395, F. 3277, 'India Office memorandum on Indian immigration into Canada', 26 August 1915 (henceforth 'India Office memorandum'), para. 5; Hugh Johnston, *The voyage of the Komagata Maru: the Sikh challenge to Canada's colour bar*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp. 4–6.

10 Government of India, *Report of the Komagata Maru committee of inquiry*, vol. 1, Calcutta: Government Printing Press, vol. 1, 1914, paras. 4 and 7.

11 *Ibid.*, paras. 6 and 10; Baba Gurdit Singh, *Voyage of Komagata Maru or India's slavery abroad*, ed. and with an introduction by Darshan S. Tatla, Chandigarh: Unistar Press, 2007, pp. 73–4.

12 On boundaries between business and politics in colonial shipping, see G. Balachandran, 'Sovereignties, subjectivities, and narrations: nations and other stories from the sea', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 21, 2, 2009, pp. 5–8.

13 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601, Gurdit Singh's announcement, enclosed with letter from Colonial Office to India Office, 12 May 1914.

14 Government of India, *Committee of inquiry*, para. 10; Singh, *Voyage of Komagata Maru*, p. 11.

Vancouver – it was not allowed to dock because otherwise ‘many of the Hindus would have escaped’ – with the remaining 354 starving and thirsty passengers confined on board and cut off from direct contact with the shore, until a naval cruiser was despatched to force it to return to sea on 21 July 1914.¹⁵ On the ship’s return voyage, some thirty passengers got off at Yokohama and Kobe. Fearing a mutiny in the Sikh regiments stationed there, Hong Kong refused to allow any passengers to disembark.¹⁶ Singapore ordered the *Komagata-maru* to anchor three miles off its coast and denied entry to Gurdit Singh, although he owned a business there. These exclusions underscored the *Komagata-maru*’s transformation into ‘the new Andamans’, as one passenger observed, in reference to the notorious British Indian penal colony.¹⁷ At first, many functionaries (including the viceroy) considered preventing the *Komagata-maru* passengers from entering India, if necessary by extending a wartime ordinance against enemy aliens. But in the end it was decided to amend this ordinance to allow the internment of returning nationals, divert the *Komagata-maru* to Madras, ‘where the atmosphere was less excitable than in Calcutta’, and transport the ship’s passengers under guard to be dealt with in Punjab.¹⁸ When a communications mix-up set the vessel on course to Calcutta, the colonial government, determined to ‘avoid any demonstration’ or anything that might stir political opinion in the metropolis, decided to stop the ship some twenty kilometres downriver at Budge-Budge and transfer the passengers onto a special train to Punjab.¹⁹

The *Komagata-maru* arrived at Budge-Budge on 26 September 1914 with 321 passengers, nearly six months after it departed from Hong Kong for Vancouver. Though at last free to disembark, and despite having spent most of the last six months on the ship, the majority of the passengers refused unless they could go to Calcutta. In the end, only fifty-nine passengers boarded the special train waiting on an adjoining track. The rest insisted on marching on Calcutta, but were stopped and turned back. It is unclear what happened next. As police and army detachments surrounded the marchers in gathering darkness, clashes erupted in which at least twenty-one people were killed, including nineteen passengers.²⁰ Some 210 passengers were arrested and sent to a Calcutta prison. Most were released in the following months but confined to their villages for several years. Approximately thirty passengers, including Gurdit Singh, managed to escape at Budge-Budge. Most were apprehended later, while Gurdit Singh gave himself up on Gandhi’s advice in November 1921.²¹

Exemplifying colonial indignities and subjection, the *Komagata-maru* has long since become part of India’s independence struggle. In North America, especially Canada, it now symbolizes a deeply racial immigration history. Recent scholarship also emphasizes the *Komagata-maru*’s transnational resonances. In Canada it stirred a ‘bootstrap enactment of a

15 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601, note by the immigration official B.B. Robertson, 1 August 1914.

16 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601, Hong Kong government to Colonial Office, 25 July 1914.

17 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, exhibit 49, ‘An account in English of the tyranny over “Komagata Maru” passengers in Kobe’; Government of India, *Committee of inquiry*, para. 24; Sohan Singh Josh, *The tragedy of Komagata Maru*, New Delhi: Peoples’ Publishing House, 1975, p. 69.

18 National Archives of India, Home-Political (henceforth NAI, HP), September 1914, 211–224A, memo by H. Wheeler, 15 August 1914; letter, 11 September 1914; cable to Kobe, 31 August 1914; HP, November 1914, 97–177A, Viceroy’s telegram, 2 October 1914.

19 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, *Komagata Maru* inquiry committee, vol. 2, F. Slocock’s evidence, 9 November 1914.

20 Josh, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru*, appendix 7, pp. 117–18, lists twenty-nine killed and two missing.

21 NAI, HP, 97–177A, Bengal government’s report to the Government of India, 12 October 1914; ‘Note on the Budge-Budge riot’ by D. Petrie, 8 October 1914; Johnston, *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*; Hugh Johnston, ‘The *Komagata Maru* and the Ghadr Party: past and present aspects of a historic challenge to Canada’s exclusion of immigrants from India’, *BC Studies*, 178, 2013, pp. 9–13.

nascent and evolving practice of popular sovereignty', involving the 'interactive creation of a bounded legal order, a bounded national space, and a bounded territorial space'.²² While continuing to paint Gurdit Singh as a 'trickster' with an eye to profit, colonial and metropolitan officials also suspected the *Komagata-maru* of being a transnational *Ghadr* plot (that is, of the Hindustani *Ghadr* Party, a radical anti-colonial movement active in North America, Mexico, continental Europe, and Japan) against the British empire, perhaps with support from Germany and anti-British elements in Japan.²³ Recent scholarship stresses the *Ghadr* party's transnational footprint and the broader significance of *Ghadr* associations for normative, political, and territorial boundary-making in North America.²⁴ Britain and Canada's handling of the *Komagata-maru* as a *Ghadr* plot reflected and reinforced their collusion, in their own respective interests, with the US strategy of racializing radical politics (including radical anti-colonial activism) and using immigration policies against the spread of 'un-American' ideologies.²⁵ Together they marked imperial-transnational reconfigurations of acceptable politics and their expressions into an emerging international system.²⁶

From the perspective of this article, the *Komagata-maru* offers a striking illustration of a ship's nominally 'free' passengers, who were neither bound by quarantine nor subjects of penal proceedings, being denied landing and kept in detention on water. The passengers on the *Komagata-maru* were not the first, nor unfortunately the last, to undergo this experience. Among other instances that have drawn the attention of historians, in 1888 Chinese passengers of the *Afghan* and other vessels were denied permission to disembark in Melbourne and Sydney. In 1939 over 900 Jewish refugees who fled Hamburg on the *St Louis* were forced to return to Europe (many eventually to die in Nazi camps) at the end of five weeks at sea, during which their vessel was refused entry by Cuba, USA, and Canada. Like the *Komagata-maru*'s long voyage culminating in its unplanned arrival off Calcutta, such instances exemplify how elusive destinations and elastic transits formed aspects of steamship mobility in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁷

The remainder of this section turns to the *Komagata-maru* passengers' evolving subjectivities and motivations through this ordeal, a subject which has so far attracted rather less attention.²⁸ One of Gurdit Singh's first steps on taking over the *Komagata-maru* was to improvise a *gurdwara* (Sikh space of worship) in the forecabin, in which the *Guru Granth Sahib* was 'installed ... in almost similar surroundings to those of the

22 Johnston, 'Komagata Maru and the Ghadr Party'; centenary accounts in the *Globe and Mail*, 24 May 2014, and *Vancouver Sun*, 23 May 2014; Audrey Macklin, 'Historicizing narratives of arrival: the other Indian other', in Hester F. Lessard, R. Johnson, and J. Webber, eds., *Storied communities: narratives of contact and arrival in constituting the political*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010, pp. 43–4.

23 NAI, HP, 211–224A, W. C. Hopkinson to W. W. Cory, 30 June 1914; HP, 97–177A, W. H. Vincent to H. Wheeler, 16 November 1914. The conspiracy theory became dominant once war broke out: OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601.

24 Chang, *Pacific connections*, ch. 5; Sohi, *Echoes of mutiny*; Maia Ramnath, *Haj to utopia: how the Ghadr movement charted global radicalism and attempted to overthrow the British empire*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011; Johnston, 'Komagata Maru and the Ghadr Party'.

25 Sohi, *Echoes of mutiny*, ch. 3.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 196–7; Radhika Mongia, 'Historicizing state sovereignty: inequality and the form of equivalence', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 49, 2, 2007, pp. 384–411; OIOC, L/PJ/6/1395, F. 3277, 'India Office memorandum', para. 1.

27 Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the global colour line: white men's countries and the international challenge of racial equality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 39–41; Sarah A. Ogilvie and Scott Miller, *Refuge denied: the St. Louis passengers and the Holocaust*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.

28 A recent exception is Johnston, 'Komagata Maru and the Ghadr Party'.

ordinary *gurdwara* ... [on an] ... elevated platform profusely carved with costly embroidered cloths'.²⁹ A devotional site for prayer and worship with a *granthi* in attendance, the *gurdwara*'s significance on board was as much strategic as religious and emotional.³⁰ Together the *gurdwara* and the *Granth Sahib* became pivotal emblems investing the *Komagata-maru*'s voyage with the symbolic aura of a *jatha*: that is, a group of volunteers on a religious-political mission familiar in Sikh lore, an aspect further underscored by the venture's planned and improvised geographies linking *gurdwaras* in Singapore, Hong Kong, Vancouver, and finally Howrah (Calcutta), where the passengers hoped to go in procession to deposit the *Granth Sahib* and mark the termination of their voyage.³¹

At Vancouver the *Komagata-maru*'s passengers, who had travelled 'thousands of miles over the sea', were confined to their vessel and isolated from contact with the shore.³² Passenger witnesses to the *Komagata-maru* inquiry committee related going without food or water for several days. As supplies ran desperately short, the Canadian government refused assistance because 'such a precedent might encourage other charterers to engage in similar expeditions', hindered efforts by the shore committee (comprising members of Vancouver's Indian community) to arrange supplies, and while insisting on Gurdit Singh paying for supplies, refused to allow any passenger ashore to procure them. The embargo extended to sanitary and waste disposal services and water even to meet sanitation requirements.³³ Melodramatic as it sounds, Canadian officials hoped to starve the passengers into leaving and promote disaffection against Gurdit Singh, who they believed was the mainstay of their resistance.³⁴ Yet, to their surprise, officials and journalists who went on board saw no evidence of general disaffection, being struck instead by the amiability and courtesy of the passengers.³⁵ On one such visit, following several days of short rations and no water, Malcolm Reid, a Vancouver immigration official, was reportedly told by Amar Singh, a member of the ship committee, that he would not be allowed to leave until the 'provisions and water' promised by him had been delivered. Fearing a threat to their safety, W. C. Hopkinson, a former police official in India employed to keep tabs on anti-colonial activists on the Pacific coast and now acting as Reid's interpreter, escorted the two accompanying female stenographers back to their launch, only for both the male officers to soon join them.³⁶

Conditions on ship were 'exceedingly filthy' with toilets blocked, refuse piled on deck, and an 'increasing number of flies and rats'. But the passengers braved them as best they could, observing local regulations against jettisoning garbage, possibly a self-aware effort despite the extraordinary stress to preserve and assert a collective civic comportment for those on shore who might be disposed to look beyond racial or cultural stereotypes, yet keeping the rest of the ship as clean as possible and regularly scattering ash on decomposing refuse to hold off odours and infestations.³⁷

29 NAI, HP, 97-177A, 'Note on the Budge-Budge riot'.

30 Johnston, 'Komagata Maru and the Ghadr party'.

31 Johnston, *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, p. 82; NAI, HP, 97-177A, p. 116; W.S. Hoskyns's inquest report; Bengal government's report to the Government of India, 12 October 1914; 'Note on the Budge-Budge riot'.

32 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, exhibit 42, extract from Gurdit Singh's diary.

33 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601, Canadian government telegram to Colonial Secretary, 18 July 1914 (quote); see also the passengers' statements in OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028.

34 Johnston, *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, pp. 42-3, 45, 52, 56, 61, 68-73, 80.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 69-71, 84-5.

36 NAI, HP, 97-177A, appendix M, statements of T. Yamamoto, captain of the *Komagata Maru*; OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601, Hopkinson's memo on 'meeting of the committee appointed by the passengers on board S.S. Komagata Maru: who have taken the matter out of Gurdit Singh's hands', 9 July 1914.

37 Johnston, *Voyage of the Komagata Maru*, pp. 65, 71, 72-3.

In Calcutta more even than in Vancouver, officials expected a mood of rebellion against Gurdit Singh on the *Komagata-maru*. This was understandable: besides the failure and hardships of their voyage to Vancouver, the passengers had suffered unexpected further setbacks on the way back, including being turned away from Hong Kong, where many had held regular well-paying jobs. Yet according to an intelligence official, Gurdit Singh's authority was 'far more complete ... than we had ever imagined'. Not only was there 'no disposition to make any complaint', but the passengers 'exhibited a closeness and reluctance to speak'.³⁸ Indeed, it would appear that in representing Gurdit Singh as the main figure and the passengers as his dupes, colonial officials had misunderstood the nature of organization on the *Komagata-maru*.

Frequent references may be found in the documents to a 'ship committee'. This committee deserves attention. Before Vancouver its main role was to manage the stores and kitchen.³⁹ The committee was reconstituted in Vancouver after most of its members, being among the twenty-odd returning residents, left. Its role now expanded to managing contact with the shore committee, negotiating with shore officials, and making decisions about next steps. For example the decision to boycott the immigration board of enquiry as a farce was taken by this committee. Its scepticism was justified, even the India Office noting in 1915 that the 'efficacy' of Canadian immigration laws 'rest[ed] to some extent on ... subterfuge'.⁴⁰ Determined to be seen to observe legal niceties but unable to dissuade the committee or to get Gurdit Singh to overrule its decision, Hopkinson addressed the passengers directly about 'their rights' and urged them to 'go ashore before the Board'. 'To a man', the passengers rejected this advice.⁴¹ Shore officials in Vancouver saw the committee as a sign of Gurdit Singh's waning control.⁴² But this does not square with other evidence of unity among the passengers at Vancouver and Budge-Budge. On the contrary, if a committee was in charge and if its authority and responsibilities grew with the gravity of the passengers' challenges and choices, their remarkable unity may have reflected a democratic aspect of the *Komagata-maru* experience that colonial officials lacked the wherewithal to grasp.

The *Komagata-maru* was a politically transformative experience for its passengers. This much is recognized. Sohan Singh Josh notes that passengers who departed Hong Kong as loyal, former 'mercenaries' nourishing 'wishful dreams' and 'illusions ... about ... even-handed [British] justice and impartiality' were 'no longer the same men' when they set foot in Calcutta. As for Gurdit Singh, three months on the *Komagata-maru* had transformed 'a respectable businessman ... into a political leader' who, even while being on run from the police, took an active part in the Congress non-cooperation movement. Many passengers subsequently became radical anti-colonial and left-wing activists.⁴³ In rounding off this section, however, I would like to draw attention to a possibly deeper impact on the passengers than the surface evidence of their later political affiliations and activities.

38 NAI, HP, 97-177A, 'Note on the Budge-Budge riot'.

39 Dhan Singh, a member, described it as a 'rations committee': OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, *Komagata Maru* inquiry committee, vol. 2, 28 October 1914. Josh, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru*, p. 71, refers to a 'managing committee': *Tragedy of Komagata Maru*.

40 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1395, F. 3277, 'India Office memorandum', para. 12; L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, exhibit 54.

41 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601, Hopkinson to Cory, 10 July 1914.

42 Notably, the title of Hopkinson's note of 9 July describes the committee as having 'taken the matter out of Gurdit Singh's hands': OIOC, L/PJ/6/1325, F. 3601.

43 Josh, *Tragedy of Komagata Maru*, pp. iv-v, 54, 67; Johnston, 'Komagata Maru and the Ghadr Party'.

In marked contrast to Vancouver, or even the previous day further downriver at Kulpi, colonial officials meeting the *Komagata-maru* at Budge-Budge found the passengers' behaviour 'rude', 'offensive', and 'most insolent'. The 'demeanour of most of the active participants' was one of 'studied insolence'. 'Instances of rudeness ... happened so frequently as to obliterate ... individual cases. There was hardly a man one spoke to who had not thrown off completely the courtesy one is accustomed to meet with from the Sikh in his own country.'⁴⁴ Another official reported encountering 'independence rather than insolence'. Questioned where he came from, a 'good-humoured, decent sort of man' replied 'Hindustan'. When asked about his village he retorted 'I know nothing about villages or districts, I come from Hindustan.' Passengers addressed officials with the familiar '*tum*' rather than the respectful '*aap*' to which they were accustomed. Officials claimed not to 'attach any importance' to these attitudes. But they rattled and rankled, one official infantilizing them as being 'really intended for impertinence ... to try and make us lose our temper', yet losing his own cool to snap at Gurdit Singh when he interrupted the district magistrate: '*chup raho* [keep quiet] Gurdit Singh, when the *sahib* [master] is speaking you should keep quiet'. Upon this Gurdit Singh turned on his heels and walked away; when called back he returned only to accuse the 'sahib' of lying.⁴⁵ Other officials reported passengers walking away mid sentence, or accusing officials of lying and 'loose talk'. Diaries and chronicles seized from the boat suggest that passengers no longer trusted the government, and believed that their path to respect lay in self-assertion rather than deference to authority.⁴⁶

The colonial government's strategy for dealing with the domestic fallout of the *Komagata-maru* affair was to drive a wedge between the surviving passengers and moderate Indian nationalists. Contacts in Japan with *Ghadr* Party leaders such as Maulvi Barkatullah, the supposed role of *Ghadr* activists on the Vancouver shore committee, and rumours of *Ghadr* arms and newspapers being smuggled on board the ship were all grist to this mill. Less than a year after Budge-Budge, government officials felt satisfied that the *Komagata-maru*'s 'Indian promoters [had] been thoroughly discredited' and, thanks now to the ship's *Ghadr* associations, 'moderate Indian politicians' could not speak out even on 'the Canadian question [i.e. discriminatory immigration restrictions]', let alone the treatment of the *Komagata-maru*'s passengers, 'without seeming to give support to treason'.⁴⁷

The *Ghadr* aspect was therefore an important line of investigation for the *Komagata-maru* committee. It questioned witnesses about Maulvi Barkatullah's speeches, the circulation of *Ghadr* literature on board, and the roles of two educated Sindhi brothers, Pohla Ram and Jawahar Mal, both students in Kobe and, according to captain T. Yamamoto, 'dangerous' men who joined the ship 'in suspicious circumstances'.⁴⁸ A striking feature of these summary depositions is how the witnesses, whether those caught up in the Budge-Budge clashes and examined in Bengal's Alipore central jail or the fifty-odd passengers who took the train to

44 NAI, HP, 97-177A, 'Note on the Budge-Budge riot'.

45 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, *Komagata Maru* inquiry committee, vol. 2, F. Slocock's evidence, 9 November 1914.

46 NAI, HP, 97-177A, Bengal government's report to the Government of India, 12 October 1914; 'Note on the Budge-Budge riot'. OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, exhibits 42 and 54.

47 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1395, F. 3277, 'India Office memorandum', para. 1. This mirrored US strategies to isolate radical activists: see Chang, *Pacific connections*, ch. 5.

48 NAI, HP, 97-177A, 'Note on the Budge-Budge riot'; appendix M.

Punjab and were examined in Jullundur, seemed united in refuting colonial officials' insinuations that Barkatullah and the Sindhi brothers gave political lectures or preached sedition. Witnesses averred that Barkatullah warned passengers they would not be allowed to enter Canada, while the Sindhi brothers were 'good persons' who advised them to 'return quietly' to India and make sure they were carrying no contraband. It is improbable the witnesses were coached or the testimonies coordinated, Jawahar Mal deposing in Alipore central jail on 28 October and the passengers who went back on the train to Punjab being examined in Jullundur on 18 November. The proceedings were also held in camera, and witnesses appeared to have been pressed harder on sedition in Jullundur than in Alipore.⁴⁹ Absent coordination, a plausible explanation for such striking commonality might be that the passengers now shared a common moral view and standpoint on the whole affair. If this was so, their *Komagata-maru* experience may have exerted a deeper formative influence on their conceptions of morality and political legitimacy than the public careers of a few prominent individuals alone might reveal.

Indian crews at sea and in harbour

The late nineteenth-century expansion of steam shipping and the reskilling of crews that it necessitated sparked a set of intermeshing changes in how work was organized and labour contracted and regulated in a restructuring merchant shipping industry. The international – or, more accurately, the British – merchant shipping industry's swift recourse from the 1870s to an expanding global pool of maritime labour, especially from the colonies, is well recognized. Particularly in the last two decades, several dimensions of this phenomenon have been researched from the perspectives of colonial and cultural history, labour history, and maritime history.⁵⁰ Colonial maritime workers have also begun to feature prominently in social histories of modern Britain.⁵¹ In varying degrees this literature draws attention to the conflicting challenges faced by employers and metropolitan officials of spatially, racially, or culturally separating lower-waged colonial workers from one another and from British workers, while also managing a segmented maritime labouring milieu *within* Britain. The nature of such challenges, and the efforts of employers and the state to address them, differed considerably between ports and over time. They were also affected by variables such as where the crews came from and the local relationships they formed, the attitude of British maritime unions and their local branches, the nature and scope of employers' shipping interests, and immigration regulations and the workers' response to them. Such contingencies meant an uncertain and changeable outlook for the mobility and freedom of colonial crews of British merchant vessels.

49 OIOC, L/PJ/6/1338, F. 5028, *Komagata Maru* inquiry committee, vol. 2, evidence of Jawahar Mal (28 October 1914), Kirpa Singh, Chanda Singh, Bishen Singh, Inder Singh, and Dan Singh (18 November 1914).

50 Laura Tabili, 'We ask for British justice': workers and racial difference in late-imperial Britain, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994; Richard I. Lawless, *From Ta'izz to Tyneside: Arab community in the north-east of England in the early twentieth century*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995; Diane Frost, *Work and community among West African migrant workers since the nineteenth century*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999; Frances Steel, *Oceania under steam: sea transport and the cultures of colonialism, c. 1870–1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011; G. Balachandran, *Globalizing labour? Indian seafarers and world shipping, c. 1870–1945*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

51 G. Balachandran, 'Subaltern cosmopolitanism, racial governance and multiculturalism: Britain, c. 1900–45', *Social History*, 39, 4, 2014, pp. 528–46; Tabili, 'We ask for British justice'; Lawless, *From Ta'izz to Tyneside*; Frost, *Work and community*; see also Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 years of history*, London: Pluto Press, 2002.

Indian crews were among the most regulated in the industry. But detailed regulation did not mean diminished uncertainties; rather, sometimes the opposite was true, because of gaps and slippages between the letter of the law, its interpretation in custom or precedent, differences between ports, or inconsistencies over time. Nevertheless, efforts to naturalize the confinement of Indian crews to their vessels at port followed close on the heels of their expanding employment on British merchant vessels, which accompanied the spread of steam in the 1870s.⁵² Since the early nineteenth century Indian crews had not been allowed to be discharged in Britain, and their employers were obliged by law to ship them back. However, until the early 1880s Indian seafarers attracted by opportunities for work, leisure, or pilgrimage to holy places such as Mecca were allowed to relinquish engagements at Indian Ocean and Red Sea ports. Despite ‘stretching protection to the point of injury’, an Indian government electing at that time to look askance at subaltern mobility through the lens of vagrancy and disorder, bowed to employers’ demands and put an end to such discharges.⁵³ Two decades later, when Australia framed laws to deny mail subsidies to ships employing Indian crews, complaisant officials in Calcutta offered to confine Indian crews to their vessels in Australian ports. A decade further on, crew complaints about such confinement were dismissed as ‘scarcely conciliatory’.⁵⁴

Restrictions of this nature kept Indian crews on board their ship at many ports where long working hours might further shield them from local publics.⁵⁵ Employers also liked wherever possible to regulate contact between crews in port and people ashore.⁵⁶ Even in British ports, where sometimes their ships could be held up for lengthy periods, many Indian crews continued to live on board, their sense of isolation reinforced by the close watch under which docks were kept for drugs, contraband, women, and other ‘loiterers’.⁵⁷

Though such restraints limited opportunities for mobility and socialization, it was not impossible to find ways round them. Lives in transit or confinement did not mean lives on stand-by.⁵⁸ As already noted, confinement on board was not unvarying or uniform, not least because some shipowners found it irksome for their own logistics. Indeed, some shipowners were reluctant even to report or prosecute Indian deserters in Britain if, on balance, not doing so left them better off. All this made for porous regulations, thanks to which a few hundred Indian seafarers could be found ashore at nearly all times in Britain, most still under contract to their employers while awaiting their next ship. Following the tightening of regulations on hiring ‘coloured alien seamen’ (that is, non-colonial seamen) at British ports and a slump in

52 The National Archives, UK (henceforth TNA), MT 9/127 T 7332/1876, Indian government despatch, 21 October 1875.

53 NAI, Finance and Commerce, Separate Revenue (henceforth FC, SR), October 1883, 1219–41A, note by J. O’Conor, 17 May 1883; also January 1884, 54–56A; Legislative Department (henceforth LD), January 1893, proceedings 51–153. See also Tony Ballantyne, *Between colonialism and diaspora: Sikh cultural formations in an imperial world*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, p. ix.

54 NAI, FC, SR, April 1902, 109–11B, India Office to Colonial Office, 18 Feb. 1902; HP, 211–224A, H. Wheeler’s minute, 29 August 1914.

55 International Labour Organization, Geneva, C 1903/129, news summary of a wire service report from Washington, August 1939.

56 A. Martin Wainwright, *The better class’ of Indians: social rank, imperial identity, and South Asians in Britain, 1858–1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 87.

57 TNA, HO 213/308, summary of British social hygiene council report on ports, 1934.

58 As Roland Wenzlhuemer notes in ‘The ship, the media and the world: conceptualizing connections in global history’, pp. 163–86 in this issue; TNA, HO 213/308, summary of British social hygiene council report on ports, 1934.

maritime employment opportunities in India, from the late 1920s more Indian seafarers also began to jump ship in Britain.⁵⁹

Some employers and officials therefore demanded stricter controls. The shipping company most intent on them was the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (P&O). P&O mainly carried passengers, mails, and cargo between British, Indian, and other Asian and Australian ports. Until the 1950s it had few major interests beyond these trades. Almost wholly dependent since the 1880s on Indian crews – of whom it was the largest single employer – P&O had invested heavily over time in recruitment networks from Bombay reaching deep into Punjab, Goa, and the Ratnagiri and Gujarat coasts. The British India Steam Navigation Company (BISN), which became a part of P&O in 1914, also operated within a restricted British imperial sphere, and was similarly invested in Indian crews engaged through an extensive recruitment network centred on Calcutta.⁶⁰ P&O and BISN vessels had forecastles purpose-built for Indian crews, which were numerically larger in size but whose members were entitled to bunks one-half to one-third smaller than those provided to crews of other nationalities.⁶¹ As their largest employer and a recipient of generous British government mail subsidies, P&O was an attractive target for British unions opposed to the employment of Indian crews. In its own interest and to avoid aggravating such opposition, P&O was keen to restrict Indian crews to Asian waters and to British shipping with Asia. It also spearheaded efforts to limit their employment in Atlantic waters.⁶²

P&O's crewing arrangements and shipping interests obliged the firm as far as possible to isolate its Indian crews in Britain. Emblematic in this respect was the accommodation it provided in London to crews waiting to be shipped back to the subcontinent – a 'godown', which a rare inspection report that the P&O had failed somehow to scotch, described as a 'disgrace', 'most unsatisfactory in every detail', and comparing '[un]favourably even with common lodging houses'.⁶³ Tellingly, this 'godown' was a disused hulk strategically moored at the Albert Docks, beyond the health and sanitary jurisdiction of the London County Council. Effectively isolating Indian crews from the mainland, its labouring milieu, laws, and controversies, as well as from metropolitan diversions and temptations, the disused ship became in effect an off-shore camp to control the 'life and ... movements' of its Indian crews.⁶⁴

The challenge of being on board ship for long periods, and of traversing ports where they might not be permitted to disembark, involved Indian crews in complex negotiations. Regulations provided a framework for many aspects of shipboard employment: where Indian crews could sail, their diets, accommodation, winter clothing, and so on. Regulations and contracts also opened up spaces for negotiation, particularly over 'customary' practices and relations with European officers.

59 Balachandran, *Globalizing labour*, pp. 177–84.

60 National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, P&O 7/8, *Group Asian crew manual*, pp. 4–6.

61 NAI, Statistics and Commerce (henceforth SC), March 1901, 135–42A, letter from Bombay shipping master, 8 October 1900.

62 NAI, SC, 135–42A, note by J.E. O'Connor, 12 January 1901. For an earlier period and more generally, see also SC, Commerce and Trade, Merchant Shipping, December 1894, 907–913A, note by J.E. O'Connor, 27 November 1894; LD, January 1893, proceedings 51–153; OIOC, L/E/9/970, letter to India Office, 24 June 1937, enclosure; NAI, Commerce and Industry, Merchant Shipping, December 1907, 18–29A, letter to India Office, 12 December 1906; Balachandran, *Globalizing labour*, pp. 39, 126–7.

63 OIOC, L/E/7/1152, report by T.G. Segrave, 1 December 1922.

64 Tabili, 'We ask for British justice', p. 64.

Space was an area of contestation from the start. Preoccupations ashore tended to be about the smaller forecastle spaces for Indian crews. A supposed petition – that Indian crews did not care for more accommodation because their ships were like ‘palaces’ and their quarters ‘far and away superior to what we can ever hope to obtain ourselves on land’ – was undoubtedly written and circulated by employers, chiefly P&O.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, more than demanding larger bunks or an end to discrimination, Indian seafarers’ concerns about space on board seem at least at first to have derived from their lively trading activities along voyage routes. Some trade involved bartering food rations to diversify nutritional values or offset the monotony of the official diet.⁶⁶ Forecastles were filled in addition with a bewildering array of stock-in-trade: curios and articles (such as Bombay quilts), livestock (‘monkeys, snakes, even small deer’, and birds including ‘parrots ... starlings ... sparrows’), and onions and coconuts for ‘export’, against ‘imports’ of European glass and crockery and Chinese silks. At some ports this trade was transacted from deck with shore-based traders drawing up alongside in boats.⁶⁷ Before long, such trade appears to have become a form of custom, with British officers also investing or taking a cut from its profits. Otherwise, employers and masters were loath to interfere, for fear that ‘chang[ing] the *men’s rules*’ might sour relations or provoke a strike.⁶⁸ If forecastles were turned into stores, in good weather Indian crews spread their bedding and turned decks into sleeping quarters, retreating in bad weather to the forecastle, where they preferred curling up in hammocks slung from the ceiling to sleeping on bunks.⁶⁹ Indian crews also liked to bathe on deck regardless of the weather, even more so in port, with water piped from shore rather than the ‘stale’ water from the ship’s tanks.⁷⁰

Crews holed up in port had few diversions. Visits to other ships were a possibility; if they were also carrying subcontinental crews, these might be an occasion for meeting relatives, kin, and old shipmates, or for receiving fresh news from home. Shore visitors could provide cause for humour, spectacle, or even profit. Observing Venetians flocking ‘every Sunday’ to watch them eat on deck, as was the ‘usual practice ... together, ten or twelve persons at a time, from a large pan of rice’, an Indian crew decided to stage the spectacle for a fee (‘for children it was half-fee’): the visitors were ‘observing us and wondering just as we observe monkeys and enjoy their antics’.⁷¹

Anglican missionaries, who if they behaved and rocked no boats, generally had the run of British ships in UK ports, were a more routine distraction.⁷² Many Indian seafarers appear to have been interested in religious doctrine and politics: long voyages meant opportunities for religious and political debate, and crews often included an older member who might be distinguished among them for religious learning. However, Indian crews made truculent

65 NAI, LD, October 1895, proceedings 235–94, appendix 78, memorial of 18 January 1895; also proceeding 267, appendix 81.

66 Balachandran, *Globalizing labour*, pp. 120–1.

67 NAI, LD, 235–94, appendix A33, letter from Bombay shipping master, 15 July 1895; Gabor Korvin, ed., *Memoirs of Khawajah Muhammad Bux, Australian businessman*, trans. from Urdu by Syed Haider Hassan, unpublished mimeo, Rawalpindi, 2006, pp. 23–4, 30, 58.

68 NAI, LD, 235–94, appendix A33, letter from Bombay shipping master, 15 July 1895; SC, CT, MS, August 1892, 494–531A, letter from Finlay, Muir, and Co., 18 December 1891, emphasis added.

69 OIOC, L/E/7/940, ‘Report on the outbreak of beriberi on the steam ship “Sutlej”’; Baron von Hübner, *Through the British Empire*, 2 vols., London: John Murray, 1886, vol. 1, p. 357. Chinese crews traded rice, silk prints, tea, etc. and slept on deck; customary practices allowed gambling and cards in crew spaces: *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 6 February 1927.

70 OIOC, L/E/9/970, letter to India Office, 24 June 1937.

71 Korvin, *Memoirs of Khawajah Muhammad Bux*, p. 58.

72 Wainwright, ‘*Better class*’ of Indians, p. 87.

missionary subjects. Discussions with port missionaries could turn ‘heated and argumentative’, and preachers often confronted ‘forcible reasons ... not easy to combat’ in defence of the crews’ religious beliefs or felt challenged to embrace the faith of their putative subjects.⁷³ On a ‘typical’ visit, a missionary, making what he thought to be an inoffensive remark about India’s loyalty to the empire, might be taunted about the impending collapse of the Raj, and feel provoked into ‘gloat[ing] ... [though] not quite logically’ about relentless Christian conquest and the ‘end of Mohammedan power’: ‘Turkey crumbling, Persia helpless, Egypt anglicized, India conquered, and Bokhara, the city of learning, taken by the Russians’.⁷⁴

Long voyages dictated choosing ships with care. Since desertions were a criminal offense and agreements could only terminate in India, lawful pretexts were required to cut short unsatisfactory engagements. A repeated stratagem exploited a formal illegality in the de facto terms of the crews’ engagement, to which, normally, it was in everyone’s interest to turn a blind eye: supposing them to be engaged only on vessels between Britain and the subcontinent, Indian merchant shipping laws allowed Indian crews at British ports to be transferred from their original vessel to another headed to India. The last condition was reduced to a rarely observed fine print by the regular practice of crews, upon reaching Britain, being transferred to ships sailing to Atlantic or other destinations. This happened because employers preferred longer engagements to keep costs down, because longer engagements meant more wages for crews, and because port officials tended to look the other way if owners and crews seemed in agreement. Consequently, shipowners and Indian crews colluded to improvise a customary practice that presumed the latter’s voluntary consent for onward Pacific and Atlantic voyages from Britain.

This informal practice also gave Indian crews a potential opening for lawful exit from engagements that had soured for any reason. Shipowners and port officials were invariably taken aback whenever Indian crews challenged their transfer to a vessel not proceeding to India, usually because they had taken a dislike to the ship or its officers. The police would be called and criminal proceedings initiated, but courts always sided with the crew’s position that it could not be forced to sail to other destinations than India.⁷⁵ In times of peace, the law could not be amended to resolve this ambiguity without abandoning the legal fiction that Indian crews only worked on ships trading with the subcontinent, and thus risk stoking the dormant opposition of British unions. Consequently, Indian crews’ transshipment at British hubs to vessels trading with the rest of the world remained voluntary through the Second World War.⁷⁶

Breaking out: Chinese crews in New York

In the summer of 1942 the master of the *Silverash*, a British-registered vessel in port at Brooklyn, shot and killed a Chinese seaman, Ling Yang-Chai, for refusing orders. Ling was

73 *Ibid.*, p. 85; George Small, *Extracts from the journal of the scripture reader and missionary in Hindustani and other Oriental languages to the Asiatics, Africans, and South Sea Islanders in England, from June to December 1876*, London: Simmons and Botten, 1877, entries for 2 July and 26 August 1876.

74 J. Salter, *The East in the West, or, work among the Asiatics and Africans in London*, London: Partridge and Co., c.1896, ch. 10.

75 Balachandran, *Globalizing labour*, pp. 235–9.

76 OIOC, L/E/9/977, letter from Secretary, Shipping Federation, 27 December 1939; telegrams from Government of India, 6 February and 31 July 1940.

protesting at having been refused leave to go ashore. A grand jury took ten minutes to dismiss manslaughter charges against the master. However, the outrage sparked by the killing brought to an end a two-decades-old practice of denying or restricting shore leave to Asian crews and confining them to their vessel in US ports.⁷⁷

Since the late nineteenth century, as Asian seafarers began arriving at US ports, small numbers drifted ashore into local labour markets, forming loose networks of support and sociality that included other itinerant workers, from circus artistes to peddlers of exotic Oriental curios. Some settled in the US while making periodic trips home, marrying into African American, Creole, and Hispanic communities, informally buying land, or working in warehouses, mines, steel and auto plants, and on the railroads.⁷⁸ The numbers were small: in the dozens where Indian seafarers were concerned, for instance. The 1915 La Follette Act, which decriminalized desertions in US ports, provided new opportunities. It also later helped cushion the effects of the 1917 US Immigration Act by providing seafarers from the Asian barred zone with an apparently legal route into the United States.⁷⁹ Tougher procedures for southern European working-class migrants had already blurred some boundaries between passengers and crew, since US immigration officials did not scrutinize crews as closely as passengers in steerage.⁸⁰ Once Asian seamen had got past immigration officials, the La Follette Act made it harder to deport deserters showing an apparent interest in returning to sea on US vessels – for instance, by signing up with a local maritime union.⁸¹

Not a few seafarers from India exploited these ambiguities to jump ship in US ports. Chinese desertions were far more numerous, a fact reflected in complaints by officials and shipowners anxious to avoid having to hire costly replacement crews in the US, as well as their keenness to substitute Indian crews for Chinese crews wherever possible on US-bound vessels. The 1917 Act authorized US port authorities to demand bonds of US\$500–1,000 from shipowners for allowing Asian seafarers off the ship. In practice, this bond was rarely demanded. It was similarly rare for a bond executed in good faith to be forfeited. With a rising tide of complaints from British shipowners about the costs of replacing Chinese crews in US ports, it took considerable effort by British diplomats before the US authorities would even agree to issue a notification that Asian crews could be ‘detained’ on their vessels unless employers furnished this bond. But no action followed: few port officials enforced the bond, while US courts continued to rule that prohibiting the ‘entry of bonafide Asiatic seamen’ was against ‘seamen’s laws’. Nor were penalties ‘actually ... imposed’ on the rare occasion that a seafarer under bond deserted, except when officials suspected employers’ ‘connivance in ... desertions’.⁸²

Failing to make headway with the US government, British shipowners decided, with their own government’s approval, to use the bond as a pretext for enforcing ‘voluntary restrictions’ on Asian crews at US ports. A ‘voluntary’ clause was hence added to Indian, Malay, and

77 TNA, MT 9/4370; see also Tony Lane, *The merchant seamen’s war*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990, p. 167.

78 Bald, *Bengali Harlem*.

79 Balachandran, *Globalizing labour*, pp. 160–1.

80 Torsten Feys, *The battle for the migrants: the introduction of steamshipping on the North Atlantic and its impact on the European exodus*, St John’s, Newfoundland: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2013, p. 304.

81 OIOC, L/E/7/1142 F. 4817, UK consular despatch, 25 July 1923; letter from UK ambassador, 8 August 1923. See also Hassan N. Gardezi, ed., *Chains to lose: life and struggles of a revolutionary – memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan*, New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1989.

82 OIOC, L/E/7/1142 F. 4817, letter from UK ambassador, 8 August 1923.

Chinese agreements, obliging crews, before being hired, to forswear any claim to shore leave in the US. In these circumstances the clause was, of course, anything but voluntary, so other justifications had to be invoked, the Indian government, for instance, reconciling to the clause on security grounds, namely that it would check ‘undesirable’ ‘Bolshevik’ elements in the US substituting for deserting Indian seamen and ‘pass[ing off] ... as ... Lascars in order to get to India’.⁸³

In the 1920s it was through such ‘voluntary’ restrictions, rather than the application of any US immigration laws (including the 1917 Act), that Asian crews were stopped from going ashore at US ports, except perhaps for an excursion or two ‘under escort for shopping and other purposes’.⁸⁴ The clause was a great success from the shipowners’ point of view and endured for nearly two decades. Before its introduction, shipowners had sometimes thought nothing of offering double wages and a bonus to attract deserting Asian crews back to their vessels in US ports, powerfully highlighting just how keen they were to avoid making local hires at US wages, as well as their vulnerability to Asian crews exploiting the ambiguities in US laws and regulations.⁸⁵ The ‘voluntary’ shore-leave clause sought to allay such anxieties and reinforce British shipowners’ control over Asian crews in US ports.

In 1927 preliminary hearings began on a US congressional bill to refuse admission into the US of ships employing crews from the Asian barred zone specified in the 1917 immigration legislation. Chinese crews were a particular target, the aim of the draft bill (according to the US Seamen’s Union leader Andrew Furuseth) being to extend the ‘Chinese exclusion law ... to the sea’ and to prevent ‘particularly Orientals’ arriving in the US.⁸⁶ British shipowners and diplomatic representatives lobbied strongly against the bill, which would have prevented the hiring of Asian crews on US-bound vessels and gravely complicated the former’s crewing logistics. As part of their lobbying efforts in Congress, British shipowners circulated an alternative draft which would permit Asian crews to be employed on foreign vessels calling at US ports, but not allow them to set foot on US soil. Their practice of confining Asian crews to their ships while in port also became notably more demonstrative, with vessels in dock being placed on regular armed watch. Though it never passed, the bill remained a sporadic committee-level fixture on the US congressional agenda for several years, thus giving shipowners a continuing pretext for maintaining restrictions on shore leave. These restrictions appear to have been applied with particular strictness and consistency on vessels carrying Chinese crews.⁸⁷

Ling Yang-Chai’s protest and killing reflected tensions inseparable from the conditions under which Chinese seamen worked, and the long periods of confinement that they had to endure. In general, since the 1900s, Chinese crews seem to have suffered more overt mistrust and hostility than seafarers of almost any other nationality. Relations between European officers and Chinese crews had long been tense; they turned openly confrontational at several points during the Second World War. These relations were said to be particularly tense in port,

83 OIOC, L/E/7/1142 F. 4817, letter from Indian government and note by C.E. Baines, 5 December 1922; ‘lascar’ was a generic colonial term for Indian seamen.

84 OIOC, L/E/7/1142 F. 4817, Indian government telegram, 5 December 1922; L/E/9/974, Ellermans to Foreign Office, 11 October 1935.

85 Balachandran, *Globalizing labour*, p. 162.

86 OIOC, L/E/7/1458 F. 4454, British embassy to Foreign Office, 23 February 1927.

87 TNA, ADM 1/22978, reply to Admiralty inquiry, 19 July 1934. See, in general, OIOC, L/E/7/1458 F. 4454; Balachandran, *Globalizing labour*, pp. 165–6.

with shipowners and their representatives claiming that they were a source of ‘great strain’ and ‘nervous tension’ for officers, ‘whose whole time ... was taken up with crew disputes’.⁸⁸ Matters came to a head in 1940, when a series of strikes broke out among Chinese crews in Britain against disparities in their wages, war bonuses, and working conditions compared to those of British crews.

Wages and bonuses were finally raised in April 1942, after force and threats of deportation failed to quell the strikes, and a string of military defeats in the face of Japan’s seemingly relentless advance forced the Western allies grudgingly to acknowledge China’s frontline role in Asia. But the wage increases were proverbially ‘too little, too late’. Besides, according to Tony Lane, relations remained poor because of ‘unrelenting British intransigence’ and the ‘heavy-handed behaviour’ of ships’ officers and port officials, who saw the problem simply as a breakdown in crew discipline. Fearing en masse desertions in the US, British and Dutch vessels (which were now the principal employers of Chinese crews) reinforced armed watches in harbour. What followed was another series of protest strikes, on this occasion more centred on New York. Ling Yang-Chai was killed in the course of one such strike.⁸⁹ Restrictions on shore leave in US ports and other such barriers fell in a heap after the events aboard the *Silverash*.

In the months that followed, British and Dutch ships reported desertion rates of up to one-third of their crews in US ports, particularly New York.⁹⁰ Desertions by foreign seafarers were a common phenomenon in US ports, and wage differentials were historically the most frequent cause. The strains of the war and rationing were two of the other reasons why many thousands of European seafarers skipped their vessels in the USA in this period. Even for Asian seafarers there was ‘no shortage’ of better-paying shore jobs at most times in the US, especially in restaurants, laundries, and farms. Shortages worsened during the war, when many shore employers or their agents (among them some federal departments) advertised jobs on Californian farms and in New York hospitals in the local Chinese press. Many of these advertisements were explicitly targeted at Chinese seamen, who were enticed with promises of jobs that came with ‘freedom to stay’. Another cause for the desertions by Chinese seamen was said to be bad on-board conditions and ‘harsh treatment’ and ‘discrimination ... by white officers’.⁹¹

More attractive shore occupations and harsh shipboard conditions had prevailed for decades. While this was equally true of wage disparities, desertions were also reported among Chinese crews engaged on US or Panamanian wages.⁹² So what was new or different about 1942? The answer seems to lie in two main elements, both relevant to this article’s interest in the transit experiences of those whose journeys were uncertain and itineraries unstable. During the war, refusal of shore leave in US ports increasingly came to mean weeks of seemingly unremitting confinement on board, especially for Chinese crews arriving from across the Pacific. Moreover, after Hong Kong and Singapore fell into Japanese hands, Chinese seafarers

88 Modern Records Centre, Warwick (henceforth MRC), MSS 175/3/14/2, National Transport Workers’ Federation, ‘Chinese invasion of Great Britain: a national danger – call to arms’, July 1914; TNA, MT 9/4370, ‘Note of a meeting at the Ministry of War Transport on “Chinese crew problems” held on 15 January 1943’ (henceforth ‘Note on “Chinese crew problems”’).

89 Lane, *Merchant seamen’s war*, pp. 164–6; TNA, MT 9/4370, ‘Note on “Chinese crew problems”’.

90 These figures are reported in TNA, MT 9/4370.

91 TNA, MT 9/4370, ‘Survey of the Chinese seamen situation in the United States’, 26 May 1943, para. 13; advertisement in the *China Daily News*, 22 May 1943. As Frances Steel notes in ‘Anglo-worlds in transit: connections and frictions across the Pacific’, pp. 251–70 in this issue, desertions by white seafarers were an established habit at US ports.

92 TNA, MT 9/4370, ‘Survey of the Chinese seamen situation’, para. 10.

confronted the prospect of prolonged exile from home, indefinite engagements, and unrelieved spells afloat at sea and in port. Even at ports where they were allowed ashore, many employers – especially owners of oil tankers – refused to ‘relieve’ Chinese crew members on one pretext or another. Consequently, as an intelligence report from Aden noted, Chinese seamen had grown so tired of working on ships that they did not wish to continue at sea after their contracts expired, at least ‘until they have had a rest’.⁹³

At the same time, according to other intelligence reports, Chinese crews had developed a strong sense of national consciousness during the war, and sought now to embody the ‘self-respect’ deriving from China’s status as an Allied power and a member of the United Nations. Some observers blamed Chinese crews’ assertiveness on Allied wartime ‘propaganda on behalf of China’, and on Western praise for ‘China’s fighting stand against Japan’.⁹⁴ In the opinion of the intelligence official in Aden, during the war Chinese crews had acquired an ‘independent, intractable attitude’ and an ‘exaggerated sense of their own importance’, and were, as a result, ‘not in the least amenable to discipline’.⁹⁵ Not surprisingly, employers expressed similar views: they resisted negotiating with Chinese crews and government representatives because of apprehensions that such negotiations might seem unduly ‘flattering’ to the latter. They were also ‘strongly opposed’ to films, broadcasts, and other forms of wartime propaganda about China’s role in the war, or indeed to ‘anything that flattered the Chinese’.⁹⁶

Such evidence would suggest that by 1943 an insurgent sense of nation and nationalism had emboldened Chinese crews to challenge the prevailing attitude among ships’ officers and colonial officials, which, in the reported words of a British consular official in New York, was that Chinese crews were in reality ‘coolies’ rather than seafarers, and it was impossible to make them do any work without ‘get[ting] tough’ with them.⁹⁷ Intelligence insinuations that Chinese seafarers had previously lacked a sense of ‘self-respect’, or had Allied propaganda to thank for it, are predictably simplistic. Nevertheless, it is plausible that Allied propaganda may have confirmed, if not sharpened, analogies in the minds of Chinese crews between their own subjection on Western vessels and their nation’s subjection to Japanese occupation, while accounts of their nation’s heroic re-emergence during the war translated into subjective metaphors for resistance and liberation.

The intelligence report from Aden noted that, if not to their own country, Chinese seafarers wished to return ‘to a shore where many Chinese are present’.⁹⁸ Most Chinese wartime desertions took place in New York, where elite Chinese exiles felt moved by wartime patriotism to discover compatriots among the city’s working poor.⁹⁹ Despite opposition from shipowners and some Whitehall officials, the 1942 Chinese crew strikes in Britain and subsequent disputes could only be resolved through the intervention of Chinese government representatives in London.¹⁰⁰ In the US, too, local Chinese government representatives and

93 TNA, MT9/4370, ‘Note on “Chinese crew problems”’; MT 9/3754 M. 14578, letter from Aden field security officer, 22 October 1942.

94 TNA, MT 9/4370, ‘Survey of the Chinese seamen situation’, paras. 4–7; press cuttings in the file from the *Pilot* and *P.M.*; memorandum by Dimock, 31 March 1943; note by W.S. Johnston, 9 June 1943.

95 TNA, MT 9/3754 M. 14578, letter from Aden field security officer, 22 October 1942.

96 TNA, MT 9/4370, ‘Note on “Chinese crew problems”’.

97 TNA, MT 9/4370, letter from the Chinese philosopher Lin Yutang to *P.M.*, 16 May 1943.

98 TNA, MT 9/3754 M. 14578, letter from Aden field security officer, 22 October 1942.

99 Adam McKeown, ‘Conceptualizing Chinese diasporas, 1842–1949’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 58, 2, 1999, pp. 322–6.

100 Lane, *Merchant seamen’s war*, p. 165; TNA, MT 9/3657 F. 7724, record of a meeting between the International Transport-workers’ Federation and the Ministry of War Transport, May 1942; MT 9/4370, ‘Note on “Chinese crew problems”’.

communities watched over the treatment of their compatriots on colonial vessels. Alongside Chinese seamen, homologues of subjection also seem to have jumped ship in wartime New York, establishing continuities between maritime confinement and colonial subjection; between China's plight as a nation under occupation and that of its crews on colonial merchant vessels; and between China's fight against Japanese occupation and its seafarers' fight for dignity and freedom.¹⁰¹

British and Dutch shipowners fought back against Chinese seafarers' efforts to escape their subjection, relentlessly pressing US police and immigration officials to raid cafés, restaurants, and clubs and to consign dozens of suspected deserters to Ellis Island and other detention centres.¹⁰² In May 1943, barely a few months before the country's exclusion laws were repealed, US laws were amended to allow deserters to be recruited for the Chinese army in Burma and the Chinese labour corps in India. But practical difficulties – notably lack of space in US detention centres, shipping shortages, and the Indian government's resistance to the prospect of a growing Chinese labouring presence in the subcontinent – reduced the deterrent effect of threats of arrests and deportations.¹⁰³

Thus only the fortuitous course of the Second World War and an unravelling British empire in Asia prevented Chinese seamen from ending up like the passengers of the *Komagata-maru* nearly three decades earlier, exchanging their condition of confinement at sea for a similar one on land. The outrage following the killing of Ling Yang-Chai put an end to restrictions on shore leave for all crews of foreign ships calling at US ports. If efforts to legislate the exclusion of Asian crews in US ports in the 1920s were, as we saw above, justified as an attempt to extend the 'Chinese exclusion law ... to the sea', the success of Chinese crews in breaking out of their shipboard confinement in the fateful summer of 1942 arguably heralded the formal, if still mainly symbolic and limited, repeal of Chinese exclusion laws in December 1943, thereby underlining once again continuities between ship and shore unfolding in parallel with the dual aspect of steamships as both vehicles of mobility and vessels of confinement.

Conclusion

The increased regulation of mobility that accompanied its late nineteenth-century expansion and acceleration is widely recognized. In general, the (self-)restraints on which liberal associations between mobility and freedom rested are argued to have split mobile subjects between those thought capable of ordered movement and those requiring external restraints. Marked by race, class, gender, ethnicity, citizenship, and so on, this split dictated the governance of mobility in ways that reproduced it further as 'modes of exclusion and hierarchization'.¹⁰⁴ Regulations could rest on subterfuge, as they did in Canada, or appear random, irregular, or even perhaps whimsical in their actual working. Uncertainties about regulation had several consequences for passengers and crews. By the late nineteenth century, the regulatory reach of powerful states was beginning to extend across oceans to touch distant ports of embarkation. As ships, too, were naturally caught up in this process, voyages and transits became more

101 TNA, MT 9/4370, copy of Lin Yutang's letter to P.M., 16 May 1943.

102 See TNA, MT 9/4370 for some graphic descriptions of these raids.

103 TNA, MT 9/4370.

104 Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the ordering of freedom: on liberal governance of mobility*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2015, p. 88.

uncertain, especially for passengers deciding to brave the risk of exclusion at foreign ports. Whether from explicit exclusion or from other constraints, Asian seafarers – who with the advent of steam formed a growing proportion of crews on British and other Western ships – also faced long and uncertain voyages.

As incomplete and uncertain as they were, regulatory practices were not confined to borders or ships. They could jump between ship and shore, between passengers and crews, and between crews of different nationalities. In jumping between ship and shore they also began to span states and employers. As wage differentials between shore-based employment and seafaring widened in the late nineteenth century, particularly along the North Atlantic and US and Canadian Pacific coasts, shipowners grew steadily more concerned about desertions. Desertions were a particular worry for British shipowners, who were both the largest employers in the industry and employed some of its cheapest labour. Restraints on desertions by white crews grew weaker from the late nineteenth century, while confinement to vessels or supervised shore leave gradually emerged as a form of restraint on Asian crews. This practice bore continuities with a longer history of ships' masters denying leave to difficult crew members, while restrictions on the entry of Asian immigrants generated new continuities with shipowners' efforts to reinforce control over whole crews. The Canadian government's treatment of the *Komagata-maru's* passengers transferred practices towards Asian immigrants from shore to ship and from crews to Asian passengers; and eventually from Asian passengers to unwelcome seaborne immigrants and refugees in general, whose modes of exclusion and detention became visibly evident in Canada's techniques for dealing with the *Komagata-maru's* challenge to its racial and immigration policies.

The regulation of mobility also transformed ships into vessels of confinement. This was particularly the case for Asian crews at several ports. From the perspective of Asian passengers in particular, the *Komagata-maru* is now more iconic than unique. There were also striking continuities between ships and islands from the perspective of both passengers and crews. Analogies between their ship and the penal colony in the Andaman Islands were not lost on the passengers of the *Komagata-maru*, while the arrest and detention of Chinese and Indian crews in US ports during the Second World War led an Indian trade unionist friendly to the Allies to remark on the 'shocking contrast' between the US promise of liberty and the reality of these crews' confinement on Ellis Island.¹⁰⁵

The risk or the actual possibility of being confined to vessels affected shipboard sociality in diverse ways, ranging from how spaces were used to how crews negotiated relations with officers. The experience of long periods of shipboard confinement could also prove profoundly transformative. For Chinese crews unable to return home to Asia, ships became sites and sources of experiences for forming a consciousness of nation, freedom, and citizenship that found expression in strikes and protests, and eventually in attempts at desertion in New York. Such transformations were no less dramatic for the passengers of the *Komagata-maru*, whose sensibilities appear to have been radicalized in ways that bear no easy comparison with the lessons that many of their sympathisers on land drew from the incident.¹⁰⁶ They also seemed so obvious and inescapable to the colonial Indian government that a large number of the returning passengers were ordered to be confined to their villages for many years to come.

105 OIOC, L/E/9/458, telegram, 19 May 1944; 'ISU – Aftab Ali', 30 June 1944.

106 On the latter, see Renisa Mawani, 'Specters of indigeneity in British-Indian migration, 1914', *Law and Society Review*, 46, 2, 2012, pp. 369–403.

While focusing on ships, this article attempts to draw broader attention to the states of transit which expanded with the nineteenth-century expansion of mobility and yet, remaining invisibly folded into journeys with clearly marked departures and arrivals, have largely escaped historical attention except perhaps in relation to those journeys themselves. In the stories related here, transit could distend or interrupt journeys as much as span its ends. It might occupy in-between spaces – besides ships and camps, also islands, archipelagos, and oceans under the sway of empires and powerful states. Particularly for poorer, non-white migrants and colonial labouring subjects, uncertain journeys could put destinations out of reach, blur distinctions between transit and destination, and turn ships into floating camps. The resulting loss of autonomy and control over their mobility could also ultimately render them immobile. Hence, although centring on Indian passengers and Indian and Chinese crews, the accounts related here speak to a more general condition from the perspective of nominally free, mobile (or potentially mobile) non-white labouring subjects.

Beings in transit thus serve as a stark reminder that global histories of mobility cannot simply be about departures, arrivals, admittance, and eventual inclusion. They are also about conditions in between: departures that diverted or circled back to points of origin; arrivals that did not end in admittance; (non-)admittance that issued into internment, exclusion, externment, return, or repatriation. Imagining transit as a condition that may not necessarily be impermanent also opens up historical and contextual meanings of such seemingly self-evident spaces as ship, sea, island, mainland, and the relations between them. For instance, where destinations blur into voyages, ships are not merely vectors of mobility. They are also spaces of exile from land and ordinary land-based patterns of sociality.¹⁰⁷ Ships as spaces of exile from landed society figure naturally enough in histories of piracy. But ships have also served as spaces of internment similar to ‘camps’. Likewise, the use of islands as spaces of exile and camps is a practice with a long history that expanded in the eighteenth century and grew exponentially in the colonies and under colonial rule. Analogies between islands and ships run both ways. Islands, for instance, can be ‘unsinkable ships’, while ships can double up as floating ‘islands’ for confining prisoners, refugees, and asylum-seekers. Continuities between ships and islands remain an enduring feature of the present, underlined for example by Australia’s immigrant detention policies and practices, and its decision to excise some outlying islands from territorial definitions of the ‘mainland’ to get round its obligations under international humanitarian or refugee laws.¹⁰⁸

Imagining ships, islands, and camps in a conceptual continuum (if not under most conditions a physical one) alerts us to imperial genealogies of contemporary practices of exclusion and internment in some ‘darker’ sides, as it were, of the nineteenth-century expansion of mobility. In this perspective, stories of refugees, stowaways, marginal workers, seafarers denied landing rights, and so on, not only underline ships as rather more permanent spaces of transit than we may conventionally regard them. They also enable us to see them as

107 As other articles in this special number note: Martin Dusinberre, ‘Writing the on-board: Meiji Japan in transit and transition’, pp. 271–94; Tamson Pietsch, ‘Bodies at sea: travelling to Australia in the age of sail’, pp. 209–28.

108 Leila Green, ‘Bordering on the inconceivable: the Pacific solution, migration zone, and “Australia’s 9/11”’, *Australian Journal of Communication*, 30, 1, 2004, pp. 19–36.

vessels of confinement, and more generally as analytical vectors for thinking historically about (trans-)oceanic spaces in relation to terrestrial modes of sovereignty and power in an era of globalizing capital and expanded labour mobility, and of modern empires and powerful states claiming a global reach.

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