New research indicates that 38 per cent of the international merchant fleet has adopted multinational crewing patterns. **Bin Wu**, of the Seafarers International Research Centre in Wales, says that while seafarers appear to have got used to life in the 'global village', many questions remain to be asked of them.

Seafarers: the first global villagers?

The 20th century was exceptional in human history owing to the creation of so many new things, such as cars, aeroplanes, the space-shuttle etc. It may be difficult to agree on the most important invention because the favourite varies from one to another. For me, however, no change is more significant than the emergence of the "global village".

The term village is usually applied to a "small rural population unit" containing a normal community. The phrase "global village" first emerged in Marshall McLuhan's book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* in which he argued that electronic technology was shrinking the planet, suggesting that "time has ceased and space has vanished". Since then, use of the term global village has mushroomed in political debates, among public media, and even commercial advertisements, because it encapsulates our feeling that the world is indeed getting smaller as a result of the rapid development of transport systems and information communication technology, in particular.

Like any newly-fashioned term, global village is used by different people to relate to different things. While some people would like to use it to promote their business in the global marketplace, others may consider issues of common values, responsibility, and action, against the "global pillage". Despite its various interpretations, one thing seems clear: global village is not equal to the notion of the "united nations" because the concept of nation is a political identification, which is mainly manipulated by a few politicians "on behalf of you". Instead, the idea of the global village is largely based upon fully shared information so that all residents can make their own decisions.

To design and build a global village mansion many things need to be known in advance: how many potential residents will move in? Which families (culture systems) do they belong to? What languages, religions, and life styles do they have? How can they live together in a friendly neighbourhood, and what kinds of negotiation and management mechanisms are needed to deal with the "village affairs".

These questions need to be addressed because although we have lived on this earth for a long time, few of us really know each other. The greatest potential difficulty for the new village settlers is, perhaps, communication with each other.

In hher paper: "*Who live in the 'Global Village?*", Donella Meadow reminds us that the world is made up of more than 200 languages, and nearly 100 religions. Of these, 58.4 per cent of them are in Asia, 12.4 per cent in Africa and 8.4 per cent in Latin America. At the beginning of the new century, it is urgent that all potential residents know each other before a formal meeting is held for negotiating "village affairs".

If the development of the global village is an on-going project, seafarers in the international merchant fleet may be described as the first citizens of the new village although they still hold national passports. The transition from national citizens to global citizens cannot be separated from the transformation of the international shipping industry from national flag registration to open registration in the late 20th century. In this sense, the maritime industry is the first factory built in the global village, while seafarers can be said to be contributing to, or helping to construct the first global village mansion.

Of many indicators reflecting the progress of the global village project, multinational crewing patterns may be an important one. According to a recent survey conducted by the Seafarers International Research Centre on the global seafaring labour market, about 38 per cent of the international merchant fleet has adopted multi-national crewing patterns which are defined as three or more nationalities onboard. By contrast, only one third of ships maintained single-nationality crewing patterns. In answer to the question, who settles in this global village, nearly 150 nationalities are recorded on seafarers' supply lists. Over 40 per cent come from the Far East, 30 per cent from East Europe, over 10 per cent from South Asia and Middle East, while the traditional maritime countries contribute 13 per cent.

While seafarers may be said to be the first group to settle in the global village, many questions need to be asked of them. For example: What do you feel about your new accommodation, compared with the "old houses" of your home town? Are you happy with your "new family"?

Do you have a village committee which deals with village affairs, and allows you to take part in village management? Do you think that you are a global citizen and would you like to hold a global passport in the future?

The results from our transnational communities project suggest that, in most of cases, seafarers have become used to, and even increasingly enjoy, their social life in the global village or with multinational crews. But their working environment, in terms of their working load, employment conditions, wages and welfare, is not necessarily a happy one. Our understanding is that there is currently no "global village council" to regulate village affairs, and no plan to introduce such democracy on ships.

Fig.1 Number of Nationalities Onboard

- 5 + 10.6%
- 4 nat 9.7%
- 3 nat 17.0%
- 2 nat 28.5%
- 1 nat 34.2%

Fig. 2 Distribution of Seafarers by Region of Origin

- L.A/Africa 5.8%
- OECD 13.3%
- S Asia/M.E 11.4%
- E Europe 29.0%
- Far East 40.5%