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Opportunism for Survival: Steamship Teaboys and China's Wartime Shipping Industry, 1937–1941

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Abstract

This article examines the correlation between union activism, crime, and violence in the shipping industry in wartime China. Drawing on diplomatic and police records, shipping manifests, periodicals, and newspapers, the article deals with self-employed unskilled steamship attendants called “teaboys.” With insight into Chinese civilians’ underground struggle, the article contends that, steamship teaboys sustained their livelihoods during World War II by operating as everyday low-level spies for rival regimes. As workers, steamship teaboys pragmatically, without evidence of politico-ideological considerations, accommodated the needs of different belligerents in exchange for their own survival. Moreover, this article argues that the drastic socio-political upheaval in wartime China made these marginally employed shipboard attendants increasingly inclined towards a utilitarian patron-client relationship, originally forged in the mid-1920s when unionization began, and continued at the expense of their native-place ties and fictive family bonds. Impacted by the patron-client relationship in a climate where workers’ interests were protected by the armed forces of various regimes, the teaboys viewed unions as competitive sellers of muscle power in a market for crime and violence in industrial unrest.

Keywords: teaboys; service workers; steamships; unionization; Second Sino-Japanese War

Introduction¹

This article sheds light on the trade union politics of steamship “teaboys.” This self-employed, unskilled part of the service sector plied the waters in China’s wartime shipping industry at least until 1941, after which sources become unavailable. Taking the part as low-level spies for rival regimes during the Second Sino-Japanese War, these shipboard attendants tended toward a pragmatic, patron-client relationship to survive. In the unionization process started in the mid-1920s, they aligned with state-sponsored unions at the expense of their biological or fictive family bonds, making unions competitive agents in a market where organized crime and violence reigned. The vulnerable teaboys, meanwhile, sought protection from political entities that were antagonistic to each other but that could provide them with patronage and

pay. This situation parallels Shanghai silk weavers' alliances with political organizations, which Elizabeth Perry has illuminated.²

These male adult steamship servants, "*chafang*"—a term meaning a room where water is boiled and food prepared—were known in English as "teaboys" or "cabin boys," a pejorative term used by expats. They provided food and beverages or handled sundry tasks aboard steamers.³ Similar to what Philippe Burrin has termed "opportunistic accommodation," teaboys took advantage of conflicts between various wartime factions and worked for different belligerents in exchange for material and symbolic rewards. They were largely not driven by politico-ideological concerns.⁴ Steamship teaboys therefore differed from colonial hotel and domestic service workers whose anti-imperialist efforts led Julia Martinez to describe them as part of the growing Southeast Asia labor movement inspired by communist or nationalist ideals.⁵

The Exploitative Economics of Passenger Transport

The teaboy trade can be traced back to the aftermath of the unequal treaties between the Qing court and foreign powers whose vessels were granted freedom of navigation in Chinese waters from the mid-nineteenth century onward.⁶ To cater to the needs of Chinese passengers segregated from their foreign counterparts and considered racially inferior,⁷ ship compradors—Chinese agents contracting with shipping firms for passenger and cargo services—enrolled teaboys as self-employed service workers.⁸

Steamship teaboys earned their livelihood in a highly exploitative employment system. Ship compradors recruited teaboys to work with no pay nor any resources.⁹ Instead, each teaboy made a deposit, ranging from fifty to two hundred Chinese silver yuan in 1933, in exchange for a position. Compradors contracted to return this money if either side withdrew.¹⁰ Steamship teaboys' deposit money—not unlike hotel teaboys—often led to debt as repaying the large amount was an onerous task for a typical teaboy.¹¹ They worked around the clock serving passengers.¹² As well, teaboys were regularly required to hand over some of their income and pay fees to compradors who gave shipping firms a lump sum return for each trip.¹³ Rather than being a part of a disciplined shipping company crew, teaboys were managed by exploitative compradors. Some foreign firms attempted to put them under their control in the late 1920s,¹⁴ and ship captains were increasingly given more power over teaboys' discipline in the early 1930s when companies began to reform passenger transport.¹⁵ The ship captains' power to supervise the teaboys was recognized by the pro-Nationalist Chinese Seamen's Union (CSU) that claimed that their men did not have to obey instructions from anyone but the captain in 1937.¹⁶

The exploitative contractual terms did not diminish competition for a steamship teaboy position. Anyone, even an illiterate, could become a "competent" teaboy. Their tasks were rudimentary.¹⁷ Lacking education and nautical skills,¹⁸ teaboys were non-apprentice laborers unprotected by craft guilds and with little bargaining power over wages.¹⁹ They sold a variety of foods, cigarettes, snacks, and bedding to passengers in both cabins and in steerage.²⁰ They also provided entertainment such as playing Mahjong,²¹ or they introduced prostitutes to male passengers.²² Although they did not engage in arduous physical work, they often carried passengers' heavy baggage from the wharf to their cabins,²³ or delivered articles for different

authorities or individuals.²⁴ Teaboy's standards of sanitation and tidiness were not equivalent to those of stewards, whose service had to comply with the strict criteria set by expatriate staff.

Low expectations aside, the income available made the teaboy trade attractive. Teaboys sold food and rented necessities and bunks often at a steep mark-up.²⁵ For example, they could charge two copper coins for a cup of tea in 1934.²⁶ Over and above their tea prices, however, were their unlawful activities such as extorting passengers for tips, or human-trafficking and smuggling.²⁷ These illicit activities engendered widespread hatred of steamship teaboys, not only causing fluctuations in the economic markets and loss of government revenue, but also threatening public safety across China.²⁸ Teaboys' blackmailing and contraband trade provided them with income far greater than the earnings of skilled mariners and hotel or apartment teaboys. What they earned was comparable even to a middle-class income.²⁹ In the 1930s, it was quite common for a teaboy to have a monthly income of three to four hundred yuan, slightly higher than the salary of a university professor.³⁰ This amount was also far higher than the salary that a skilled head seaman could earn—one yuan per month in the early twentieth century.³¹ Despite their low social status in Chinese society, their income attracted many to work as steamship teaboys.³² According to union statistics, seven thousand teaboys were in active service in Chinese waters before the Second Sino-Japanese War.³³ The total number of attendants aboard a vessel could at times increase by more than 100 percent, to 120 teaboys—a figure that no steamer could support—because teaboys at different ports would get aboard and compete for jobs.³⁴ Overall, teaboys' poor performance and behaviors made it difficult for them to secure wider support in labor disputes. This then paved the way for them to affiliate with different influential figures.

Solidarity Based on Kinship and Shared Local Origins

At the outset, solidarity between unskilled teaboys and skilled seamen was maintained because many Chinese crew members joined labor guilds tied to biological kinship or shared local origin. Ship compradors and senior seamen were empowered to recruit teaboys and skilled mariners respectively.³⁵ They usually looked for crew with a similar personal background as themselves and initiated preferential recruitment based on a blood relationship or native-place ties.³⁶ This contributed to the formation of different labor guilds where maritime laborers forged unity across different steamship sections.³⁷ Also, seafarers from various counties and towns joined native-place associations that promoted mutual assistance amongst townsmen and fellow villagers.³⁸ Native-place groups from Ningbo, Wuxi, Hubei, Suzhou, or northern Jiangsu conventionally stood for the interests of maritime laborers working aboard Shanghai-based steamers.³⁹

To seek more support, maritime workers also aligned with the Green Gang, which admitted members from diverse native-place backgrounds. This secret society, which formed mutual-aid networks during the Qing period,⁴⁰ was closely associated with the development of Luoism Luojiao—a local, salvationist religion with origins in Buddhism and prevalent among seafarers who transported grain to Beijing.⁴¹ Many seamen were attracted to this religion for spiritual support.⁴² Luoist tradition organized nineteenth-century seafaring gangs into different provincial fleet divisions,

or “*chuanbang*”—that were diverse but shared local origins based on fictive kinship networks. These seafarers were incorporated into various divisions according to their native places, creating a broad representation of different townships in each fleet—a phenomenon that continued in the steamship era.⁴³ After the termination of grain transport services, out-of-work mariners filled the newly created positions on steamers actively controlled by the Green Gang, which inherited Luoist fleet divisions.⁴⁴ Green Gang seafarers were also bound by a pseudo-family hierarchy, leading to the formation of a fictive, hierarchical “family” network. Men with different native-place connections contributed to the formation of a nonblood family whose members were urged to comply with obligations and provide support for each other.⁴⁵

Trade unionism also merged with gang and secret society activity in the world of teaboys in Shanghai from the mid-1920s, contributing to the grafting of a new organizational, political format onto the teaboys. Similar to what Elizabeth Perry has noted concerning how the communists alternated between political activism and gangster brotherhood,⁴⁶ hundreds of shipboard attendants sided with communist cadres during the 1925 May Thirtieth Movement against warlords and imperialism.⁴⁷ The teaboys showed no particular interest in industrial action until they were deprived of employment by various strikes. Some out-of-work teaboys from Swire’s steamers abandoned their work and went ashore to join the strikes. As they waited for financial support from the Shanghai General Labor Union (SGLU) led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), they rented a house in Pudong where they established their own union and started recruiting members.⁴⁸ Their labor activism was temporarily interrupted following the brief imprisonment of three teaboy leaders accused of subversion following the Guomindang’s (GMD; The Chinese Nationalists’ Party) violent purge of the communists in April 1927.⁴⁹

Trade Union Activists as Partisans and Spies

Changing political circumstance in China after its unification under the GMD’s leadership in 1927 further encouraged a growth in the trade union membership of steamship teaboys. This fostered their political predisposition toward party politics and the establishment of individual pro-government labor organizations opposed to trade union interests.⁵⁰ These organizations came under the protection of various authorities in power. Teaboys formed two unions affiliated with the Chinese Seamen’s Industrial Federation (CSIF) and its successor, the CSU union controlled by the Nationalist in Nanjing.⁵¹ They came into being in Shanghai immediately after the 1927 Northern Expedition, when the defeated warlord Sun Chuanfang fled the city.⁵² Unlike the nineteenth-century seafaring gangs attached to the Green Gang, these two attendant unions had an unprecedented diversity of native-place bonds among their members. The River Steamer Cabin Boys’ Union (RSCBU), active along the Yangtze River, was composed of three thousand attendants largely with roots in Jiangsu and Hubei in 1933.⁵³ Another union called the Ship Passengers’ Safety Association (SPSA) was mainly active onboard Shanghai-Ningbo steamers and consisted of around one thousand members in 1927. Although this association was dominated by members hailing from Ningbo, 12 percent of the total membership came from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and other parts of China.⁵⁴ (See [table 1](#))

Table 1. Unions with which Steamship Teaboy Were Affiliated until 1941⁵⁵

Union	Political and union affiliations	Membership	Members' provenance
CSIF	GMD and CCP (1921–1927); GMD Guangzhou clique (1927–1936)	21,500 (1929) (registered); 160,000 (1929) (unregistered)	From various parts of China and overseas
CSU	GMD Nanjing clique (1932–1937); GMD Chongqing (1937–1941)	Not known	From various parts of China and overseas
SGLU	GMD and CCP (1925–1927); GMD Nanjing clique (1927–1937)	218,804 (1927)	From branches based in Shanghai
CSSMGGA	GMD Chongqing (1939–1941)	Not known	From various parts of China and overseas
CSGLU	Japan (1939–1941)	623 (1939)	Executive committee members from Jiangsu, Anhui, and Zhejiang
ACSF	Wang Jingwei's collaborationist administration (1939–1941)	Not known	Executive committee members from Jiangsu
RSCBU	CSIF (1927–1933); CSU (1933–1937) Loyalty divided (1937–1941)	3,000 (1933)	Mostly from Jiangsu and Hubei
SPSA	CSIF (1927); SGLU (1927–1935); CSU (1935–1937); Uncertain allegiance (1937–1941)	About 1,000 (1927)	Mostly from Ningbo, with a small number from Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and other parts of China

Table 1 terms: All-China Seamen's Federation (ACSF); Chinese Communist Party (CCP); Chinese Seamen's General Labor Union (CSGLU); Chinese Seamen's Spiritual Mobilization Group in Guerrilla Areas (CSSMGGA); Chinese Seamen's Industrial Federation (CSIF); Chinese Seamen's Union (CSU); Guomindang (The Chinese Nationalist Party) (GMD); River Steamers Cabin Boys' Union (RSCBU); Shanghai General Labor Union (SGLU); Ship Passengers' Safety Association (SPSA).

The two teaboy unions were governed by two different executive committees. In an election organized by the RSCBU union in May 1927, more than four hundred teaboys elected twenty-two council members who then chose eight executive union leaders.⁵⁶ Those teaboys ranked below the level of the council committee also elected a new chief foreman and deputy aboard each vessel. General assemblies discussed broad issues; minor concerns were determined by members aboard each steamship.⁵⁷ The SPSA union also shared a similar hierarchical structure, with an addition of five supervisory board members.⁵⁸ The RSCBU and SPSA unions were initially affiliated with the Shanghai branch of the CCP-backed CSIF union, which was taken over by the GMD after April 1927, and subject to the influence of the GMD's Guangzhou

clique. It was renamed the CSU and put under Nanjing's absolute control after 1932.⁵⁹ These teaboy unions, whose members were first granted seaman status by the communists,⁶⁰ offered a wide range of benefits to their members.⁶¹

The teaboys' increasing predisposition toward party politics led to the construction of patron-client relationships in the shipping industry from the late 1920s. The RSCBU union teaboys—affiliated with the pro-Guangzhou CSIF union—and their SPSA counterparts, who shifted their loyalty to the Nanjing-backed SGLU union after 1927, presumed that their financial contribution to the umbrella union would mean they received unconditional support.⁶² The teaboys not only constituted a majority of the CSU membership in the 1930s, but also paid the most fees to this union.⁶³ Any teaboy who failed to join and support the union financially would be bullied and dismissed.⁶⁴ This trade-off established a new precedent in the teaboys' world. Easily corrupted, it paved the way for the unequal treatment of various attendants under the aegis of politicians and gang leaders. These figures included Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's subordinate, General Yang Hu, who commanded the Peace Preservation Corps and the pro-Nanjing CSU union, Zhao Zhizhi, a Cantonese official who controlled the CSIF union, and Du Yuesheng, a prominent Green Gang leader who dominated the SGLU.⁶⁵ Even after the GMD's takeover of China in 1927, some union-affiliated teaboys, who were imprisoned during the purge of the communists, benefited from union pressure on the police to release them.⁶⁶

Despite teaboys' active participation in politics, ideals or philosophies of political parties was not what motivated them. Although the communists persuaded some attendants to join the CSIF union when it was under the CCP control,⁶⁷ the teaboys soon saw the CCP as powerless following its suppression by the GMD in 1927.⁶⁸ This was evident when communist cadres failed to solicit support from the teaboys in the industrial action against Swire in February 1933, after the company dismissed over one hundred teaboys from the SS *Wusong*.⁶⁹ After the CCP's rout in 1927, teaboys sought to buttress the Three Principles of the People—a political philosophy developed by Sun Yat-sen. Their actions often contradicted Sun's ideals, however, as the teaboys continued smuggling goods and drugs and failed to financially support the union. As well, their shift of allegiance to Japan was at odds with the principles of *minzu* (nationalism) and *minquan* (democracy). This stance of the teaboys not only undermined China's efforts to free itself from imperialist occupation, but also deprived workers of the freedom to choose their delegates.⁷⁰ Despite teaboys' lack of enthusiasm for ideology, they still differed from what Alain Roux has explained about Shanghai syndicalist workers who dismissed political ideals but were less likely to ally themselves with political figures.⁷¹ The teaboys maintained affiliation with various authorities that could reward them and sustain their livelihoods.

The pre-war patron-client relationship between teaboys and government officials continued during the recession in the shipping industry caused by the Second Sino-Japanese War. Although cargo and passenger services in Chinese waters continued intermittently until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, shipping activities, especially those in the lower Yangtze, were predominantly overseen by foreign companies, and were later monopolized by the Japanese.⁷² In the first eleven months of 1942, teaboys constituted more than half of the 272 unemployed maritime laborers,⁷³ a level of unemployment due largely to the intermittent suspension of

passenger service because of the war.⁷⁴ The lack of skills among teaboys also worked against them as cargo vessels operations depended on a crew's expertise.⁷⁵ Some crew members of the Swire company were illegally detained and others fatally wounded during military operations.⁷⁶ Many Chinese seamen, and especially teaboys, suffered great misery and homelessness in Shanghai.⁷⁷ Such miserable conditions forced their fight for survival; they became dependent on anyone who could save them from unemployment during the war.

Yet the wartime patron-client relationship between attendants and powerful individuals differed in two ways from those of the Nanjing decade—the period between 1927 and 1937, when China made significant socio-economic progress under Chiang Kai-shek's leadership. First, the political struggles between the teaboys intensified during the war. Instead of only being involved in conflicts between the CCP and the GMD and within the Nationalists' regime, wartime teaboys also confronted the Japanese. In the areas under their control, the Japanese provided teaboys with jobs aboard their fleets. While pro-GMD CSU union staff-in-exile ran a passenger service between Yichang and Changsha,⁷⁸ the Japanese and Nanjing's Reform Government—the predecessor of Wang Jingwei's Reorganized National Government—funded two pro-Japan shipping companies that operated almost ninety vessels in China.⁷⁹ Aside from shipping, the belligerents also backed maritime unions with which teaboys were affiliated, attempting to divide the labor movement. Teaboys were attached to the Chongqing-backed Chinese Seamen's Spiritual Mobilization Group in Guerrilla Areas (CSSMGG),⁸⁰ the Japanese-led Chinese Seamen's General Labor Union (CSGLU),⁸¹ and the All-China Seamen's Federation (ACSF), a seamen's association affiliated with Wang Jingwei's collaborationist administration.⁸² Membership of the unions included teaboys from diverse native-place backgrounds, often overlapping with their counterparts in rival organizations.⁸³ Again, Alain Roux's observation are valuable: Many unskilled workers in wartime had to accept assistance provided by any party, including the Japanese.⁸⁴

Second, the methods for maintaining the relationships differed from those they had in various political assemblies or the GMD, which they supported monetarily during the Nanjing decade.⁸⁵ Before the war, the union-affiliated teaboys, aware of the extravagant tastes of General Yang Hu, ingratiated themselves by paying union dues, which gave Yang a part of his income.⁸⁶ The relationship was mainly sustained by the financial subsidies provided by political patrons rather than by teaboys' bribes in exchange for work or protection at work.⁸⁷ To raise funds for their comrades in Shanghai, pro-GMD CSU union staff inaugurated a passenger service between Changsha and Yichang, paying each out-of-work maritime worker 6 yuan per month.⁸⁸ The Chinese Seamen's Spiritual Mobilization Group also received a monthly allowance of 100 yuan.⁸⁹ As for the pro-Japan CSGLU union, it reportedly received a monthly stipend of 600 yuan from the Japanese-backed Shanghai Municipality,⁹⁰ and 1,000 yuan from the Japanese Military.⁹¹ Similarly, Wang Jingwei's collaborationist regime provided funds for its own seamen's union ACSF, whose executive members were entitled to 300 yuan per month.⁹² Also funded by Wang's administration, local seafarers' organizations in Shanghai were allotted more than 100 yuan per month over three months from June 1940.⁹³

In return for the subsidy provided by their trade union patrons, union-affiliated teaboys engaged in partisan and spying operations. Their wartime political activity

even involved physical confrontations. Teaboy Shao Xubai, a SPSA union delegate to Chongqing, maintained close relations with GMD officials in exile.⁹⁴ Reports indicate that the maritime workers affiliated with a Chongqing-backed field service corps engaged in logistics and military operations against the Japanese during the early phase of the Battle of Shanghai.⁹⁵ Apart from distributing anti-Japanese leaflets and preventing work stoppages,⁹⁶ Shao also made good use of his pre-war connections in the pro-GMD SGLU union to organize postal and maritime workers. As part of a Special Action Corps engaged in intelligence gathering and sabotage, they joined in the resistance to the Japanese.⁹⁷ Any defectors who worked for the Japanese might feel the wrath of Shao's resistance activities.⁹⁸

Meanwhile, Shao's counterparts working for the Japanese assisted in the kidnapping of Chongqing intelligence personnel hiding in Shanghai. In fact, Wang Jingwei's administration and the Japanese Special Service worked together to arrest and assassinate suspected agents and returning government officials.⁹⁹ As an integral part of Wang's collaborationist regime, the ACSF was involved in partisan activities organized by Japanese intelligence. After the union was established, its members shadowed and assaulted Chongqing agents. Teaboys' participation in such activities comes to life in the attempted abduction of Hu Qi—a union staff member of the Chinese Seamen's Party Headquarters in exile. As a former leading teaboy of the GMD-backed RSCBU union, Wang Oumin initially worked with Hu Qi for Chongqing. Then Wang Oumin surrendered to the collaborationist regime.¹⁰⁰ Despite his defection, Wang remained in touch with his former colleagues, who tried to switch his loyalty back to the GMD.¹⁰¹ Wang Oumin ignored their pleas and even worked with Wang Jingwei's secret agents to kidnap Hu Qi—his workmate from the pro-GMD CSU union in Shanghai's French concession in October 1939. A letter was discovered that included political and military intelligence about Wang Jingwei's administration. This was the probable reason for the kidnapping of Hu, who possessed the letter.¹⁰² Teaboy defectors such as Wang, who worked to expose suspects, were of importance to the Japanese authorities.

Besides their role in partisan activities, teaboys also gathered intelligence. The nature of their jobs gave them great mobility and access to passengers, including first-hand strategic information both shoreside and onboard ships. In 1938, six Chongqing-backed teaboys and seamen were appointed as "correspondents" for the GMD-backed CSU union. They worked in pairs, undertaking intelligence work ashore in neutral areas and Japanese-held territories. In 1938, one of these six "correspondents," Wei Xiesheng, a leading teaboy of the former pro-GMD RSCBU union, was dispatched to Hong Kong together with Wang Yalun.¹⁰³ Sent there to contact maritime workers, these "correspondents" also investigated a wide range of political issues and were asked to note the condition or movements of maritime laborers, defectors, social organizations, and steamships.¹⁰⁴

Teaboys also collected intelligence onboard vessels, deployed by belligerent regimes to monitor passengers travelling abroad. For example, in February 1940, the Japanese-backed Chinese Seamen Party Headquarters wanted to create an intelligence network within the fleets on which their members served, recruiting forty out-of-work teaboys to collect intelligence from passengers. The teaboys—about to take an oath of allegiance to Japan and receive two months of training—were

instructed to pay attention to suspicious passengers, especially people from Chongqing.¹⁰⁵ It remains unclear whether the different belligerents hoped the teaboys would act as spies on particular vessels controlled by sympathetic unions, but Japan's monopoly on shipping in the lower Yangtze favored this type of activity aboard its steamers. Teaboys—low-level socio-political actors—played a role in wartime Chinese politics. Spying was in line with similar roles for unemployed youth who helped Chinese intelligence authorities in exchange for money and meals.¹⁰⁶ Teaboys' partisan and spying activities, done at risk to their own lives, seemed more self-aware than those protests organized by unemployed and desperate workers who unwittingly aided the Japanese in disrupting and weakening British factories in Shanghai.¹⁰⁷

Beneficiaries of Wartime Politics

The direct impact of the teaboys' involvement in politics was that it enabled them to challenge shipping firms, the police, and other shipping personnel during a war when states and militaries were more powerful than any union or native-place association. Wartime Chinese teaboys were different from the early twentieth-century European maritime laborers who exploited the "interstices of sovereignty," in the words of Charles Bégue Fawell.¹⁰⁸ They organized union activities in overseas ports where French jurisdiction was not applicable. In China, the teaboys affiliated with state-sponsored unions that were sellers of muscle power in local labor disputes, fighting "closed shops" by intimidating their opponents with physical violence.¹⁰⁹ The war not only subverted the pre-war order, it also divided the teaboys amongst themselves. As Elizabeth Perry has shown, the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War broke up the factions that Shanghai silk weavers had taken advantage of in the pre-war labor movement—Shanghai Social Affairs Bureau versus the GMD's paramilitary corps or "Blue Shirts," and the GMD versus the CCP. After 1941, the war also squelched any sign of anti-Japanese activity,¹¹⁰ signifying a change for the teaboys, too. Soon after the defeat of the Nationalists in Shanghai, at least 623 steamship teaboys and other maritime workers engaged in the new order by shifting their allegiance to the Japanese, wooing their colleagues to register with the pro-Japan CSGLU union.¹¹¹

The Japanese-backed union-affiliated teaboys began to force compradors and foreign shipping companies to reinstate dismissed comrades by demanding the intervention of the French Concession Police in labor disputes. In 1939 in Shanghai, the Jardine company sacked five teaboys affiliated with the Japanese-backed CSGLU union. They were accused of showing scorn for senior officers and poor performance.¹¹² The teaboys sought assistance from their union leaders. About eight union representatives, including a Mr. Koyama—a Japanese adviser to the union—boarded Jardine's vessels twice in December 1939 and urged the captain and the comprador to re-employ the men. Their requests were denied.¹¹³ The dismissed teaboys and their union heads therefore sought assistance from the French police, who had suppressed union activities but were increasingly subject to Japanese influence after 1937.¹¹⁴ While the union negotiated with the comprador onboard Jardine's SS *Desheng*—a steamer transporting many British soldiers—the French authorities deployed their police to Roosevelt Terminal, ostensibly to guarantee the safety of union members threatened by British servicemen angry over the union's breach of

the peace on the British steamer. The union president, Yang Runqing, encouraged the French police to dispatch officers in similar incidents in the future.¹¹⁵

Japanese military assistance was a last resort for the dismissed teaboys and union leaders once police intervention failed to achieve their ends. Jardine's consistent refusal to reinstate the Japanese-backed teaboys incited agitators to appeal to the Japanese Gendarmerie in Tianjin to arrest Chen Liangqing, the comprador responsible for the dismissal of the teaboys. Chen's brother, a comprador on another vessel, heard his brother was about to be arrested by the Japanese military, and he met with Japanese officers in Tanggu to prevent it. Eventually, the Japanese commanders promised not to assist the union, provided that Chen's brother duly satisfy the Japanese officers' tastes with an expensive dinner.¹¹⁶ This attempted arrest of Chen Liangqing illustrates the teaboys' strategic alignment with the wartime political machinery. Adding to Anne Reinhardt's observation on how shipping firms attempted to curb the attendants' unlawful onboard activities in the mid-1930s,¹¹⁷ the teaboys' obvious success in this case, consolidated their power in the wartime shipping industry.

Another alternative open to teaboys was to seek diplomatic assistance from the Nationalist government in exile. The drastic decline of Britain in wartime Asia prevented it from safeguarding its long-term interests in China, and it provided an opportunity for Chinese workers to win concessions in labor disputes. When Butterfield and Swire planned to reduce the number of teaboys and put them under the company's control onboard the SS *Xin Beijing* in Shanghai in 1939, the teaboys successfully forced the company's hand.¹¹⁸ Swire had been unobtrusively reducing the number of teaboys on its fleets since the mid-1930s.¹¹⁹ The eighty Ningbo teaboys onboard the SS *Xin Beijing* had so far been exempt from the reorganization scheme based on an agreement signed between the pro-GMD CSU union and Swire in the mid-1930s; reforms were difficult to achieve because the teaboy unions were shielded by the GMD.¹²⁰ In 1939, following rumors that Swire would go ahead with the reorganization scheme, eighty teaboys in Shanghai sent a telegram to Chongqing and turned to Yang Hu for help.

Subsequently, Yang asked Wang Chonghui—minister of foreign affairs of the Nationalist government in exile—to pressure the British Embassy to halt the Swire teaboy reorganization scheme.¹²¹ Although both Swire staff and British diplomats believed that the union officials' complaints were based on a simple misunderstanding of the agreement between the pro-GMD CSU union and Swire, the British authorities nonetheless suspended Swire's plan to further reduce the number of teaboys aboard the SS *Xin Beijing*.¹²² Swire's management believed that this was not the right time for the wholesale removal of the teaboys from a vessel, and sent a delegate to Chongqing to talk with the government officials in exile, including Yang Hu.¹²³ Although Swire provided no explanation, it is likely that the British authorities wanted to avoid offending Chongqing.

Conclusion

This article contributes to labor history by offering a view into "teaboys," an unskilled, understudied group of steamship laborers, and contends that these men played a role in China's wartime shipping industry as low-level spies who were nevertheless able to leverage gains for themselves in a febrile atmosphere. These

attendants, whose type of work facilitated particular forms of illicit authority and influence, were not reminiscent of the Wang Jingwei regime's high officials, whom Timothy Brook describes as men with collaborationist nationalistic ideals—freeing China from the control of foreign powers and the GMD's pro-Western stance.¹²⁴ Nor do they resemble Fu Po-shek's research on pro-Japan intellectuals—whose literary talent was utilized by the occupiers to give a patina of normality in Shanghai—and who lamented their loss of innocence while collaborating with the enemy for survival.¹²⁵ Instead, these teaboys, exploited by ship compradors, took advantage of the confrontations between different parties and acted pragmatically for survival, without any particular moral or politico-ideological position. This article, which echoes Frederic Wakeman's argument concerning Chinese civilians' participation in an array of underground activities related to wartime political terrorism and criminal violence,¹²⁶ has shown that hundreds of steamship attendants—highly mobile maritime laborers whose contribution was on a par with that of other urbanites acting as low-level “special agents” such as shop apprentices, lens makers, and chandlers—were part of a larger social phenomenon that took part in wartime politics.

Moreover, this article argues that in the development of unionization, teaboys were increasingly predisposed by China's wartime political climate toward a utilitarian patron-client relationship. Elizabeth Perry and Ming K. Chan have shown that the Nanjing Decade saw the inclusion of labor organizations as part of the apparatus of the state or politicians, as respectively exemplified in labor officials' support of silk weavers' unionization or the GMD's toleration of the pro-Nationalist CSU union activities against foreign firms in Shanghai.¹²⁷ Building on Perry and Chan's perspectives, this article finds that teaboys do not fit neatly into Perry's categorization of workers' predisposition toward politics. On the contrary, it reveals that a low skill level did not preclude laborers' attachment to political organizations.¹²⁸ This patron-client relationship, a precedent set by teaboys and different GMD factions from 1927, was further strengthened by war. The expansion of maritime unions, patronized by various belligerents, provided union members with subsidies, job opportunities, and protection from the military and the police. The development of the patron-client relationship was also evident in wartime teaboys' engagement in more violent and sensitive errands such as abduction and espionage.

This utilitarian relationship between state-sponsored labor organizations and steamship attendants turned labor unions into competitive agents in a market for violence and organized crime. Teaboys' vulnerable, self-employed status exposed them to fiercer job competition than salaried workers. This article argues that government-backed yellow unions—similar to political parties and secret societies—controlled populations of maritime workers, many of whom were accustomed to violence and willing to take risks for symbolic or material rewards often at the expense of their native-place ties and the Green Gang's fictive family bonds. This made them attractive allies for both criminal organizations and political factions and facilitated the blurring of unions, gangs, parties, and the state. Union-affiliated teaboys who were protected or backed by foreign police and military forces could intimidate compradors and other maritime laborers. Nationalists' diplomatic pressure on the British authorities stopped the dismissal of teaboys who had served aboard Swire's fleets. This article aligns with Prerna Agarwal and Elizabeth Perry's respective contentions that labor

unions were a competitive agent that could sell muscle power in a market for union activism, crime, and violence. This was true from dock workers in British India and to silk weavers in Republican Shanghai.¹²⁹ This also stands above and beyond Chinese gangsters and intelligence authorities as suggested by Brian Martin and Frederic Wakeman, respectively.¹³⁰ Teaboys' engagement in the political patron-client relationship and unions' role in violence, together with teaboys' lack of enthusiasm in communism or Sun Yat-Sen's ideals, reflected that Chinese labor movements were significantly driven by state politics and struggle. Additionally, they were impacted by industrialization and ideological factors, as Lynda Shaffer and Fang Fu-an argue respectively.¹³¹

Notes

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