

Liverpool Hostel, 1942 (Chinese merchant seamen at a hostel
Liverpool, May 1942)

In this black and white photograph, four Chinese men sit around a small café table covered with a checked cloth. Most of the room is dim, but a shaft of bright white light coming in from a high window and falling on the table is made solid by thick cigarette smoke.

Two of the men have their backs to us, two are facing. They all wear trilby hats with small brims and high crowns and dark suits and ties. Two are smoking and there's a shell-shaped ashtray in the centre of the table, along with two teacups and saucers. Of the two men facing us, one has his head lowered as he shuffles a pack of cards, while the other is sitting back in his chair, contemplating the man opposite him with a serious expression. The men with their backs to us seem to have their attention focused on the dealer's hands. There is a fifth chair pushed back from the table, as if someone else has just left the group. Other tables and chairs, and the back of another customer, are just visible at the edges of the photograph.

The moody lighting, sharp suits and intense gazes at first suggest that this is a staged drama, reminiscent of 1930s films, but in fact Hardy was commissioned by *Picture Post* to document the lives of Chinese sailors in Liverpool during a 1942 strike for equal pay.