

# **The Political Commissar and His Shipmates: Transformation of the Commissar's Role on Chinese Ships**

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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## **FORWARD**

I am very pleased to learn that Chinese social scientists have conducted research on the changing role of the political commissar aboard China's ocean-going merchant ships. Changes in the work and status of political commissars inevitably reflect the changing role of the state as an economic, political and social force in China's on-going social and economic transformation. We may, therefore, through a close and sensitive analysis of the shipboard political commissar system develop a genuine insight into the ways in which the overall transformation of Chinese reforms may affect the everyday life of ordinary people.

I worked as a seafarer on merchant ships for eight years and that experience, taken together with more recent studies and observations, tells me that in many respects the seafaring life today is still very similar to the way it was when I was a young seaman fifty years ago. The job can still be physically arduous and sometimes very dangerous. Socially, the life of the seafarer which could always be lonely because unlike jobs ashore, there were relatively few opportunities to be with other family members, lead a varied social life and be with old friends. There are still the same restrictions on social life and it can be easily argued that the seafaring life is now more socially isolating than at any other time in maritime history. Although the average speed of ships has certainly increased, long sea passages are still normal, port times have decreased dramatically and crews are less than half the size. Taken together, these factors all point to a more alienating life for seafarers. In these sorts of circumstances and by retaining the socially cohesive role of the commissar, it is entirely possible that in overcoming the shortcomings of the planned and in building the new China, the new commissars of the new order can lead the world in sustaining a humane and sensitive social order for seafarers.

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2 July 2003

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## **Reference**

## **Chapter 1. Introduction**

Chinese ocean-going vessels started carrying political commissars in the early 1950s, shortly after the founding of the People's Republic. In China, the deep-sea ship is commonly referred to as the 'floating motherland'. To seafarers, the ship is said to stand for home, security, warmth and life, indeed for the 'motherland'. The motherland is associated with socialism and control and the commissar is a means of guaranteeing that the voice of the Party is heard and its rules and policies implemented on board ship. Fifty years have passed since its introduction and the regime of the political commissar apparently has deeply rooted in the Chinese shipping industry with the commissar accepted as a normal part of the crew, although the post has never been required by any international maritime standard and is today largely unknown outside China.

To most Chinese, the political commissar is a household word heavily charged with politics and ideology, stretching back to the Northern Expedition of Mao's Red Army in the 1920s and today's People's Liberation Army. Few people would associate the regime with the country's merchant shipping except seafarers, their families and other major 'actors' in the industry. This is not surprising. After all, as in most other parts of the world, seafarers go almost unnoticed by the general public in China, although the launch of ships always makes headlines in the media and the emergence of ships from the horizon has long become part of people's daily view in many port cities.

In the Western view, political commissars on PRC ships are simply the eyes and ears of the Chinese Communist Party, guarding the gangway against Western visitors' attempts to contact Chinese seafarers. As to what is going on beyond the gangway and

how commissars interact with the rest of the crew, little is known, especially in the West.

This book is about the political commissar in today's Chinese ocean-going merchant fleet. It is intended to inform both Chinese and Westerners about the true nature of the commissar and his relationship with other seafarers in the small shipboard society.

The book is based on an empirical study of the 'roles and functions' of the political commissar on Chinese ships engaged in ocean trade. The study was part of an enquiry conducted by the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University in Britain, in connection with Outreach Seafarers' Welfare Schemes. Overall, the project was intended to help the International Transport Workers Federation Seafarers Trust (ITF Seafarers Trust) assess how far it might be possible to provide effective and alternative ways of meeting seafarers' welfare needs in a rapidly changing maritime environment, and help welfare agencies evaluate their own practices. The project was funded by the ITF's Seafarers Trust. The research for this part of the study began in September 2000 and was completed in October 2001.

The book is published simultaneously in Chinese and English, although the two parts are not the translation of one another. In the first part, Feng and Shi take the major responsibility in analysing the data collected for this study in Chinese; in the second part, Zhao analyses the same data not only in English but also, where appropriate, to interpret the data from wider perspectives. In this sense, the two parts, though drawing on the same data, serve as separate articles in their own right.



There is an underlying difference of the terminology in the two parts. In Chinese, the authors have no real problem of gender-bias, since the English words ‘crew’, ‘seamen’, ‘sailors’ and ‘seafarers’ are covered by the gender-neutral words of ‘*chuanyuan*’ or ‘*haiyuan*’. English is more gender sensitive and differentiation must be stated rather than inferred from its context as in Chinese. Taking into account the overall demographic profile of the seafaring workforce in the country, the authors sometimes use ‘he’ rather than the gender-neutral ‘they’ in their analysis when referring to the commissar, the captain or other seafarers. This is mainly because no women are found sailing in the People’s Republic’s ocean-going cargo fleet. The authors note that a small number of women seafarers successfully sailed on a cargo ship engaged in international trade in the 1970s, that women continue to captain ships on the Yangzi as recently as the mid-1990s, and that a sizeable group of young women are currently training as deck officers in some prestigious maritime education and training institutions. However in China, women seafarers in the marine sector reside either in history or in the future. When the study was conducted, all the commissars and seafarers in other ranks and positions interviewed were men. ‘Crew’ and ‘seafarers’ are used largely with the same meaning in this study. At most points, they do not include the commissar and the captain. For analytical convenience, the commissar, the captain and the other seafarers on board ship are categorised separately from the point of view of their behaviour and relations.

The English section of the book includes ten chapters. *Chapter One* introduces the objectives of the research, the primary research methods and the main theoretical concepts adopted for the analysis. *Chapter Two* provides some general background about the shipping industry in China, highlighting the effects of the restructuring of

world shipping on seafarers in general and of enterprise reform on Chinese seafarers in particular. *Chapter Three* examines the historical factors leading to the introduction of political commissars into the country's merchant ships and outlines the changes in the social status of the commissar in the shipboard community over the past four decades. *Chapter Four* then focuses on the commissar and examines the criteria and procedures of how he becomes qualified for the role through a detailed investigation into his qualifications, motivation, training and career development. *Chapter Five* shifts the focus of analysis to record the role the commissar routinely performs. It allows the reader to observe the commissar by noting his daily activities at sea. *Chapter 6* examines the commissar's position in the ship hierarchy by scrutinising the power granted him by the party-state, the reduction of his official power in recent years and the so-called 'personality power' – an effective informal strategy used by the commissar to overcome the inadequacies of official power in conducting his work. *Chapter 7* investigates the relations and interactions of the commissar with the main members of the ship community, the captain, the crew and the union representative. *Chapter 8* analyses the multiple roles the commissar plays during the voyage, including his support for the captain, his mobilisation of the crew, his care for and management of the crew at sea, his mediation of the social and working relations among seafarers and his special role in relation to Chinese seafarers on foreign ships. *Chapter 9* highlights the causes and conditions of the role conflicts that many commissars experience and notes the coping strategies they adopt. It also tries to measure the commissar's commitment to his role. *Chapter 10* summarises the functions of the commissar: in relation to the party-state and the shipping company and on board ship in relation to the captain and the crew. It concludes by looking at

the prospect of the commissar regime in the context of China's social and economic transformation and the wider trend towards globalisation.

### **1.1. Objectives**

The book has two objectives: to provide an objective account of the roles of the political commissars in China's merchant ships and to contribute to the search for 'best operational practice' in the world maritime industry. The study looks beyond the rhetoric of the party-state and the stereotyped Western perceptions of the role of the commissar aboard PRC ships. Rather, it focuses on political commissars' daily activities in real life and their interactions with other seafarers in the ship community at sea. The interactions and relationships of the commissar and his shipmates in the context of shipboard society and its everyday life are the main focus of scrutiny.

### **1.2. Research Methods**

The book is the result of a collective endeavour. The research was first conceptualised by Tony Lane and ZHAO Minghua in 1999 at the Seafarers International Research Centre, Cardiff University (UK), and was conducted primarily by FENG Tongqing (Chinese Workers Studies Institute) and SHI Xiuyin (Sociology Institute of Chinese Social Sciences Academy). This, the principal part of the fieldwork, was supplemented by interviews conducted by ZHAO with Chinese seafarers in a major container port in Europe and with shipping managers, Party officials and trade union leaders in Beijing and Shanghai between 2000 and 2001.

In-depth interviews were the major research instrument and a total of sixty-one interviews were conducted. Fifty interviews were conducted by the authors with

seafarers of various ranks and positions. These seafarers were employed in four shipping companies covering ports from Northeast to the eastern part of China. Supplementary interviews were conducted with eleven shipping managers, party leaders, government officials and seafarers' trade union leaders in order to gain insight into their views about the legitimacy and future of the political commissar in China's merchant fleet. Four shipping companies participated in the study, all of them engaged in international ocean trade. Between them, the companies own 400 ships and employ some 25,000 seafarers (about 25% of the country's total workforce on ocean-going ships). To guarantee confidentiality, these companies are called Company A, Company B, Company C and Company D.

All except two of the seafarers interviewed were active in seafaring in the above companies and were ashore on leave between ships at the time of the interview. The interviewees included 40 'cadre seafarers (officers)', including 19 commissars, 13 captains, five chief engineers, three chief mates, and 10 'mass seafarers (ratings)' including two 3<sup>rd</sup> mates, two 3<sup>rd</sup> engineers, two able-bodied seamen, one boatswain, one ship doctor and two radio officers. Four of these seafarers had led the shipboard trade union branch on their last voyages. Given that the roles of the commissar and his work and social relations with the captain are a most important part of the research, more commissars and captains were included in the sample as the following table shows.

**Table 1. Seafarers Ranks.**

	<b>CADRE</b>	<b>SEAFARERS</b>		<b>MASS SF.</b>	
Commissar	Captain	Chief	Chief Mate	3 <sup>rd</sup> mate, 3 <sup>rd</sup> engineer, rating	TOTAL

19	13	5	3	10	50
38%	26%	10%	6%	20%	100%

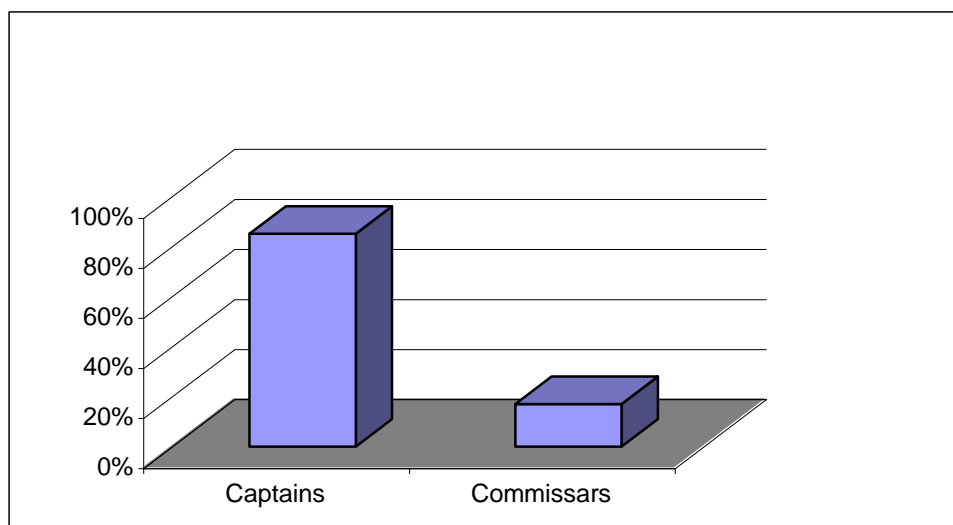
All seafarers were male, their age ranging between 61, the oldest, and the youngest 25. The average age was 45.2 years. Most were between 41 and 50. Given that the sample is ‘biased’ with more senior officers, the age profile of the seafarers covered for this study largely matches that calculated by Seafarers International Research Centre’s global labour market study (Lane et al, 2002:64).

**Table 2. Seafarers Age.**

Age	>30	31-40	41-50	51-60	< 60
Cases	2	14	20	14	1
% of total	4%	28%	40%	28%	2%

All those interviewed were all experienced seafarers. One captain had been at sea for 33 years and one commissar for 26 years. On average, these seafarers had an employment history with the shipping companies for 17 years. Their education backgrounds varied greatly. Most captains (85%) had received higher education; most of the commissars (83%) had never been to college or university (Figure1).

**Figure 1. Captains and Commissars: Higher Education Comparison**



Interviewees were systematically sampled from the seafarers' register provided by the seafarers department or human resource department of the shipping companies contacted. To reduce the sampling error and to make the selection more homogeneous, the register was first stratified according to seafarers' ranks and positions. The sampling interval varied according to the size of the register provided by the companies. If the first seafarer selected was at sea or could not attend the interview, a substitute with the same rank or position was selected at the same sampling interval from the same population.

The interviews were conducted either in the meeting room of the shipping companies or in the nearby hotels where the researchers stayed for the study. In both cases, arrangements were made to ensure that the seafarer met and talked with the two researchers in the absence of any third party. Most interviews lasted two to three hours and focused on a core list of the questions prepared and piloted by the researchers in the previous three months. Initially, the tape recorder was used but it was abandoned when the researchers noticed that it made most interviewees nervous even though they had given their consent and been guaranteed confidentiality. For most interviews, one of the researchers took charge while the other made notes.

Ideally, a shipboard research trip would have been organised so that researchers could use other research methods, in particular participate observation, to gain deeper insight into the data gathered in the interviews. Unfortunately, rigid governmental control made this impossible. It is worth noting that the political commissar is a politically sensitive issue in China now and shipping companies were extremely cautious about opening their doors to our group of social scientists. The research team

also tried to get access to the detailed working diaries commissars keep. However, it turned out ‘these diaries are kept on board ships and treated as confidential company documents.’

The researchers were allowed access to company archives in all the four shipping companies and these archives included the following:

- Booklets on company history
- Manuals on roles and responsibilities of the Commissar
- Company policy regarding the Commissar’s roles and responsibilities
- Stipulations on Commissars’ responsibilities
- Commissars’ yearly work-plans (2000)
- Commissar’s year-end work review (2000)
- Company reports on ‘exemplary deeds’
- Minutes of some company meetings
- Records of some major events or incidents in the company.

The information extracted from these sources is important because it helps illuminate the context in which political commissars operate their business.

This book places its concern to the sailing political commissar employed on China’s ocean-going merchant ships, focusing on the analysis of the role of the seagoing commissars and its function in the ship community. It is essentially intended to present and synthesise the rich empirical data gathered by the authors through their field studies. For this purpose, and to allow the reader to hear seafarers’ real voice, accounts of the authors’ interviews with informants are quoted directly.





## **Chapter 2. Background : Chinese Shipping & Enterprise Reform**

While seafaring has always been an occupation associated with hard labour, risk, loneliness and long period of separation from land and families, the globalisation of the industry in recent decades has brought about deep changes in the quality of life for seafarers on board ships: fast turnarounds resulting from advanced technology, the shrunken ‘society’ aboard due to the reduction of crew levels, the building of ports increasingly remote from city centres, and the intensified use of crews from an even greater mix of nationalities. These are among the major factors reshaping the experiences of world seafarers, including Chinese seafarers, at the beginning of the 21st century (Lane, 2001). In China, the state of Chinese seafarers has been further complicated by the introduction of enterprise reform, a top-down restructuring programme adopted since the mid-1980s to boost the efficiency and productivity of the country’s state-owned industrial firms. This chapter profiles the Chinese shipping industry, highlights some major changes brought about by enterprise reform and looks at the main response of Chinese shipping under the pressure of worldwide restructuring.<sup>1</sup>

### **2.1. Chinese Shipping**

China’s emergence as an international maritime nation is a recent phenomenon. In 1961, when the People’s Republic established its first deep-sea merchant fleet, it consisted of four ships. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China (including Hong Kong) ranked No.3 in the world league of fleets with 2373 ships (1000 dead-weight tons <dwt> and over) totalling 60883 m. dwt, putting China behind Greece and Japan but

well in front of Norway, Germany, the UK and other traditional maritime powers (ISL, 1998:30). China now has three major shipping companies, all state-owned and with clearly defined spheres, namely ocean, coastal and river. With the slow demise of the planned economy, the boundaries are fading and companies are free to trade where they wish, although in practice each main player still dominates its traditional sphere of trade (Table X).

**Table 3. Top three shipping companies in China**

Place	Company	DWT (1000)
1	China Ocean Shipping Group (COSCO)	1587.27
2	China Shipping Group (CSCO)	795.13
3	Chanjiang Shipping Group (CSC)	357.21

*Source: Ministry of Transport (PRC) et al. 2000.*

The private sector has developed considerably in the last twenty years. However, most private shipping companies are so-called ‘single-ship companies’ and therefore do not benefit from economics of scale. Foreign ship owners have also made some inroads into China’s market. By 1999, 18 foreign ship-owners had branches in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and other major ports. They were allowed to compete with Chinese shipping companies for market share. Although joint ventures in vessel ownership and operation are still rare, foreign ship owners and operators from Japan, Norway, Switzerland and so on.

The expansion of the fleet has led to a great demand for seafarers. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their number was estimated at 338,000, of which over one third are engaged in ocean shipping (Zhao & Wu, 2002; Shen & Zhao, 2001). Traditionally,

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<sup>1</sup> A substantial part in this chapter is drawn from Minghua Zhao’s ‘The Consequences of China’s Socialist Market Economy for Seafarers’, *Work, Employment and Society*, 16(1), 171-183, March, 2002, ISSN 0950-0170.

seafarers were recruited from coastal cities and provinces such as Shanghai, Dalian, Shandong and Fujian. In recent years, shipping companies found it increasingly hard to meet their recruitment requirements from their traditional sources of labour and have had to shift their attention to poor inland provinces such as Anhui and Henan, where labour is cheap and plentiful (Li & Zhao, 2003).

## **2.2. Enterprise Reform**

Industrial restructuring, or enterprise reform as it is known in China, started in the mid-1980s. It is part of the overall economic reform programme introduced to restructure China's industrial firms. The reform has introduced two new principles into the state industrial sector: the separation of state ownership from enterprise management to encourage managerial autonomy; the reduction of workers' social benefits. At the enterprise level, the reform is of two main types. Reforms to the production process have encouraged management autonomy in a whole array of areas, from purchasing and pricing to recruitment, task-definition and pay determination. Profit and productivity are now key performance criteria. The reforms have replaced collective with individual incentives at a variety of levels, expressed in a battery of 'responsibility systems' and payment structures that aim to establish a closer link between rewards and effort or performance. Reforms in employment regulations have replaced permanent employment and welfare provision with individual employment contract.

The most recent round of state enterprise reform entails the introduction of the Modern Enterprise System (MES) and the Group Company System (GCS). Both are intended to transform China's largest state-owned enterprises, including the four shipping companies into internationally competitive corporations. It is intended that

these corporations, while remaining in overall state ownership, will closely resemble typical Western corporations in their structure and processes of production, with Boards of Directors accountable to shareholders rather than subject to the political authority of the party-state. The state sector is a main target for intervention and shipping is a leading industry in these reforms.<sup>2</sup>

### **2.3. The Response from Chinese Shipping**

Since the start of reforms in the mid-1980s, a series of re-structuring strategies have been undertaken to rationalise the country's state-owned shipping companies. The adoption of contract labour and the introduction of the contract responsibility system in the 1980s have fundamentally re-shaped the relationship between enterprises and the state, with greater decentralisation and more discretion for shipping managers, the reduction of the party and bureaucratic control and the use of a labour contracting regime linking performance and rewards.

The early and mid-1990s saw the incorporation of China's largest ocean shipping group, China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO). Echoing the reformers' intention, the group claimed in its mission statement that its goal is 'to change the operational mechanism of the company and to establish a modern company system' and 'to boost China's competitiveness in the world shipping market and to intensify management' (COSCO, 1997). Soon after issuing that statement, China Shipping (Group) Company (CSCO), a conglomerate of shipping companies traditionally

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<sup>2</sup> There is a rich literature reviewing the reform process in China. It includes, for example, Woodward, 'China's Industrial Reform Policy' (1985), Tidrick & Chen, *China's Industrial Reform* (1987), Howard, 'Rice Bowls and Job Security: the Urban Contract System' (1991), Byrd, *Chinese Industrial Firms under Reform* (1992), Child, *Management in China during the age of reform* (1994); O'Leary, G., ed. *Adjusting to Capitalism: Chinese Workers and the State*, (1998) and Hassard, 'State Sector Reform and Societal Transformation in China' (1999).

specialising in coastal trades, was formed, sponsored by the government to facilitate competition in Chinese waters. Between them, the two major players operate more than 800 ocean-going vessels controlling most of the country's shipments of foreign trades.

As 'modernised corporations', these shipping groups have been quick to embrace 'modern' management mechanisms and 'modern' technologies, typically including the structural reorganisation of the fleets, the development of automation on board vessels, the computerisation of vessel tracking, ship movement management and financial management, the streamlining of the work force, and the opening of the country's seafaring labour resource to foreign vessels (COSCO, 2000). Enterprise reform has thus fundamentally changed the landscape of the country's shipping industry in the last two decades and the change has significant implications for a most important agent of the industry's management regime, the political commissar.

## **Chapter 3. The Commissar Regime in the PRC Fleet: a Historical Review**

The political commissar was introduced to China's fleet in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as part of the Communist Party's extension of control over the country's industrial workplaces. The past 50 years have seen the development and consolidation, indeed the institutionalisation of the commissar regime, and the existence of the post on board PRC ships was taken for granted for half a century. It was not until the enterprise reform of the late 1980s that serious concerns about the post has been raised. This chapter provides an historical account on how the political commissar regime was initially transferred to the PRC merchant fleet and how it was subsequently institutionalised. The overall social status of the commissar in the shipboard community and the shipboard organisational infrastructure of the Party Committee are also depicted and analysed.

### **3.1 The Introduction and Development of the Post Aboard**

#### **Early Years**

On 15 June, 1951, an ocean shipping company jointly owned by two communist countries, China and Poland, was set up. It was intended to break the American-led embargo, as these ships flew the Polish flag and were allowed to call at ports where the PRC-flagged ships were denied entry. The first group of Chinese political commissars were placed on ships crewed entirely by Chinese seafarers. The programme was initiated by the Ministry of Transport and modelled on the existing commissar system in the USSR merchant fleets and in the People's Liberation Army. Ten years later, the Chinese Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) was formed and

became the first ocean going fleet solely owned by the PRC. The Chinese Communist Party lost no time in applying the then ten-year-old sailing commissar regime to the country's ocean-going fleet. All the COSCO vessels, indeed all of China's deep-sea going ships, have been carrying political commissars ever since.

The introduction of the commissar regime mimicked the establishment of party control over the workforce in land-based factories in the same period. In the 1950s, party representatives, many of them military cadres, were placed in factories to form party branches at workshop level. Their main objective was to lead and mobilise the workers to build socialism and to 'supervise factory directors in production' (Frazier, 2002:93).

Ocean shipping, a critical part in Chinese economy, was also subjected to this process. Because of the vessel's geographical mobility and frequent contact with the outside world, the crew has been viewed vulnerable to capitalist corruption. An institution was therefore necessary to ensure party control over such a highly mobile workforce at sea. The easiest and most effective way was evidently to adopt the existing model – Maoist or Stalinist – by placing commissars on ships. If ships and seafarers were too mobile to be controlled from land, the alternative was for the party representative to exercise control aboard by sailing with the crew. The integration of the land-born political commissar regime with the social and professional structure of the ship was hence 'natural' and 'logical'.

### ***Military Link***

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) was consulted when the post of the political commissar was first introduced to the country's merchant navy. By learning from the PLA's tradition of 'organising the party branch at the company level', the party committee for shipping companies placed the focal point of the work on the ships themselves and 'organised party branch on the basis of the ship', setting up the post of the commissar to head the shipboard party branch. The link between the PLA and the shipboard commissar regime in the merchant navy was so close that the first group, and indeed most of the currently active commissars, were recruited from among the PLA political officers.

In 1959 the General Political Department (*zong zhengzhi bu*) of the PLA selected 15 'outstanding' regimental and battalion level army officers from among the nation's various military commands. These 15 military officers later became the merchant fleet's first sailing commissars. In 1963, sanctioned by the Party Central Committee, the party committee of the Ministry of Transport transferred 33 navy officers at battalion, regimental and divisional levels to work on the country's ocean going merchant ships. These officers were 'chosen' because they were politically and ideologically trustworthy, experienced in political work and physically fit. Most were later appointed as commissars. In 1969, with the approval of the State Council and the Central Military Commission, 20 navy officers who had served on military vessels were chosen as commissars on merchant ships. The largest number of commissars in China's ocean shipping fleet was drawn from the military forces in the 1970s. With the support of the PLA's General Political Department, two batches totalling several hundred commissars and deputy commissars were chosen from among the army's political officers at battalion and regimental levels. Most were in their mid thirties. All



these officers were converted into civil commissars and placed on merchant ships in state shipping companies.

### ***From ‘Covert’ to ‘Open’***

The post of political commissar was originally covert. In the early days, the commissar was disguised as “deputy captain” or ‘assistant captain’ in order to avoid ‘unfavourable reactions (to the regime) in other countries’. This practice was copied from the former Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland and other East European socialist countries. As time passed, foreign port authorities became aware of the identity of the commissar and began ‘deliberately to find fault’ with them. In the meantime, because of they were hidden, the commissars found it hard to handle major incidents involving foreign affairs beyond the ship, thus affecting their working efficiency. In 1967, with the approval of the State Council, the then Military Control Commission of the Ministry brought the commissar regime into the public domain. Since then, the commissar has been accepted as an integral part of the crew without any question until economic reform.

### ***Debates since the Mid-1980s***

The situation changed with the introduction of the market economy and of enterprise reform in the mid-1980s. The diminished attention to ideology and politics gave rise to doubts about the need for the commissar. Since the mid-1980s, debates have raged about the ‘effectiveness’ of the commissar regime. Some people have begun to advocate a complete their removal from the fleet. By the late 1980s, many companies had started registering their political commissars as deputy captains, a compromise with the party’s hard-liners, who wanted to retain the position. The reform was aborted following the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989. In the early 1990s, when

economic reform again gathered momentum and enterprise reform resumed, the debate revived among shipping managers, many of whom questioned the need to carry ‘non-productive personnel’, including the commissar.

There is no centrally available information about the number of sailing political commissars active in China’s deep sea going fleet. According to the traditional model, i.e. one commissar per ship, around 1360 commissars are needed for the country’s ocean-going ships ( $\geq 10,000$  GT), or 3740 when the ship size covered by the estimate drops to 300 GT.<sup>3</sup> However, given that crew sizes on the PRC’s ocean-going vessels have been reduced significantly since the late 1990s because of the promotion of market forces in China’s state industrial enterprises, we doubt whether the fleet that many commissars. This has been confirmed by our field study and other research findings. One third of the 300 ocean shipping seafarers surveyed in 2001 in Shanghai reported that their ship had no commissar. A most recent SIRC study (January 2003) in Hong Kong also found that only 50% of the 23 Chinese ships visited by the researcher carried the commissar. However, these ships tend to be operated by small shipping companies at local or provincial levels. Most ocean-going vessels owned by large state companies still have commissars on board. They are usually registered as OS (ordinary seaman) on the crew list, including the four companies participating in this study.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The computed figures include ‘back-up’ commissars needed to fill the posts in the fleet. The back-up ratio adopted here is 1.7, used by Chinese state shipping companies to calculate the size of the seafaring workforce they need. The ratio means 1.7 commissars are needed to support a ship’s all-year-round operation at sea.

<sup>4</sup> The survey is part of the research on seafarers’ labour market in China conducted by Professor SHEN Guanbao in Shanghai University. The study in Hong Kong was conducted by Dr. WU Bin in Seafarers International Research Centre, Cardiff University, UK.

### **3.2. The Status of the Commissar in the Shipboard Community**

The status of commissars on Chinese merchant ships has changed from time to time, corresponding to shifts in the party's emphasis on the role of its representatives in the workplace.

#### ***1950s-1960s***

The 1950s and 1960s were a difficult period. The Chinese economy was deeply affected by the US-led embargo and by the disastrous Great Leap Forward, intended by Mao to surpass capitalism. The era also saw China's relations with the USSR and most other socialist countries seriously deteriorate because of its different interpretation of Marxism. Throughout these two turbulent decades, party leadership was constantly emphasised and strengthened in all sectors of China's economy and society, including shipping.

As noted above, the commissar regime was introduced to the merchant navy during this period. Seafarers were now stratified into 'cadre crew (*ganbu chuanyuan*)' and 'ordinary crew (*yiban chuanyuan*)' (also called 'mass crew (*qunzhong chuanyuan*) or 'worker crew (*gongren chuanyuan*)'. The former refers to officers, including the commissar and his deputy, the captain, the deck and engine officers, the security officer, the assistant navigator, the assistant engineer, the assistant electrician, the radio officer, chief steward, the steward, the medical doctor and the political worker. The latter covers the rest of the crew, traditionally called 'ratings' on Western ships.

The 'cadre crew' were administered by the political department of the party committee in the shipping company; the 'ordinary crew' were managed by the seafarers' management department of the shipping company. As a rule in Chinese

society since 1949, cadres have more rights and privileges than the ordinary Chinese. Cadre crew had not only higher positions in the ship's professional hierarchy but also higher social status than ordinary seafarers, and the commissar was the head of the cadre crew. In terms of ship's technical operation, the commissar relied on the captain; in other respects, especially in the sphere of review and promotion, the commissar had more power to influence the career path of individual seafarers. However, there was no big difference between the captain and the commissar in terms of wages, benefits and welfare treatment.

### *The 1970s – mid 1980s*

In 1966, Mao launched the Cultural Revolution - a mass movement against revisionists within the party that turned into a disaster for the Chinese people and economy. It lasted ten years (1966-1976) according to official chronology. During this period ideology and politics were prioritised over production across all sectors of the Chinese economy. In shipping, the status of the commissar was greatly enhanced. Between 1975 and 1978, the political commissar Responsibility System (PCRS) was introduced. 'At that time, the commissar was virtually in charge of everything (Captain, B:8).' The PCRS did not last long. It terminated with the start of enterprise reform, when production began to take priority.

The late 1970s witnessed events like the normalisation of the relations between China and the US, the end of the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaoping's launch of economic reform. The improvement in international relations greatly benefited China's trading environment and generated a big increase in foreign trade. The second half of the 1970s saw a significant growth in the PRC fleet, most pronouncedly in ocean shipping (Sun, 2002). The growth in the size of the fleet generated an increase

in the demand for seafaring labour. Several hundred military cadres were transferred to support the development of the merchant navy by working as political commissars. The demand for ‘technical seafarers’ - captains, engineers, radio officers, deck hands and so on – was even greater. Dozens of maritime education and training institutions were set up and before long hundreds of seafarers of various qualifications were produced to crew the country’s newly-purchased (though largely second-hand) merchant vessels.

In shipping as in other sectors of the economy, ideology and politics were still emphasised but there was a subtle shift of emphasis towards production and technology. As the shipping business grew, a substantial number of graduates from maritime schools, colleges and universities joined the industry and ‘technical’ seafarer job such as navigators, engineers and electricians attracted more and more attention. In 1975, the Ministry of Transport issued ‘Provisional Measures Regarding Examinations and Certifications for Seafarers’, which set higher technical standards for the qualification of seafarers. The document was particularly welcomed by the ‘technical seafarers’ among the cadre and the ordinary crew, because it allowed these seafarers - for the first time since the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 - the opportunity to advance themselves up the ship hierarchy along non-political channels. The distinction between political workers and technical personnel among the cadre crew became even more pronounced. Previously, commissars and captains were indiscriminately classed as ‘cadres’. Now, the former became ‘political cadres (*zhengzhi ganbu*)’ and the latter ‘technical cadres (*jishu ganbu*)’. In the public perception, the captain and the commissar had the same social status, although the division of labour between them remained unchanged.

*Since the mid-1980s*

However the greatest change in respect of the commissar's status did not take place until well into the 1980s. The last two decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as already noted, saw China in general and Chinese industrial firms in particular undergoing a fundamental shift from planned economy to market oriented economy. With profit-making the primary goal, Chinese firms now endeavour to reduce production costs and increase productivity and their firm's competitiveness in the international market by retaining only the most necessary posts. While the general trend is for firms to be 'liberated' from the party-state control, the Captain Responsibility System (*chuanzhang fucezhi*) was introduced to merchant ships in 1988. This step reflected similar changes in factories, where the Director-Responsibility System (*changzhang fucezhi*) was introduced as part of enterprise reform.

This development led in turn to the change in the company's administrative system whereby administration of the cadre crew was separated from that of the ordinary crew. Shipping companies started to reform the seafarers' management and expanded its control over both cadre crew and ordinary crew. For the first time, the company Party Committee had lost its direct administrative control over seafarers, including sailing commissars. The strengthened crew management department is now dominated by the captain. The commissar and the captain no longer coexist at the top of the ship hierarchy.

Under the Captain Responsibility System, the captain has overall decision-making power over navigation and crew management. Being placed in the centre of a shipboard command system, he is responsible for a variety of tasks, in particular the operation of the ship, including safety and efficiency. The new policy stipulates that

the commissar, in addition to party and ideological work, is expected to *assist* the captain and has special responsibilities in crew management during the voyage. This is a first and most important indication of the decline in the commissar's status in the ship hierarchy. The commissar now typically receives lower wages and fewer benefits than the captain, although his wages and benefits are still among the highest on board ship.

The organisation of crew management has also undergone substantial change. The titles 'cadre crew' and 'mass crew' have been abolished. In their place, new categories of 'senior crew/seafarers (*gaoji chuanyuan*)' and 'junior crew/seafarers (*diji chuanyuan*)' have been adopted – a modification imported from the West by way of Hong Kong. The commissar and the other previous 'cadre crew/seafarers' are automatically converted into senior seafarers. Under the new system, all seafarers, whether captains, commissars or cadets, are placed under the jurisdiction of the shipping company's seafarers management department. The commissar and other party representatives still maintain close ties with the land-based company's party committee, but their immediate line managers are now shipping managers, not the secretary of the party committee.

The division of labour between the captain and the commissar has kept more or less intact during the reform. There has been little change in the two men's designated responsibilities. According to the new company policy, the captain and the commissar are still expected to be jointly responsible for the ship's overall operation and shipboard management, 'safely, thoroughly and qualitatively'. A closer examination, however, suggests that the commissar's power and influence over the crew has been

considerably reduced and his relationship with the captain and the other seafarers has become more complicated in recent years, as indicated in the rest of the book.

### **3.3.1. The Organisational Infrastructure for the Commissar**

In a land-based state-owned factory, the secretary of the party branch has his own administrative office and staff, an organisational infrastructure independent of factory management. Such an infrastructure would normally consist of party cadres in charge of various parts of the party work in the factory, including party promotion and party recruitment. The staffing cost and the operational cost of the party branch is born primarily by the factory.

Unlike the land-based factory, however, the ship is a workplace that is constantly mobile and its workforce is fluid and transient. Seafarers stay with a ship for six, eight, nine or more months. They then leave the ship and their shipmates – for good in most cases. A seafarer's relationship with the ship is different from a worker's with his or her factory. His high mobility poses a challenge to conventional methods of party organisation and control. Conventionally and in principle, the party secretary is democratically elected by the party members on the basis of a recommendation by the party committee at a higher level. While this is not a problem for factory workers, the transience of the seafarers in relation to their ship as well as their shipmates makes it difficult for the party committee to maintain a permanent foothold on shipboard.

The commissar regime helps solve the problem. Theoretically, the commissar and his office are a branch of management imposed by the party committee. The commissar is recommended by the committee but nominated by company management. This



procedure enables the party committee to send its representative to work among the seafarers on board ship.

Until the late 1980s, the commissar had the support of his own independent administrative body and organisational infrastructure on board ship. He had his own office that was separated from his cabin and enjoyed the administrative support of a deputy and a junior political clerk. Both the deputy commissar and the political clerk acted on his instructions rather than those of the captain.

In 1988, in the first round of enterprise reform, which emphasised the reduction of party-state control and called for management autonomy, the commissar temporarily lost his title and became deputy captain. At the same time, he lost his staff – the deputy commissar and the political clerk. Since then, the commissar has become the sole political worker aboard.

As already noted, the ship also has a party branch while at sea. The branch is normally formed before a voyage when the crew is assembled and party members are identified. Company reports show that some two thirds of seafarers in the country's ocean-going fleet are party members. It has become the norm for the commissar to be 'elected' as the secretary of the shipboard party branch.

The commissar is responsible to both the company party committee and company management. Both bodies can issue instructions to the commissar and direct his work during the voyage and during his shore leave. On completion of each voyage, the company management routinely examine the commissar's work and performance. The commissar is also expected to report to the company's party committee. Based on

the result of the management examination and the report the commissar delivers, an appraisal of his performance is made and filed in the company archives. These archives contain a full record of his career path, as shown in next chapter.

## **Chapter 4. Requirement, Recruitment, Training and Promotion**

The post of commissar has gradually taken shape over half a century of experience. As a profession, it has its own requirements and procedures in terms of recruitment, training, promotion and other regards. These requirements and procedures have changed over time. This chapter examines crucial junctures in the commissar's career against the background of China's major social, economic and political changes since 1949.

### **4.1. Requirements**

To be a commissar, an individual must be a party member and meet the criteria set by the party committee. These criteria have varied over the years.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the candidate was required to 'have a clean personal record' and be 'politically reliable'. This meant that he would not have served the Nationalist Government in 'Old China' and would have proved trustworthy in the course of the various social and political campaigns initiated by the party during those two decades.<sup>5</sup> He would have to be 'loyal to the party and the state', have a proven history of 'strictly observing the party discipline' and 'some experience in conducting political work.' Political loyalty and reliability were clearly central.

By the mid-1970s, the official criteria were modified and added to. An official publication in 1975 stipulated that the commissar must 'have a high level of political

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese Communist Party launched several social and political campaigns during this period to consolidate its control, including, for example, the 'Three Anti and Five Anti Campaign' in the early 1950s which was targeted at the remnants of the 'old society', the 'Great Leap Forward' in the late 1950s which was intended to 'catch up with the UK and overtake the US' and the 'Cultural Revolution' which was initiated by Mao 'to fight against the enemy within the party'. All these campaigns engaged people from all walks of life and had a damaging effect on many individuals.

consciousness’, ‘be loyal to his motherland and the communist cause’, ‘possess the ability to faithfully carry out the party principles and policies’ and ‘have some experience in conducting political work’. For the first time, the commissars were expected to ‘have some general knowledge of ocean shipping’

The criteria experienced further change in and after the mid-1980s. While the shipping companies have been granted more autonomy in business and ship operation and have been encouraged to enlarge their profit margins by learning from capitalism, the ‘qualifications’ required of a commissar increasingly match those of human resource managers in a market economy, although the demand for the individual’s loyalty to the party has never been compromised. To qualify as a commissar, an individual must be ‘politically strong’, ‘professionally capable’, ‘morally sound’ and ‘personally upright’. He is expected to ‘study [his trade and knowledge of ocean shipping] hard’, ‘conduct his duty whole-heartedly’, ‘exercise good self-discipline and stand aloof from corruption’, ‘show genuine concern for all crew members, handle matters fairly and impartially’ and ‘always set a good example for other crew members and demonstrate an ability to promote ship unity and teamwork’ (Wang, 1999). As an ‘integral part of the crew’, there is no requirement of ‘sea-worthiness’, the commissar needs to obtain basic certificates to prove his ‘seaworthiness’.

#### **4.2. Recruitment**

Ever since the 1950s, most commissars on merchant ocean going ships have been recruited from the military forces. Among the commissars interviewed for the study, about 70% had experience of political work in military forces before joining the merchant navy as political commissars. This proportion is fairly standard across the

fleet. Company D reported having 259 commissars. Among them, 183 were recruited from among the political cadres at battalion and regimental levels in the army, navy and air force. Most of them had already gained experience as political workers. Some had been recognised as having ‘performed outstandingly’ as political officers, as demonstrated in the following accounts:

I was born in 1943. I graduated from the Third Aviation College of the Air Force with a college diploma. I started to work (in the air force) in 1959 and joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1963. After 28 years’ service, I was transferred to this ocean shipping company and appointed as a shipboard commissar. (Commissar, D: 4).

I was born in 1942. I joined the Communist Party of China in 1964. Like many of my counterparts, I became a shipboard commissar after serving in the army forces. I joined the army in 1961 and started to do political work in 1966. In 1978, I was selected to work as a shipboard commissar in this company. For over 40 years, I have been doing political work. (Commissar, D: 2).

I am 50 years old. Before I was transferred to this company in 1991, I had served as a political officer in the army. I have been working as the shipboard commissar in this company since my transfer in 1991 (Commissar, A:5).

I used to be an army officer in charge of political work in a regiment. In 1997 this shipping company requested my army unit to select some regimental officers as candidates for the position of commissar and to work on board the company’s merchant vessels. When I learned the news from my superior, I said I would like to go. The company’s personnel department then made a special trip to my army unit to examine the candidates. These candidates had all been recommended by their superiors and were interviewed individually, one by one, by company representatives. Some candidates were removed from the shortlist after the interview. Some were selected, I was among them. I learned later it was because I was strongly recommended by the army commander himself as an outstanding political officer (Commissar, A: 2).

Commissars were experienced political cadres who were specially sought after by the shipping companies. However, not all ex-military officers were used as shipboard commissars immediately after transfer. Some were first employed in the company’s land-based office and then assigned posts aboard - in many cases as stewards. In

several cases, officers transferred from the navy were first used as navigation or engineering officers before being appointed as commissars several years later.

I am 51. I used to be an army man. I served in the army from 1966 to 1978. My highest rank was a battalion-level officer. After the transfer, I was first assigned to work in the company's security department. Later, I was given a post as a steward. Several years later, I was promoted to commissar (Commissar, C: 3).

I was transferred from an army unit and I am now a commissar working on board the company's ship. While in the army, I spent 7 years as a news reporter, 8 years as a propagandist in the Publicity Section of the Political Division of my Department, 3 years as a secretary in the Organization Office of the same Political Division and several years as a propagandist in the Publicity Office of a higher level army unit. In 1986 I was transferred to the company. I spent nearly 6 years in the company's Organization Division before I was made a political commissar. As luck would have it, the company decided at that time to assign some land-based political workers to take up posts as sailing political commissars, thus I had the opportunity to work on board ship (Commissar, A: 4).

Most of these commissars are in their early 50s. They will reach retirement age in a few years' time. They have spent their entire working lives as political workers aboard and ashore.

The sources of recruitment of commissars has diversified in the 1990s. Largely free of state control, shipping companies now have the freedom to decide where to recruit their shipboard political workers. Although political officers in armed forces are still the main source, new sources of political labour have been opened up and developed.

Both conventional procedures and market-orientated methods are adopted when recruiting shipboard commissars from among military officers. When sensing a rise in demand for the post, shipping companies still request their conventional supplier for support and would still send their representatives to interview and select

candidates from battalions and regiments. However, the development of the free labour market since the mid-1990s has made other channels available.

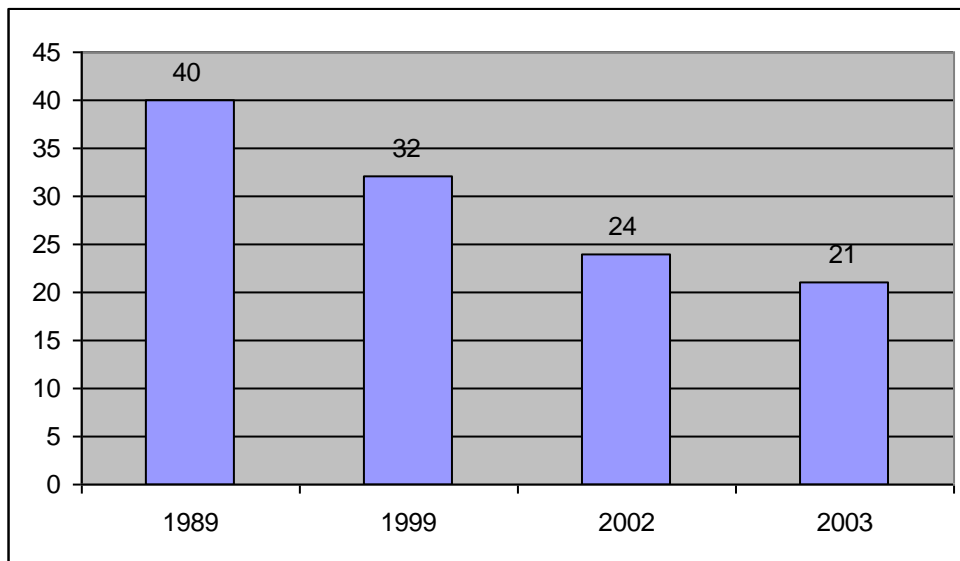
Under the planned economy, it was the government's responsibility to find employment for discharged military officers, including political officers. With strong central state control, the government rarely had problems finding jobs for discharged military personnel. Firms were obliged to accept discharged officers when allocated by government agencies. This situation has changed since the 1990s. Overstaffing has become a constant headache for managers in many state companies with the deepening of the enterprise reform over the last several years. Now, government agencies have to request, rather than order, companies to accept discharged officers. Companies that no longer feel obliged to accept them, can refuse. Many do so on the grounds of a lack of vacancies. Under this pressure, the government set up an 'Ex-military Officers Labour Market' (*zhuanye ganbu shichang*) at local levels to help find jobs for the country's discharged military officers. Shipping companies therefore have another way of locating candidates with military background to serve as commissars. A senior member of the party committee in Company A observed:

Like other shipping companies, our company still employs a certain number of demobilized army officers each year and places them on board as commissars. But we no longer accept ex-officers blindly. We pick and choose those we want. We go to the ex-officers' labour market run by the local labour bureau and place an advertisement. Some companies want to hire young and junior officers at platoon or company level. We prefer senior officers, usually at regimental level. About 90% of sailing commissars appointed in the last couple of years were recruited in this way (Company A, Manager 1).

Other sources of political labour have also been developed since the late 1990s. Young commissars have begun to be recruited from various 'new' sources, primarily from among the seafarers on the company's payroll, especially those under threat of

redundancy. In the 1990s cost-sensitive shipping managers endeavoured to reduce crew sizes. For example, a typical containership in the PRC fleet carrying 3000 boxes employed more than 40 seafarers in the late-1980s, but only 32 in the late 1990s. A ship of the same type carrying 5200 boxes had a crew of only 24 seafarers in 2002 and 21 from January 2003. The crew size has almost been halved in 15 years (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Crew size change, 1989-2003**



Several posts have been phased out, including those of steward, radio officer, electrician and medical doctor. Shipping companies consider these redundant seafarers are re-employable because of their relatively strong educational qualifications and technical training. They developed a strategy to retrain them into sailing commissars. Among the ‘new’ commissars recruited by one of the four companies, six were redundant seafarers, including three ex-radio officers, two ex-stewards and an ex-electrician.

Seafarers face intense competition before they are appointed with the new post, simply because there are many redundant seafarers and few vacant commissarships. For these seafarers, becoming a commissar means not merely a job or re-employment



but starting a new career and promotion. Only a small number of redundant seafarers are selected and only those considered as ‘exceptionally strong in politics and moral standard, having an excellent personality and being great with communication and people skills’ get the posts. As the following quotes show, these commissars are mostly in their thirties or early forties. They are better educated, and some speak good English. They are the second generation of the Commissar.

I was born in 1959 and began to work in this company in August 1980, first as a trainee on board ship, later as an OS, and then as an AB. I have worked as an AB for quite a long time, until 1987 .... Then I took some courses in a marine college for a year and became a steward. I worked as a steward for quite a few years... In 1997, the company informed us that they would select some seafarers as reserve political cadres. I was recommended by two commissars who had sailed with me before and believed I was qualified for the post. In fact, there was another reason ... The company was cutting posts and stewards were at risk of redundancy. Anyway, I was short-listed and passed the company’s background check. I was formally appointed and, after some training, I have been working as a full commissar ever since (Commissar, C: 4).

I was born in Tianjin in 1960. In 1983, I went to Qingdao Marine College where I took an advanced course in engineering. I served as a steward for several years... In 1996, I was selected because of my good performance and assigned to work as a trainee commissar... I am now a full commissar (Commissar, B: 4).

One commissar with experience as a steward described his ‘promotion’ in detail:

Why was I promoted from steward to commissar? Mainly because when I was a steward, I helped the commissar resolve some tough problems on several occasions, including a bad fight between the boatswain and the steward assistant when we were sailing in the Pacific. I won his trust and admiration. He told me, “You can do a better job than me.” He began to foster me and encouraged me to prepare myself to be a professional commissar. He raised the issue at a shipboard meeting. But the captain disagreed, he wanted me to be a third mate. So they had to take a vote. Most people preferred me to be promoted as a commissar, only the captain and the chief mate wanted me to be a third mate. The meeting then made a formal recommendation to the company and I was later nominated the shipboard commissar (Commissar, C: 1).

Occasional cases were found where technical officers have become political commissars. These cases are, however, ‘very exceptional.’ The typical dream of such officers is to become captain or chief engineer, if they decide to stay at sea at all. A crew manager reported,

There have been cases of technical personnel being made to political workers. But such cases are isolated in the company, for most technical staff are unwilling to serve as political workers. During my 15 years’ employment with this company, I have come across only one such case. A second officer with qualification from a well-know maritime university agreed to do political training and eventually became a sailing commissar. It was an exceptional case. Normally, those who have been trained for ocean-shipping business are bent on becoming the second mate, the first mate and eventually the captain. Commissar is definitely not part of their dream (Company B).

On a small but perceptible scale, as reported by senior managers and party officials, commissars have begun to be recruited from ‘society’, that is, from industries beyond shipping. One of the commissars interviewed reported:

‘I used to do clerical work in a land-based industry, as a party branch secretary in a factory. In 1998, I saw an advertisement by this ocean shipping company and learned that they were recruiting people to be commissars on ships. I applied and was given the job (Commissar, C: 2).’

A senior party official in Company C noted that redundant political workers in some bankrupted industries, ‘cotton mills for example’, are ‘a new source with a great potential.’ This is because ‘these people are experienced in conducting political work with workers, and we know they will accept our offer, because their industry has vanished and they are desperate for jobs.’

### **4.3. Training**

The training of political commissars has undergone a transition from the informal and ad hoc towards a more structured formal procedure. In the ‘old days’, commissars

were recruited with relative ease from the military forces where they already had experience as political workers. The skills they acquired by working with soldiers in battalions or regiments had prepared them for the political work in their new posts. In the view of the shipping company, they were 'ready-made' commissars who needed no further training.

However, a small number of the commissars in this category reported having received at least some training. As the following accounts show, the company's public relations office or the organisation office of the company's Party Committee were sometimes used as training bases for commissars before they were placed aboard.

Before I was transferred to this company in 1990, I worked in the army as a regimental commissar. After transfer, I spent the first year in the company propaganda office to familiarise myself with my future assignment. This company engages in ocean shipping, which requires special professional knowledge, that I badly lacked. Besides, I needed some time to get used to my new job (A:1).

I was a propagandist in the publicity office of a higher-level army unit. In 1986 I was transferred to the company. I had spent 6 years in the company's Organization Division before I was made a sailing commissar in 1992 (A:4)

Several commissars also reported having received training between ships. However, the training was always brief, company-based and concerned with party ideology and politics. The first generation of commissars recruited in this way learned the job 'on the job', as several 'old' commissars said when they recalled the start of their career in the merchant navy.

Training programmes, tailor-made and campus-based for commissars, were not consciously introduced until the late 1990s when the new sources of political labour were identified. A demand for training for commissars recruited from the new sources

was therefore placed on the agenda of company management and party committees. Meanwhile, shipping managers and party officials also became aware of the need to provide some ‘scientific’ and campus-based training for their ‘old commissars’ so that they could ‘catch up with the world trend and recharge themselves with new knowledge, new thoughts and new ideas’, as one senior training manager explained. The training of the newly recruited commissars has therefore been included as part of the HRM agenda in shipping companies.

Commissar training has become increasingly formalised and centralised and commissars now attend tailor-made courses in party schools funded by shipping companies. There are two kinds of training programmes. One is designed for new commissars before they assume their post aboard, the other for commissars between ships. The objective of the training, according to the Party Committee, is to improve commissars in two particular ways - their competence in conducting political-thought work and their knowledge about shipping and seafaring.

What is the ‘political-thought work’? In its attempt to theorise the concept, one Party Committee in a major ocean shipping company dubbed it ‘political-thought workology’ and noted in its *The Manual for Sailing Political Commissars*, ‘While there is no doubt that what the captain, the chief engineer, the chief mate, the radio officer and so on do belongs to a specific branch of maritime science, we must also recognise that what the political commissars do on board ship also belongs to a science! Political-thought work is a branch of the applied sciences, a synthetic interdisciplinary science, a science that convinces people by reasoning.’

A branch of the applied sciences in the view of the Party Committee, ‘political-thought workology’ should cover both basic knowledge and professional knowledge. Basic knowledge should draw on pedagogy, psychology, ethics, sociology, political science, aesthetics, behavioural science etc. Professional knowledge must include the following dimensions of political-thought work: its objectives, tasks, status, functions, primary content and process, and principles and methods.

Why the requirement to improve the commissar’s knowledge of shipping and seafaring? One senior official in a Party Committee of one large shipping company explained:

In real life, our thoughts are closely associated with our professions or occupations. Many of our thoughts are actually produced in the course of our work. Therefore, here is the logic – if the sailing commissar wants to do his job effectively, he must incorporate his political-thought work into seafarers’ work process. This means that he must have a certain level of knowledge of maritime industry so he can understand seafarers’ job.

According to the *Manual*, commissars are advised to derive this kind of knowledge from natural sciences, modern science and technology, management of modern enterprises, Chinese history, world history, Chinese maritime history, geography, deep sea shipping and so on.

There is no curriculum systematically designed for training commissars. The textbooks and other training materials are adopted according to ‘what is most important at the moment’. In 1999, for example, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issued an important document ‘The Decision of the Central Party Committee on Some Major Issues Regarding Reform and Development in State Enterprises’. The main theme of this document was a call to promote party control of

the workplace in state enterprises. A major shipping group revealed an ambitious training plan designed to ‘provide each and every serving commissar with campus training in three years.’ This training programme was organised as a quick response to the call of the Central Party Committee and was intended to ‘consolidate the party branch on board ship and to strengthen political work with the crew during voyages’. Ironically, the contents of the training hardly seemed to reflect the party’s call. Throughout training, commissars were called to ‘focus attention on production and trade’ and ‘to do their utmost to support and promote their companies’ development and reform.’ They were told to pledge their full support to strengthening the company’s ‘cohesion’ and its market competitiveness.

China’s entry into the World Trade Organisation in 2001 brought about a significant change in curriculum with regard to training commissars. As the following syllabus adopted by the shipping companies shows, the objectives and specifications of the course are a far cry from the goals set in 1999.

**Box 1. Syllabus for the Training of Sailing Commissars, 2001.**

**1. Aims and Objectives**

To improve students’ overall quality and to help them widen their operation and management concepts and strategies, gain extensive knowledge of management concepts and methods, further familiarise with WTO and other international rules and regulations, and increase the overall capacity and competitiveness of the entire company.

**2. Training Modules**

- Lectures by senior managers in the company
- WTO, rules in shipping and impact on our company
- Development models and trends in international shipping
- Marketing: theory and practice
- Finance management
- Human resource management
- Information management and e-commerce
- Strategic management in enterprises
- Logistics

- Case study of GE management model
- Case study of Haier management model<sup>6</sup>
- Seminar on cases studies
- Field work and research

### **3. Teaching Staff**

Most teaching staff will be externally invited or hired, including senior managers or officials from major companies, senior researchers in major companies' R&D departments and top scholars from prestigious universities and research institutes in Beijing and Shanghai. Some subjects will be taught by senior teaching staff in the school and by senior managers invited from top firms in other industries.

Clearly, such a training plan approximates closely to typical MBA courses in business schools in a market economy. Through the training, commissars are expected to acquire a sound understanding of the 'Four Focuses' and 'Four Interests'. Specifically, they are expected to focus on strengthening the company's cohesion, competitiveness, technical competence and risk-preventing and risk combating capacity. They are supposed to work 'in the interest of company reform, to increase the economic gains of the company as a whole, to maintain the stability of the seafaring workforce and to improve the overall seafarers' quality.

### **4.4. Motivation**

Most political officers transferred from the armed forces were willing to work as sailing commissars. The following recollection of a commissar was typical. This commissar had served in the army for 16 years before being transferred to the merchant fleet as a sailing commissar:

I had been a political commissar in the army for four years before my transfer in 1979. At that time, a person was considered lucky to be selected as a sailing commissar on a merchant ship. I was interested in the job, because the company provided a very positive environment for commissars. The upper-level Party Committee closely scrutinised to our performance. So we worked devotedly and comfortably, and achieved good results.... The company had highly qualified personnel and the Party Committee pursued proper tactics and

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<sup>6</sup> Haier is the largest refrigerator producer in China.

policies and appreciated the commissars' significance. Thus, many people at that time wanted to become commissar.

As commissars, we were very committed and did our best not to bring dishonour on the company in any way. For example, in 1986, I was sailing as a commissar on a ship. At that time South Yemen was undergoing a coup. We were incidentally given the task of bringing back Chinese from that country. We promptly evacuated over 400 overseas Chinese and Chinese experts. I made good use of my army knowledge and experiences in organising the mission. The mission was so successful that we evacuated every single [one] of the personnel as instructed. We brought everyone to safety. I co-operated well with the captain throughout the missions. I still feel quite proud of myself for this (Commissar D:5).

As mentioned, some ex-military officers were not immediately placed on ships but were instead allocated to ordinary cadre's post and told to do clerical work in the company. In such cases, they felt both demoted and challenged. Demoted, because of their loss of the privileges and higher wages they had enjoyed in the armed forces. Challenged, because of their lack of knowledge and experience of shipping. They would therefore try to overcome the problem and seek compensation by urging the company party committee to place them on board ship as sailing commissars. They expected that by conducting political-thought work of the sort they were familiar with and by earning relatively higher wages at sea, they would be able to regain their confidence and status which had suffered a loss as a result of the transfer. A 57-year-old commissar in Company D noted his rationale for the transfer, 'When I was transferred from the army in 1990, I felt I had been demoted. In the army I was a political commissar with the rank of a regimental officer, a rank considered neither 'somebody' nor 'nobody'. In the company I was reduced to a mere nobody. I was not happy with the change (D:5).' This man contacted the secretary of the company's party committee. He described his conversation as follows:

I used to be chauffeured to and from my office when I was in the army. But now I have been transferred to a civilian post. It was a thing of past. I naturally



felt 'unbalanced' when I had to pedal to the office everyday instead of going by car. If I was given a ship to sail, I would be able to earn more money, so that when I went ashore, I could afford to hail a taxi. This would be similar to the privileges I enjoyed in the past. The transfer had also cut a large chunk off my income. My monthly salary used to be more than 200 *yuan* when I was an army officer. But it was reduced to only little more than 170 *yuan* after the transfer. So I told the party secretary that by going to sea, I could make more money. That would make me feel better, and would bring me into a feeling of balance. The party secretary was convinced and gave his consent. A year later, I was appointed as a sailing commissar and placed aboard a merchant ship. I have hold the same post ever since 1991. Now, I am nearing retirement age (D:5)

When asked if they liked their jobs, most commissars expressed mixed feelings. Many said they still considered what they were doing was interesting and meaningful. Many, however, reported serious concern about the reduced importance of politics and ideology in production and a strong sense of loss, especially when compared their status and treatment with the captain's.

Today to be a sailing commissar is no longer as an attractive career as before. People prefer to be on the technical staff. The sailing commissars will soon find that fewer and fewer people want to succeed them (D:5).

We are also worried about the construction of the institution of the sailing commissar. In fact, the key lies in policies from above authorities. In the past, the party branch always took the lead on ships. Now, the party branch no longer plays the leading role. Instead, it is expected to serve or assist the captain and the technical staff aboard (C:4).

Even so, most commissars interviewed emphasised the value of their work and noted that they will continue to work hard as long as they remain aboard. None showed any intention of changing jobs. They chose to stay with the ships because they do not have other skills valued in today's labour market. They chose to stay also because they are still well above most seafarers in the ship hierarchy, despite their drop in status in the reform years.

#### **4.5. Promotion**

The sailing commissar is a dead-end career. Although commissars receive differentiated salaries, the differentiation is based primarily on seniority, not on knowledge, skills or experiences. Compared with the other seafarers, commissars have a very limited chance of promotion. Over the decades, only a small number of the commissars have been promoted to higher posts in the land-based political offices of higher authorities, mostly the party committee. Assessing their chances of promotion, one commissar says:

Even when one of us is lucky enough to be transferred to company headquarters, his chance of being selected as a divisional-level cadre, a post with a higher rank than commissar, is much slimmer than that of a technical cadre, especially the captain. Being a political worker, he is most likely to be assigned to a job in the political office, where a limited number of divisional vacancies is available. The divisional posts include heads of the organisation department and the propaganda department and the secretary of the Communist Youth League Committee. You can count the posts on fingers. But there are far too many commissars – more than a hundred in our company (B:2).

Between 1995 and 1997, no promotion of a commissar was recorded in the company file of any of the companies participating in the study. Most senior commissars have stuck to their posts for life. In the companies, the commissar is likened to a party secretary of the production brigade in the countryside, who traditionally kept his post for thirty to forty years until retirement. It is general knowledge that most commissars dedicated their entire life to one post.

Chances of promotion have become even slimmer for commissars since the reform, when an individual's technical or professional knowledge and experience counted from the point of view of promotion. Since 1990, for instance, even fewer commissars have been promoted. Most opportunities have been offered to technical cadres –

captains, chief engineers and other senior officers. Over the last eight years, among crewmen who have worked on board a model ship in Company A, two officers have been promoted to bureau-level posts and four have been named as ministerial-provincial level model or advanced workers. None of the promoted or named was a commissar. In Company D, as many as 80 technical cadre seafarers (senior officers) were awarded the title of 'Advanced Worker' and 'Model Worker' between 1988 and 1992. Of them, only nine were sailing commissars.

A tiny number of commissars have been promoted to higher positions through fast-track programmes. The following account is by one of the 'exceptionally successful' sailing commissars. He joined the shipping company in 1997. Only 12 months later, he was promoted to head an important office in the company's Party Committee.

Reflecting upon his experience of promotion, he says:

I joined the company as a sailing commissar in 1997. One year later I was promoted to the company's divisional-level position. This is unprecedented in company history. None of my colleagues who were regimental-level officers in the army and who came to the company in the same year as me has received this kind of treatment. It was therefore certainly not because my rank in the army was more senior to theirs. Neither was it because of my longer years of service. As I mentioned, some commissars had remained at their posts for around 40 years. But I was at the job for only 12 months. Some people would say that nowadays promotion has to do with backdoors or personal relationships. However, I had no such personal connections here in the company because I had only just been transferred from the military. I got the promotion because I was quick to adapt to the company environment, I was capable of coming up with constructive ideas with regards to the company's development schemes, and these ideas were appreciated and accepted by senior officials in the company. I was promoted because of my exceptional performance (A:5).

The performance of this ex-commissar was indeed 'exceptional'. He explains the immediate background – how he helped complete an impossible task that had led to his promotion:

When I joined the company in 1997, there was a LPG ship, which had been in service for more than 20 years. It was too old for operation. The port's state control authority had forbidden the ship to operate at the port. The ship therefore had to operate offshore. But that would greatly affect the company's income, because at-port operations yielded more income than offshore operations. Besides, the offshore operation must be done under good weather conditions and the ship would have to cease operation in stormy weather. But inshore operation is quite different, it can be done under all-weather conditions. However bad, the storm would die out once it reached the harbour. So there is a world of difference in the economic efficiency of the two modes of operation. The director of the company made a special trip to the port's state control authority and requested permission for the ship to enter the port. The port's state control authority eventually gave its consent on condition that the ship become as well maintained as the industry's model ship *Huatonghai*.<sup>7</sup> Against this background, the general manager instructed the political department to work out a plan to send an outstanding commissar to the ship in order to emulate *Huatonghai*. They therefore started to search for such a commissar throughout the company. At the time, I was a newcomer and had only sailed two ships. But the company believed that I had done an excellent job and trusted that I would know how to perform a miracle on that old ship. I was thus selected to lead the emulation campaign, and I successfully fulfilled the task in a few months. After that, I was given another two ships to sail, but by then I already felt that the company intended to help advance my career. I was asked to stop sailing and offered the current post and I have been heading this office since 1998 (A:5).

Just as commissars' chances of promotion are small, so too is their risk of demotion. Not a single case of demotion was found in the study. In the seafarers' view, 'so long the commissar makes no bad mistakes, he should be able to stay aboard in his post.' In most companies, the post, as a product of the planned economy, still has the features of an 'iron rice bowl' - a permanent post with little risk of unemployment and little chance for promotion. Despite this, it is worth noting that one company participating in the study has introduced a grading system that divides the commissars into four 'grades' and adjusts their wages according to

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<sup>7</sup> *Huatonghai* has been a model ship since the late 1990s. It has high-quality maintenance and high productivity despite its old age. Seafarers reported extremely hard work, long working hours and poor living conditions on this ship according to Zhao's interviews with the families of some seafarers who had employment experiences on this model ship.

their grade. This is considered ‘an important reform scheme to provide an incentive and boost competition among the commissars (Shipping Manager, C:14).’

## **Chapter 5. Role Performance**

The commissar works and lives with the rest of the crew throughout the voyage. In theory, he starts and ends his role with the journey, although in practice some commissars continue working even when they are on leave ashore, either as a result of their own ‘over-commitment’ or because of company’s instruction. This chapter describes the role the commissar routinely performs when in position. In other words, it records the commissar’s daily work in real shipboard life at sea.

There is no particular job description written for the individual commissar. Tasks and responsibilities are minutely specified in *The Commissar’s Manual* compiled by the companies party committees. Commissars are expected to carry out these tasks when they enter the role or start working. The research found that most commissars fulfilled their responsibilities during their performance of the role, aboard and ashore. Both the official data and the interview data suggest that the commissar’s tasks or responsibilities range widely and concern nearly all aspects of working life in the shipboard community. ‘The commissar has to look after everything on board ship, big or small. Thus he should familiarise himself with everything essential on board. He has to be a jack-of-all-trades (A:3).’ ‘I am actually a minister without portfolio who looks after almost everything (B:2).’ The rest of the chapter documents how the commissar performs his role in real life along the sequence of the voyage.

### **5.1. On Receiving Assignment Notice**

The commissar is expected to conduct substantial research about the ship and crew before embarkation. On learning of the assignment, the commissar ‘contacts several

departments in the company in order to gain a clear picture of the trade route, the ship, the major tasks of the voyage and, most importantly, the crew (D:1).’The first department the commissar usually contacts is crew management. There, he is allowed a full access to the files of the entire crew, including the captain’s. These files provide him with a thorough view of the background of each individual seafarer on board, including his age, geographical origin, educational qualifications, marital status, health conditions, hobbies, personality, party affiliation, results of his performance review, behaviour on previous ships and so on. In addition, the commissar can always obtain extra information from the crew manager about seafarers not recorded in the file. Many commissars call this stage the ‘pre-project investigation’. One commissar said:

Usually, the crew manager was very open to me and he would reveal some important things unrecorded in the file. For example, he would tell me who has just had a divorce, who has been sacked by a ship owner, who has a bad stomach problem, who has suffered from injury or disciplinary punishment or demotion, etc. during a certain voyage, who has a strong character or bad temper and so on. Information of this nature helps you a great deal in your work aboard ’(A:4).

This kind of investigation therefore allows the commissar to familiarise himself with his crew before he meets them aboard.

The commissar also contacts other departments to learn more about the crew. Usually, these include the department of ship management in the company and the department of political work in the company’s party committee. These departments inform the commissar of the crew’s ‘collective performance’ on previous voyages, including, for example, the structure of the shipboard management, the completion of shipboard production, political-thought education, the recruitment of party members, the training and development of cadre seafarers and the observation or otherwise of discipline in

foreign relations. The commissar then gets these departments to assign him specific targets and issue him with necessary documentation to take aboard.

The commissar is encouraged to contact the department of safety and technology to learn about the ship, especially its maintenance and repair history. This allows the commissar an opportunity to look into the crew's professional background, particularly that of the deck and engine officers. He may also contact the shipping department for information about the route and the nature of the trade. The commissar's last point of contact before embarkation is the company's party committee and its various departments, where he receives detailed advice or instructions regarding his work at sea.

## **5.2. Embarkation Day**

In most cases, the commissar changes at the ships' home port in China at the end of a voyage and is extremely busy on his first day on board ship – his embarkation day. 'Getting on board, the commissar faces a new collective. He has to get to know the seamen, including their personalities, educational backgrounds, political attitudes, working experiences and so forth. He needs to know about the duty and shifts, acquaint himself with the background of each seaman including his family and health conditions, his technical skills, etc. At the same time, he must lose no time in establishing the party branch, the trade union branch, the food administration committee, the security committee, etc. He also needs to draw up various plans, including study plan and training plan. For a commissar, security work to prevent people-smuggling, piracy, drug-trafficking is of special importance. You never dare to relax (B:1).'



On embarkation day, the new commissar is taken by the departing commissar to meet the captain shortly after joining ship. This is immediately followed by a briefing from the departing commissar about the crew and a tour round ship's living and social areas: the crew cabins, the galley, the mess, the reading room, the sports and recreational facilities and so on. The tour allows the new commissar to meet the crew in various locations. After this, documents, paperwork, keys, etc. change hands before the departing commissar signs off.

Once on his own, the new commissar immediately starts to familiarise himself with the crew and ship. He visits and talks with the captain, the chief engineer, the chief mate and the rest of the crew and tours the ship to observe its overall condition and seafarers' operation aboard. A newcomer to shipboard community, an experienced commissar usually takes a low profile, because 'I know everyone is busy with work at the moment. I would just smile to them and say hello. I would wait to know more until they - heads of departments to come to meet and talk to me properly when they have time (A:1).'

The commissar then starts gathering information about 'crew issues of all kinds', including crew change, ship visits by family members, food purchase, storage, record keeping, payment of overtime and bonuses, medicine, sport and recreational facilities aboard, the establishment or consolidation of the party branch, the safe production committee and so on. At the same time, he also 'keeps an eye on ship visitors, especially those 'sexually-dressed and seductive young women' to protect seafarers from prostitutes'. Back in his cabin, he starts going over company and party documents, plans the voyage, sets up an agenda for the 'pre-voyage cadre seafarers meeting' and prepares his 'pre-voyage rallying speech' for the crew.

The 'pre-voyage cadre seafarers' meeting' is the first occasion at which the commissar meets all the officers collectively and explains his role aboard. The meeting is called by the commissar and chaired by the captain. Those expected to attend include the chief engineer, the chief mate, the radio officer, the trade union representative (who in many cases is the chief engineer) and the secretary of the Young League Branch. Sometimes, other 'important technical cadres' (officers) are also invited. Details of the voyage schedule, organisation of the ship's operation, conditions of the ship and the crew - all are discussed. Afterwards, the entire crew is called together for a meeting chaired by the captain, at which the commissar delivers his pre-voyage rallying speech. In it, he briefs the crew in considerable detail about the overall objectives of the voyage, the requirements of each department, seafarers' responsibilities, labour discipline and so on.

A final task before the ship sails is to ensure that the crews' seaman books and other supporting documents are aboard. The commissar must also work closely with the duty deck seafarer to ensure that a guard is placed at the gangway so that 'not a single stranger can slip through onto the ship'. The prevention of smuggling is such an important part of the commissar's responsibility that any error in this respect would almost certainly damage his career.

### **5.3. After the Ship Sets Sail**

Shortly after the ship sets sail, the commissar shifts his attention to three tasks: setting up a shipboard 'leading infrastructure', including the party branch, the youth league branch, the trade union branch, the food management committee and the security and safe production committee; writing up a voyage work plan; and directing the crew's attention to the 'ship's safe and effective operation'.

Focused meetings are used by the commissar as an effective means to mobilise the crew and ensure that the party keeps a firm grip on the ship. The party branch meeting

tops the agenda. Members of party branch are supposed to be ‘democratically elected by all the party members aboard’ but always includes the commissar, the captain and the chief engineer and is headed by the commissar. At this meeting, party work is planned, candidates for the youth league branch and trade union branch are short-listed and the voyage work plan is drawn up. The plan incorporates two parts: the production plan and the ‘political-thought work plan’. The former drafted by the captain covers various aspects of the ship’s operation, including task specification and the requirements for carrying out tasks, weather and climate conditions along the route, rules and regulation concerning ship maintenance and repair, and labour discipline. The latter plan is drafted by the commissar. It concerns, for example, routine party work during the voyage, guidelines for trade union work and youth league work, cadre seafarers’ training and development, crew management, crew ‘spirit’ or moral and labour discipline.

Soon after the party branch meeting other meetings follow. Initially, the commissar is always involved. At the trade union branch meeting, he looks into the organisation and management of crew sports and recreation; at the youth league meeting, how the youth league members will assist with shipboard party work and the completion of ship operation; at the food management committee meeting, how food is purchased and managed and how the accounts are administrated and controlled. At the security and safe production committee meeting, a review is made of security and safety measures and of committee members’ at sea. At all these meetings, the commissar stresses the goal of the voyage: safe and effective operation.

The party branch and the branches or committees of other organisations and functions form an extensive support network for the management of the shipboard community

at sea, thus allowing the commissar to stay updated about what is going on within the ship community and to interact with the crew in various ways, and intervene where necessary in the seafarers' work and life. These branches and committees enable the commissar to carry out his responsibilities by assisting the captain to complete the voyage successfully.

With the support network in place, the commissar first calls all party members to a meeting and then calls the entire crew to another meeting. At these meetings, both the commissar and the captain make speeches informing seafarers of tasks ahead production goals. Safety, solidarity and discipline are always the main topics.

#### **5.4. At Sea**

On open sea, the commissar spends most of his time conducting work with the crew. He is concerned with nearly all aspects of the seafarers' work and life at sea. He labours with seafarers on various tasks, eats meals with them in the same mess and shares their leisure time. He talks with them, at meetings, in groups and privately, one-to-one. He helps the cook in the galley, chats with the captain and mediates in quarels and conflicts. The commissars' main roles and functions are analysed in detail in Chapter 8, but the following accounts illustrate a 'typical day' at sea (Box 2, Box 3) and highlights some major issues he has to deal with during the voyage (Box 4).

##### **Box 2. Quote from a commissar with 17 years' experiences on tankers**

A commissar's daily work is highly intensive. Normally at sea, I get up at 6 o'clock in the morning. After washing my face and brushing my teeth, I go to the galley to help the cook. The cook has lost his assistant and needs help. I have an additional reason for helping in the galley. The quality of meals has a direct effect on seafarers' enthusiasm, which in turn has an impact on shipboard efficiency. There are therefore two reasons for me to offer a hand in the galley. On the one hand, to become familiar with the conditions in the galley and to help coordinate relations between the cook

and the crew where necessary. On the other hand, to help the cook by working alongside him.

Breakfast is served at 7 o'clock on the dot. After that I participate in the daily meeting to plan and assign work. At a quarter to eight, I go to one of the departments to see how things are going on. At eight o'clock everybody is in post and starts working, and I go to work with our seamen in one of the departments.

We have lunch at 11:30 and then resume working at 1:30. As a commissar, I work together with the seamen for almost the entire day. I benefit from this in two ways. I can act as an example for them to follow; and by mixing with the seamen I can get a better idea about what's going on, which makes my work more effective when I try to coordinate relations between different departments or individuals.

In the evening, I usually spend time with the seamen chatting or playing games. I do this almost every evening except when we have routine meetings. In the evening, I also need to chat with the captain. We exchange thoughts and ideas and compare notes. We discuss problems we have identified. If the problems are of a technical nature, it is the captain's job to handle them. If the problems are of an ideological, political or logistic nature, it is my job to sort things out. We don't meet much during the day, we usually meet after supper.

After all the problems are dealt with, I return to my cabin to read books, newspapers or company documents and write my diary. Before I go to bed, I need to patrol the ship to check that the seamen have gone to bed or if there are security problems .... (B:3).

### **Box 3. Quote from a commissar with 18 months' experience on bulk carriers:**

I had the same life as every commissar on board ship. I get up at half past 5 every day. If the ship anchors in port, I take a stroll on deck and check cargo unloading at the main cargo hold. I am not in charge of cargo unloading, but it is relevant to my work. By checking, I get to know how long the ship is going to stay in port and how much time I have to conduct my work. I also need to check if the duty seaman is at his post at the gangway and if the visitors' registration book being properly kept. If there is any problem, I request the duty seaman to remedy it or criticize him.

After returning from deck, I go to the galley to help the chef strip and wash vegetables. The vegetables for everyday meals are taken from the refrigerator and need stripping, washing, and cutting. All the staff from the supporting department help in the galley. The department head and the purser take this opportunity to assign tasks for the day.

When all is done, it is time for breakfast. After breakfast, I have a cup of tea or a cigarette. At about 7:30, each department holds a pre-work meeting. The department heads call their seamen together and assign each his tasks for the day and point out matters that require attention. I join the pre-work meeting every day in order to find out what kind of work each department is doing and point out seamen's duties where

necessary. For example, today deckhands are to work high above the ground, which is rather dangerous. To raise their awareness about safety, after the department head has distributed assignments, I give a short speech about safety procedures, reminding people of what they must do, e.g. that they must wear safety helmets, fasten their safety belts and wear protective glasses.

The pre-work meeting usually lasts 20 minutes and work starts at 8 o'clock. I work together with the seamen for the whole day. Both the captain and I are very busy. Sometimes the captain cannot find me. For example, if I go down to the engine room, he definitely won't be able to find me.

The captain and I stroll together on the deck after supper under the setting sun and draw up a working plan for the next day. Jobs like deck repairing and paint scraping is onerous. Before the work is to be done, I bring a ruler and a notebook with me and the captain takes a stick of chalk with him while we stroll around the deck. The captain uses the chalk to mark the places that need to be repaired and I measure them with the ruler and make records in my notebook. In that way, we don't need to spend time measuring and deciding what places need to be repaired during working time the next day. We simply need to take the notebook with us and lead the seamen to the place where we have made marks. They will turn on their gas and electric welding torches and start working immediately.

I hardly get time to myself in the evening. There are so many people on the ship. Since relations between the seamen and myself are good, they always like to come to my room to talk with me. I chat with them together. They come to my room, mostly for chatting but sometimes for minor matters, like distribution of houses, wage information in the company and their own promotions. Sometimes they come because they have had conflicts with others crew members and want to explain things to me. For example, one seaman may say, 'Today I was beaten by someone and it wasn't my fault.'

Sometimes, I make a phone call to the captain and he comes to my room. Normally I seldom go to the captain's room. I say to the captain, "I will not go to your room in the evening. Do you know why? It is because if I go to your room I can't control the time. I don't know what time you have to get to the bridge. If the time comes but I am still in your room, you will find it embarrassing to drive me out. It's not good for work. If you come to my room, you can simply say that it is already 8 o'clock and time for you to leave. It is good for work." So, the captain usually comes to my room. It contributes to maintaining good relations between the captain and the commissar if they meet often to communicate and chat with each other.

It also contributes to good relations between the commissar and the seamen. The commissar might not talk with someone for quite a long time, but if the commissar needs to remind him of various problems, he will talk to him. The commissar also needs to talk with young seamen seeking promotion. In a word, it is rare that no one comes to my room in the course of a month. At least 20 people come to my room every month. They are of different ages, more young people than the old, if I have to make a distinction. The young people at present have a strong desire to be promoted and some come to me for study materials. The older seamen come to talk about their ideological problems. Usually they recall the past time in a depressed mood.

The people who come to my room leave before 9:30. They leave some minutes after 9 because they know that I have work to do after 9:30. There is no need to mention other work -- the political work log that takes me at least half an hour to write each day. They politely leave me time to finish my work. I make an overall check on the ship at 10 o'clock, the routine safety check specified by the company's regulation (C-4)

#### **Box 4. A Commissar with 25 years' experience on container ships**

Working on board a ship is different from working in a land-based office that observes an eight-hour work schedule. We do a round-the-clock job. During the voyage, the commissar has to look after everything 24 hours a day and handle it properly... Bedtime on board is usually set between nine and eleven o'clock in the evening. But someone may ring you up or knock at your door at midnight.

Midnight callers have various reasons. Take asking for home leave, for example: we used to arrange for the crew to go on holiday after a long voyage, say, from Europe. Normally, when the ship had passed Singapore, the commissar began to submit the list of leave-takers to the company by telegram. Sometimes personal wishes would clash with the company's plans. There were cases of crewmen wanting to go on leave that were rejected, but another crewman was granted leave for which he hadn't filed an application. This was a real headache. Those working the 12pm-4am shift who wanted to go on leave came for a chat with me. They rang saying, 'Commissar, I want talk to you about my home leave.' I would tell them that I hadn't got the company approval. Then they would insist on having leave, anyway, they would threaten to take extreme measures, if they failed to get their granted, and they kept nagging at me. At such that times, the commissar shouldn't lose his temper because the issue was within his area of responsibility. He shouldn't blame them for phoning him at such a late hour. Instead, he should get up and help them find a solution even if it was at midnight.

Some crewmen like to go fishing when the ship is in anchorage. It is a good hobby. Once, a crewman got excited when his hand was scratched by a fishhook and kept bleeding profusely. He came to me, saying, 'Commissar! Look, I got injured while fishing on deck. What shall I do?' Well, I asked the Captain to get in touch with the port authorities and managed to have the crewman sent to the local hospital for treatment.

There are cases of fistfights among the crewmen. This can be a thorny problem. If it had happened in a land-based enterprise, the authorities could mete out disciplinary sanctions and even have people fired. But we cannot employ the same method on board ship. Bordering the sky on three sides and the sea below, intensifying the problem will only make things worse. The guilty crewman could become desperate and threaten to commit suicide. You have probably heard of crewmen beating up a commissar. You know why? The problem becomes intensified. When fistfights take place, the first thing I will do is to calm the parties involved to avoid incidents. But it is not always an easy job. ... (A:3)

## 5.5. Calling at Foreign Ports

When the ship approaches a foreign port, the commissar works together with the captain to prepare the ship and the crew before the arrival. In addition to routine checking, cleaning and maintenance of the ship and its cargo, the captain calls a ship operation committee meeting. The meeting is chaired by the captain and attended by, in addition to the commissar, the chief engineer, the chief mate and the purser. The ship's condition, the ship operation, the crew, overall conditions in the port 'including its social, economic, cultural and political conditions', and relevant rules and regulations concerning the port's state control, immigration and so on are briefed at the meeting. Then, it is the commissar's responsibility to pass the information to all seafarers at a crew-members' meeting chaired by the captain. The following accounts by two commissars describe their duties before sailing into a foreign port:

Before we reach a port, I always brief the seamen about the country and its laws and regulations. I stress discipline and prevent them from going ashore without permission from me or the captain. They are not allowed to conduct any business, aboard or ashore (D:1).

Before our ship calls at a foreign port, I need first of all to assist the captain in carrying out checks to make sure that our ship passes all the examinations by the port state control, the immigration etc. If we fail to pass any of these examinations, our ship is not allowed to leave the port to continue the journey. One day in port costs US\$3,000 to US\$5,000. So, the examination work before we enter each port is very important. Secondly, it is my job to educate the crew before we actually dock. Each time, I prepare some study programmes to inform our seamen of the economic and trade situation, geographical features and security status of the country and the port. We also reiterate the discipline and the rewarding and punishment policies in our company and ask our seamen to guard against human smuggling, drug trafficking and piracy. I also set aside time for our seamen to have some shore leave. According to the company rules, they must leave the ship in groups, and the groups should always have at least three seamen, so they can monitor and help each other. Finally, I see to it that at least one decent dinner or lunch is prepared for the crew during our stay in the port. I find good food really works in boosting seamen's morale (B:3).



While cargos are handled in port and attended to by the captain, the commissar also ensures that incoming post is received and distributed without delay, that outgoing post is prepared in time for pick-up, that arrangements are made for sick seafarers to see the doctor in hospital and that food supplies are topped up. Many commissars say that they pay particular attention to attitude and behaviour changes among seafarers after they finish reading letters from their families, including those who received no letter. This is because ‘Seafarers work and live in a confined space for months. They tend to develop a more special and stronger emotional attachment to letters than workers in land-based industries. They look forward to hearing from their families everyday. Letters can bring good news. but they can also bring bad news. Seafarers are badly disappointed if they don’t receive family letters. I always observe the crew very carefully after letters day and talk to those who become depressed, withdrawn or sad (C:5).

## **5.6. Return Journey**

Chinese seafarers call their return journey *huichuan* or ship returning. It is usually tough on the commissar, especially when the ship is on its last few laps. By this time, many seafarers are physically and emotionally exhausted, especially those who have been at sea for several months and are eager to take shore leave. During this part of the voyage, the commissar involves himself even more closely with the crew, keeps his finger on the pulse of crew morale and talks to crew members whenever he feels there might be a problem. One commissar observed:

Once we went to take over a ship in Japan. The voyage lasted 15 months. On our way home, many seamen became anxious. Some were desperate to reach home and meet their families, some were eager to take their leave or get married and some became extremely worried about their families. Among

them the most anxious was an AB. Probably because of fatigue, he was constantly hounded by nightmares. I reported his problem to the company, and meanwhile talked to him and tried to make friends with him. He eventually recovered and his sleep returned to normal. He managed to stay on and get back to China at the completion of the voyage (B:4).

Paperwork occupies much of the commissar's time during this stage of the voyage. There are three reports for him to write up: the voyage report, the shipboard party branch work report and the commissar work report. He must complete three 'record books' on the voyage: the political-thought work, the party branch work and security work. At the same time, the review form must be filled up for every seafarer, because, as one commissar explained,

The company employs a systematic appraisal system and reviews the seafarer's performance regularly. The shipboard review committee is composed of the commissar, the captain and the chief engineer and reviews the crew members individually at the end of each voyage. The review usually looks into seafarer's attitudes, behaviour and technical performance and quantifies each aspect with scores. The higher the total score, the better the review result. Good seafarers are praised, poor ones are criticised and the really bad ones are kicked off the ship (B:4).

The commissar also needs to get the crew to attend 'democratic review and appraisal meeting' where they are asked to review the work of the shipboard management - the ship operation committee and the party branch - both involving the captain, the commissar and the chief engineer and to appraise their performance. The review and the appraisal results of both the crew and the management are submitted to the company on completion of the voyage.

A so-called 'star management' regime has been introduced in recent years to evaluate the crew collectively in most shipping companies. The ship is adopted as the basic unit for this evaluation and the system classifies the ship into one of five grades. For example, if a ship performs excellently throughout the year, i.e. if it operates safely

and efficiently, is well maintained and free from accident, it is classified as a Five-Star Ship and the crew qualifies for the highest wage and bonus. 'Operation cost' is an important factor when the ship is considered for classification by the 'star management' regime. A 50-year-old commissar with military political work experience notes:

In recent years, the company has adopted a star-class management. Star titled ships, ranging from one-star to five-star, are given special allowances whose size is determined by the ship's ranking in the star league. Seamen serving on differently-starred ships have different incomes. Everyone wants to sail on a higher-ranked ship (B:4)

All mentioned that paper-work, reports, record books and review and appraisal results are checked by the company and used as sources of information for the review and classification of the ship. Ships are reviewed and ranked annually and the results have direct financial implications for the seafarers.

Crew leave demands much attention from the commissar. 'He has to consider seamen's duty and shifts. Those who go on leave and those who have special things to deal with, are sometimes allowed to disembark. Those who want to stay on board or whose leave is yet to come are prepared for the next voyage (B:1).'

### **5.7. At Home Port**

Back at home port at the end of the voyage, the commissar and the captain are met by a group of company representatives sent from three departments (ship operation, transport and political work) to inspect the 'quality of the voyage'. 'The focal point of the inspection of the commissar's work is his work records, including his diary on political work and the minutes of meetings. They examine all these records and ask the commissar about overall conditions on board. Some things they find out on their

own initiative from the commissar, others he reports on, for example, 'seamen's political thought, the way the rules and regulations are enforced, problems and their solutions, etc. (A:1).'

When the inspection finishes, 'The commissar conducts a thorough safety check and then write up a summary report on the voyage. This report includes the achievement and problems of political thought work, safety, the assessment of each individual seaman's performance, etc. The commissar also needs to decide who should be praised and rewarded or who should be or criticised and punished. Such an appraisal is taken seriously by the company when they review crewmembers' work (D:1).'

The captain and the chief engineer also play an important role in the process and the final decision is made between the captain and the commissar. However, it is usually the commissar who writes up the assessment for each seafarer.

Ship logistics and pastoral care for the crew continue to take up much of the commissar's time and attention during this period. For instance, he needs to talk to leave-taking seafarers before they sign off and to arrange for seafarers' wives or other family members to visit their men before the ship sails again. One chief engineer said:

'When the ship is back in home port, many seamen's relatives come to visit their men. The commissar always arranges cars to pick them up and bring them to the ship. When they leave, he sends cars to take them from the port. Seamen don't have to look for cars by themselves, nor do they have to worry about anything. All they need do is to finish their work. On many occasions, the commissar also meets visiting families and instructs the cook to cook some good dishes (for them). During this time, the number of people on board might be double or more. Daily management of social life and meals naturally fall onto the shoulder of the commissar (C-10).'

## 5.8. Shore Leave

Like other seafarers, the commissar takes shore leave after six to nine months at sea. Although away from his ship and post, the commissar still has a lot to do. The company management and party committee expect him to ‘recharge or enrich himself during his vacation— mostly by reading extensively, collecting all relevant information, absorbing and accumulating all new knowledge and so on.’ In the company’s view, ‘(T)his is the most important thing for the Commissar to do during his leave ashore, because lack of information is a serious problem in seafarers’ life at sea. The new knowledge and information the Commissar gains on land helps him achieve a successful voyage on his next ship (HRM Official, Company C).’

Even on leave, the commissar keeps in close contact with the company, usually through participation in meetings. The commissar is not the only person who has to do so. Other senior officers, in particular the captain and the chief engineer, also stay in close touch with the company when they are on shore leave. ‘The “three chiefs”, the captain, the commissar and the chief engineer, are called to monthly meetings, usually on the 20<sup>th</sup> day of the month. They are also expected to attend the meetings regularly organised by the company for all the on-leave seafarers (A:1).’

Visits to seafarers’ families are another part of many commissars’ work while on leave. ‘I took time to visit seamen’s families when I was on leave and did my best to help solve their problems. By doing this, I can better understand why some seamen can’t concentrate on their jobs. Such things can hardly be known through lectures and meetings .... Once, after I helped a seaman sort out his child’s problems at school, he held my hand gratefully and said, “Commissar, I will follow you for my entire life from now on” (D:2).’ Commissars are also encouraged to ‘make the best use of their

leave by writing articles on their experiences and comparing notes with other commissars in other companies.’ These articles are then collected, edited and published by companies’ party committees in company newsletters or books so that their experiences can be shared across sectors in the industry or with the general public (COSCO (Guangzhou) Party Committee; COSCO (Group) Propaganda Department, 2000; COSCO (Group) Party Committee - Political Department, 2000; CWPSA, 2000).

## Chapter 6. The Position of the Commissar in Ship Hierarchy

This chapter analyses in detail the formal power structure on board ship, the part played by the commissar, and the informal power employed by the commissar to achieve success.

### 6.1. Formal Power

The Captain Responsibility System adopted in the late 1980s has significantly increased the authority of the captain by placing him at the top of the ship hierarchy as the most important decision maker aboard. However, unlike his counterparts on foreign ships, the captain on PRC ships is not master in the conventional sense. According to company specifications on responsibility, the captain and the commissar are the ‘two most senior cadres with supreme power on board ship’ and ‘any important decision can only be made after extensive discussion by the relevant shipboard committee.’

Three most important committees coexist aboard and are headed by the captain and the commissar. First, *the shipping business committee*. This committee is responsible for making major decisions concerning management of production and personnel including, for example, bonuses and overtime payment to crew members, celebrations during spring festivals and the annual work plan. The committee is composed of seven seafarers: the captain, the commissar, the chief engineer, the chief mate, the boatswain, the chief machinist and the purser. The captain is always the director and the commissar his deputy. *The party branch committee* is smaller. It includes the commissar, the captain and the chief engineer, with the commissar as secretary and the captain as his deputy. Mobilising party members in daily shipboard production

and assisting the captain in decision making in emergencies are the chief objectives of this committee. *The safe production committee* includes the captain, the commissar and all the seafarers in both deck and engine departments. It is chaired by the commissar, with the captain as his deputy.

These committees follow a procedure called ‘collective policy making with the committee head taking the accountability (*jiti juece, shouzhang fuze*)’. This phrase is confusing and can be misleading. It actually means ‘collective discussion at the committee with the committee head having the final say’. According to this procedure, when major decisions need to be made, such as promoting seafarers or paying bonuses, the head of the relevant committee must call a committee meeting and put his proposal up for full discussion and review before a decision is made. ‘For example, issues such as whether a rank-and-file seaman should be promoted to a higher position or recommended for party membership, all such important matters must undergo a collective discussion among the leaders on board before a major decision can be made and reported to the company (Chief Mate, Company C). Since all these committees are headed by the captain and the commissar, the final decision-making power is actually concentrated in these two men’s hands. Despite this, the involvement of ship management at both individual and collective levels allows a certain degree of democracy and transparency in decision making.

The company entrusts the captain and the commissar with several ‘categories of authority’ during the voyage. Together with the captain, the commissar has authority in managing personnel affairs, granting awards, making recommendations, imposing monetary penalties, taking disciplinary measures, making decisions in emergencies, allocating bonuses and supervising food management, as summarized in Box 5.



## **Box 5. Shared Responsibilities of the Captain and the Commissar at Sea**

### *Personnel Management*

The captain and the commissar have the authority to propose to the company the demotion or removal of unqualified officers from their posts. They can suspend or readjust the posts of recalcitrant seafarers or seafarers who ignore their duties and they have the authority to appoint other crew members to replace such people. When necessary, they can request the company to change certain crew members. On fixed-crew ships, that is, ships crewed by the same group of seafarers for a long period of time, the captain and the commissar have the authority to put forward proposals regarding crew composition.

Both men are responsible for making comprehensive assessments of the performance and behaviour of all crew members and have the authority to make awards for excellence during the assessments. It is also within their jurisdiction to sign 'letters of notice on reward' making suggestions to the company about seafarers who have made outstanding achievements in carrying out their duties or who have made contributions to safeguarding the overall interests of the ship and the reputation of the company, or who have done an excellent job in implementing rules and regulations. They are authorised to suggest citations for meritorious service and award seafarers who have helped bring about major achievements in technical innovation, or who have made major contributions to economic returns or who have engaged in heroic conduct during emergencies, safeguarded safety at sea or reduced loss of assets. They are authorised to make recommendations to the company on seafarers' promotion, certification, and selection for training.

### *Bonus Distribution and Monetary Penalty*

The captain and the commissar are entitled to decide specifically on the distribution of bonus according to crew members' working capacity, responsibility, burden of labour and working condition in compliance with relevant provisions.

At the same time, they also have the authority to apply financial penalties to seafarers who have violated rules or regulations on the voyage. They can suspend payment of the monthly or even the entire bonus in the case of such seafarers. In doing so they may take into account the nature of the mistake, the seriousness of the damage caused and the attitudes of the seafarers involved. They can propose for the company to impose further monetary penalty on these seafarers if necessary.

### *Administrative Disciplinary Measures*

The captain and the commissar have the authority to suggest taking disciplinary measures against seafarers who neglect or abuse their duty. They can exercise the corresponding personnel management powers, whilst suggesting disciplinary measures to the company, against seafarers found guilty of disobedience to ship management or who violate safety rules and spark off accidents. They have the right to carry out necessary investigations to obtain evidence and submit detailed

investigation reports to the company with respect to those seamen who neglect or abuse their duty and are responsible for the accidents.

#### *Emergency Handling*

When crew members drink excessively, come to blows, commit physical assaults, etc., such as may pose a threat to the safety of the ship and crew, the captain and commissar have the authority to adopt contingency measures to keep the situation with bounds. In circumstances when there is no time to receive instructions from the company or the local Chinese embassy and when a collective decision is made by the shipboard Party branch, the captain and commissar can confine or repatriate crew members who engage in smuggling, illegal drug trafficking, human smuggling or defection. This also applies to seafarers found to have jeopardized the interests of the state and company. The captain and commissar must report such incidents to the company as soon as possible. They have the right to confiscate material evidence relating to serious violations of laws and regulations by crew members.

#### **Mess Supervision**

The captain and commissar are responsible for the quality of food during the voyage. They can propose the appointment of stewards and cooks and hiring or firing them. They have the authority to check accounts and cash in storage and in reserve and can stop illegitimate food purchases. To meet actual needs, they have the authority to rectify or authorise repairs in order to guarantee food quality.

The commissar is authorised to exercise managerial power together with the captain in the above areas, although in practice such powers cannot be equally shared between the two in the context of the Captain Responsibility System. Seafarers noted, ‘I could tell that the captain and the commissar always consulted each other at work (Chief Engineer, B: 9).’ Commissars reported, ‘I always kept in close touch with the captain. I would discuss with him before meetings, before decisions were made, and about almost everything (Commissar, A:2).’ Captains told of their experience, ‘The commissar and I work together towards the same goal. We two cadres always consult and exchange views with each other and jointly carry out the work aboard (Captain, D:6).’

In addition to shared ‘authorities’, the commissar and the captain also have individual responsibilities and powers. Essentially, the commissar takes more responsibility in dealing with people or social issues such as political-thought work, trade union work, food and hygiene. The captain is more influential in handling ‘things’ or ‘ship business’ matters. At the same time, they are expected to work together on issues concerning ship security and promotion of seafarers. The responsibilities of the two posts are listed in detail in the companies’ Ship and Crew Management Annual Assessment Indicators.

## **6.2. The Decline of the Commissar’s Position in the Ship Hierarchy**

As noted in Chapter 3, the status of the commissar in the shipboard community has changed over time. Many seafarers referred to 1978 as a dividing point between the commissar ‘having more power’ to his ‘having less power’. The period of the 1960s and most of the 1970s were the commissar’s heyday. His power was at its peak between 1975 and 1978, when the Political Commissar Responsibility System was introduced. This system required that the ship to be placed ‘under the unified leadership of the Party’. During this period, the commissar, as the shipboard party branch secretary, enjoyed ‘absolute power and had the final say in all affairs on board’. In comparison, ‘the captain was only in charge of navigation and the technical aspects of shipping (A:10)’.

Since the enterprise reform in 1978, the commissar’s power has gradually declined. It reached its nadir between 1988 and 1989, when the legitimacy of the Party’s control over the workplace, and of the country, was challenged. As a result, the post of commissar was removed from the crew list and the commissar himself was

redesignated as 'deputy captain'. The new title formalised the commissar's downgrading. Seafarers recalled: '(The) word "deputy" was a clear statement to us all on the commissar's demotion. Many captains began to think seriously "Well, you are my deputy so you must obey my orders because I am your boss (Captain, C:6).' After the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, the Party restructured its leadership and consolidated its status as the leading political party. Since then, the commissar has regained some of his lost power, but not at the same level as before the reform. The following accounts from seafarers demonstrate that they were aware of the change.

When I worked as a green hand on board ship in 1975, the commissar had a big power, much bigger than the captain. He had the final say in everything. Things have become very different since 1978. Nowadays everyone can see the commissar's power has dwindled a lot and the captain's has been much enlarged ( Chief Engineer, A:10).

Before 1978, the party branch, indeed the commissar, always took the lead on ships. Now, the party branch no longer takes the lead. Instead, the commissar has to serve the captain and support the technical cadre seafarers (Captain, D:5).

The commissar has always been in charge of personnel management. But now he has to consult with the captain, and sometimes with the chief engineer as well, before exercising his power. For example, when the chief mate goes on leave, the commissar may think of promoting the second mate to take his place. Such matters would have been decided by the commissar in the old days. At that time, whoever was chosen by the commissar had to abide by the decision. This has hardly been the case since 1978. Now, the commissar must ask for my opinion if he wants to promote a seaman in the engine room (Chief Engineer, A:10).

The commissar's position has been restored since 1990. Nevertheless, he no longer has as much power as before (Boatswain, C:12).'

The cause of the decline in the commissar's position or status in the shipboard community lies in changes in the company's production goal in the reform years. In the planned economy, the ocean shipping company was at the command of the party-state. The goal of production was to complete the plan made on behalf of the company

by the state. In this context, the commissar as representative of the party-state had the legitimacy and power to dominate the workplace in making decisions. Now, the reform has fundamentally changed the goal of production as well as the relationship between the company and the party-state. Although the party still asserts its engagement and 'leadership' in production through its representatives in workplaces, the party-state no longer makes plans for the company and party representatives no longer interfere with the daily management and operation of production. In shipping, the captain plays a key role in achieving production goals (now profit), hence his rise in status to being master of the ship and the slide in the commissar's status in the ship hierarchy to being the 'second most important cadre seafarer aboard.'

### **6.3.1. 'Personality Power'**

Although the commissar's formal power has been significantly reduced in the reform years, the company management and the party committee continue to expect him to fulfil his responsibilities effectively while his formal power is inadequate and is likely to diminish further as reform deepens?

Successful commissars employ what they call 'personality power (*rengé de liliang*)' to supplement the inadequate official power granted by the company management and the party committee. This strategy has proved to be effective for coping with situations and designated responsibilities. Indeed, according to seafarers' reports, commissars with 'good personalities' have fewer problems in carrying out their work. 'When a new commissar joined the ship, the seamen would observe and see if he had a nice personality. If so, things were a lot easier. Seamen would respect him, admire

him and follow his instructions. Otherwise, it would be difficult for everyone..... No one would take any notice of him (Captain, A:9).’

What, then, is a ‘good personality’? According to both commissars and other seafarers, a good commissar should have following qualities:

- *Oriented towards the collective interest.* A good commissar must place the interests of the state, the company and other seafarers before his own personal interest. ‘He must start out from what benefits the company as well as the seamen. This is most important. If a commissar harbours other intentions, this means he doesn’t have a good personality, and he therefore cannot be not a good man. This kind of commissar has no hope of being popular with seamen (First Mate, C:9).’
- *Willing to contribute and sacrifice.* A good commissar should contribute more and ask for less in return. He should be the first to bear hardship and the last to enjoy comfort. ‘My experiences tell me that a good commissar must set a good example in work and life rather than just practise empty endless talking ... I worked as hard as those deck and engine men. I was on night duty with the crew to guard against pirate attacks when our ship was passing the pirate-controlled areas of South East Asia (Commissar, C:4).’
- *Professional and dedicated.* A good commissar should devote himself to his duty and have a strong sense of responsibility. ‘So long as I am still a commissar, I will work hard at my post. That’s the best way for people to

understand and appreciate the importance of a commissar's work (Commissar, D:4).'

- *Being fair and promoting justice.* A good commissar must promote social justice and handle matters fairly and rationally. 'How can a commissar be popular with the crew? He must be upright and have integrity. He should dare to criticise and be strong in management. He must set a good example in work and life (Chief Engineer, A:10).'
- *Honest and magnanimous.* A commissar can only win the trust of the seafarers when he is honest, open and bighearted. 'He should work in earnest and avoid things that are false and unreal (Captain, B:6).'
- *Industrious and brave.* A good commissar must work diligently and conscientiously and be brave and calm in emergencies. 'There are some competent commissars in the company. Like every seaman, they work on deck in the morning and in the engine room in the afternoon. At night they go to the galley and help cook for the seamen. They never duck out of danger. Commissars of this kind play an exemplary role on board and thus win crew's support (Captain, C:7).'
- *Being warm and treating seafarers equally.* A good commissar should mix with the crew and treat seafarers at all levels as friends. 'Our commissar often mixed himself with us in all parts of the ship. He talked and laughed with us,

had meals with us at the same table and participated in our recreational activities. He won our deep trust through such contacts (Doctor, B:11).’

- *Knowledgeable and capable.* A good commissar should know enough to impress the crew and be able to help individual seafarers when they have problems. ‘If we prove good at this, the crewmen will compliment us on their ability to address their complaints (Commissar, A:4).’

Indications are that the commissar has to make best use of both his formal power granted by the company management and the party committee and his informal resources of ‘good personality’ to master the voyage successfully, as will be demonstrated in the next two chapters.



## **Chapter 7. Relations with Other Main Actors Aboard**

As the party's representative and one of the two most important decision makers aboard, the commissar inevitably interacts with other main actors in the shipboard community and develops relations with them during the voyage. This chapter investigates these relations, in particular those with the captain, the crew and the trade union representative.

### **7.1. The Commissar and the Captain**

Given that the ship is a small and confined society with little contact with the main society on land, the relationship between the captain and the commissar is vital in determining the social atmosphere on the ship during the voyage. Seafarers find that co-operation between the two men helps establish and maintain positive working relationships among crew members and between different departments aboard. '(A) happy co-operation between the captain and the commissar produces a happy ship (Chief Engineer, D:9).' 'If the commissar on a ship co-operates well with the captain, the environment on board will be pleasant and work will go smoothly (Radio Officer, D:10).' In most cases, the two men manage to get along although it was usually the commissar who had to take the initiative in creating and maintaining such relationship.

If co-operation between the commissar and the captain is successful, both actors are usually demonstrate the following capacities:

- *They share a common agenda* - 'the smooth operation of the company and efficiency and safety on board as set by the company, so that both work hard towards this end.'

- *They play complementary roles* – they are ‘willing to meet each other’s expectations, to support each other and to step in to help and mediate when either clashes with crew members.’
- *They respect and care for each other* - ‘leaving the easier part of work to the other and having the difficult part for themselves’ and ‘pointing out each other’s shortcomings but only in a well-intended way.’
- *They keep an efficient and effective communication with each other* – ‘they exchange ideas frequently and resolve misunderstandings quickly.’
- *They are modest and tolerant* - ‘letting the other play the major role and always offering a helping hand.’

Some seafarers compared the coexistence of the two ‘most senior cadres’ on board the same ship to ‘placing two tigers on the same mountain’, thus suggesting that they are aware of the potential for conflict between the captain and the commissar because of the ambiguous management structure aboard. All commissars and nearly all captains interviewed claimed that they had positive experiences of working together. However, a few, mostly captains, pointed out that the captain and the commissar do not necessarily co-operate well all the time or on all ships. References were made to ‘bad relations’ but nearly all cases were said to be on ‘other ships.’ Only one captain (A:9) drew on his own experiences when expressing concern about the commissar’s lack of professional seafaring knowledge and its implication for the safety of the ship and crew.

Many seafarers, however, noted that the captain-commissar relationship can go wrong, especially in the following circumstances:

- When both refuse to compromise regarding their own agenda or priority. ‘The relationship will certainly go wrong if the captain insists on finishing production and transportation work in order to meet the expectations of the cargo owners, while the commissar insists that seamen conduct the work in a peaceful state of mind and without too much pressure (D:4).’
- When they compete with each other for seafarers’ time and support to fulfil tasks designated by the company. ‘For example, the company always sets deadlines for the captain to complete a variety of tasks, whereas the commissar also has deadlines to finish a large amount of work. The two men might therefore compete for time (C:6).’
- When they compete with each other ‘to become the real number-one man aboard’, ‘in order to get their own work done more easily’ or ‘to increase their influence among the crew.’
- When their personalities clash.

Essentially, the commissar and the captain have to depend on their own resources to shape and manage their relationship on the voyage. ‘This is because, with the ship sailing the vast ocean, far from the shipping company and the party committee, no one else is in a position to mediate their conflicts on board (RO, D:10).’ Indications are that conflicts between commissars and captains are usually settled in one of three ways. (1), the commissar and the captain resolve the problem between themselves and continue to work together normally. (2), they put up with each other and managed to continue their working relationship until one of them takes shore leave. (3), they continued to work on the same ship with a very strained relationship until one is taken

off the ship, usually at the end of a voyage as a result of intervention by the company management and the party committee.

## **7.2. The Commissar and the Crew**

Reviewing their relationship with crews, especially those towards the lower end of the ship hierarchy, commissars compare their role to that of leader and manager, parent and elder brother, and friend and shipmate. This analogy is widely shared among seafarers. ‘My last ship was chartered by some foreigners. In the eyes of us seamen, the commissar was certainly a leader. But he was more a parent and a friend (RO, D:11).’ ‘I have worked on several dozen ocean-going vessels and therefore have experience of working with several dozen commissars. I found they all worked hard and were committed to their duty and close to us seamen. My deepest impression was of Commissar Zhang who sailed with me on my last ship. He was not a all arrogant, always cared for us as if we were his children and appreciated us as real friends. All the seamen highly respected him and viewed him as their parent and friend. We would talk to him whenever we had any problems. We revealed our innermost thoughts or feelings to him (RO, D:10).’

As leader or manager, the commissar has responsibility for managing the crew, including by means of praise and punishment. Praise is considered most effective and practised by most commissars in their daily interactions with seafarers. He also needs to remind them of relevant rules and regulations in shipping and to monitor their conduct. ‘If he found out that a seaman did something against the rules, he would criticise and punish him. He also needs to monitor seamen’s thoughts and ideas, and

to help straighten out their thoughts whenever he finds that those ideas don't meet company requirement (C:4).'

As a parent or elder brother, the commissar needs to look after the seamen, making sure that the best possible living conditions are provided for them and that they can feel the 'warmth and care of the collective.' 'Mr. Zhang, the commissar who sailed with us on my last ship, left a very deep impression on me. He never put on airs, and took such good care of all seamen. He treated us as if we were his children, and tried to understand our work and life as a real parent (Doctor, D:11).'

As a friend or shipmate, the commissar needs to mix with seafarers by working, talking and participating in other activities with them on the voyage. 'During working hours, I go to some departments and work together with our seamen. At night, I spend most of the time having heart-to-heart conversations or chats with them (Commissar, B:4).'

'Our commissar mixed with us throughout the day. We eat, have fun and work together. I respect him highly (AB, B:12).'

The commissar provides seafarers with services and assistance and helps them solve problems that they find hard to cope with by themselves. These problems are wide-ranging. They involve nearly all aspects of seafarers' work and life, including renewal of contract, labour intensity, working schedules, working conditions, salary increases, bonus allocations, welfare and insurance, house allocation, food quality, task assignment, shore leave, reward and punishment, promotion, emotional or psychological pressures, health and physical conditions, early retirement, conflicts among seamen, departmental clashes, seamen's rights and interests, family issues such as financial hardships back at home or trouble for kids in attending kindergarten

or schools - the list could be even longer. Many seafarers said that they went to the commissar's cabin to talk with him about their problems. Many commissars reported that they spent 'most of the evenings talking to seafarers trying our best to help solve their problems (B:4; D:3; D:6).' If a commissar found the problem beyond his capacity, he 'told the seaman why and calmed him down (B:1)'. 'If the seaman makes irrational requests, I would not directly say no to him. Instead, I would help him understand the situation and reason with them (D:3).'

Most commissars strive to keep an equal professional distance between themselves and crew members. Although it is part of the job to nurture and recruit party members and to groom cadre seafarers, only a few cases were found in which the commissar cultivated his own supporters among the crew. Even when trying to help a particular seafarer, most commissars took the entire crew into consideration and ensured that 'my relations with all the other seamen remained undisturbed (A:4).' In interviews, commissars constantly emphasised the importance of keeping a harmonious relationship with the crew, 'because it largely decides the success or failure of our work aboard (A:4).'

Seafarers have mixed feelings about commissars. A few said that they did not like their commissar because 'he was too managerial' or 'he sometimes made me feel passive and having no freedom (B:10)' and 'some seamen may even feel resentful of the commissar (First Mate, C:9).' At the same time, however, many seafarers reported that they genuinely felt grateful to the commissar for his parental or elder-brotherly care and the help they received from him. 'We seamen are not stones. We can feel the warmth of the commissar. When we find he really cares for us, we respond with

respect, admiration and support. We listen to him and follow his instructions (Motorman, C:13).’

Occasionally, clashes occurred between the commissar and seafarers. When this happened, it was mostly over issues concerning seafarers’ shore leave or shore visit or the commissar’s handling of crew issues. In this case, it was always the commissar who took the initiative by talking to the seafarer involved. Usually, the seafarer and the commissar solved the problem between themselves, but occasionally the captain mediated. Very rarely, the problem was referred beyond the ship to the company. This strategy served the commissar’s interests for ‘if the company found the commissar had clashes with the crew, they would lose confidence in him. They would begin to doubt if he is at all good at coordinating human relations on board ship (Chief Engineer, B:8).’ ‘The commissar just couldn’t afford to have clashes with the crew, because his own work would be assessed at the end of the voyage and keeping the shipboard human relations smooth, at least without open clashes, was a crucial indicator (Doctor, B:11).’

However, a closer look shows that in most cases it was usually the seafarer that had to make the substantial compromise before the relationship was normalised. After all, ‘The commissar has a significant influence on the review of us individual seamen. He can report his opinion about us to the company. This in turn will have immediate implications on our future career, especially promotion (Third Mate, D:11).’

### **7.3. The Commissar and the Trade Union Representative**

The relationship between the commissar and the shipboard trade union representative is an expression of the relationship between the Chinese Communist Party and the

trade union. In China, trade unions are legally defined as independent mass organisations under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (The People's Congress, 1995). Despite the obvious contradiction and ambiguity in this formulation, the structure of the power relation is clear. Unions branches at grassroots level conduct work under the supervision of the party branch at the same level. Essentially, they are responsible for 'protecting and promoting workers' rights and interests, educating and directing workers to work hard and enriching workers' cultural and recreational life (RO & Union Representative, D:10).'

The trade union branch was found on all the ships referred to by seafarers participating in the study. It is company policy that the union branch should act 'under the supervision of the ship party branch' and that the commissar is responsible for setting up the branch, nominating candidates for the branch chair and organising elections for the chair and the selection of union group leaders.

The shipboard union branch consists of the chairman and representatives of the three departments: the deck department, the engine department and the administration department (called the 'supporting department' on some ships). 'All crew members, including the captain and the commissar automatically count as union members unless you openly declare you don't want to (Captain, B:5).'

In most cases, the chief engineer is 'elected' to chair the branch but sometimes the chairmanship falls to the radio officer. One seafarer described the process of such an election:

First, the commissar called a ship business committee meeting, with the captain's support, to discuss and decide on the candidate. Then, he called an all-crew meeting – this is in effect also an all-union member meeting, because all crew members automatically become union members after joining the ship. At the meeting, the commissar proposed for the chief engineer to chair the



shipboard union branch and asked us, “What would you think if I proposed this man to chair our union branch?” We said ok (AB, C:11).

Because it is assumed that there is no ‘fundamental difference’ between seafarers’ interests and the interest of the company, the trade union has fewer functions aboard than its Western counterparts. One captain said, ‘The trade union has little real power. It has to listen to the commissar and the captain (D:6)’.

Even so, the trade union is considered ‘useful’ in that ‘it takes care of seamen’s welfare and organises cultural and recreational activities for seamen, things like chess contests and karaoke contests etc, to enrich seamen’s spare time (*ibid*).’ The responsibility of the branch chairman includes ‘turning over member fees collected to the trade union headquarter in the company, receiving funds for organising recreational activities and collecting things like books, table tennis bats and balls from the company union headquarter and exchanging video-tapes and CD discs at port with the help of the company rep (Chief Engineer & Union Representative, A:11).’

The union chairman is expected to report to the commissar. When organising crew recreational activities, for example, he has to put forward a plan and submit it to the commissar for approval. If he needs money or other resources such as time and food to support the proposed activity, he puts forward his proposal to the commissar who takes it to the captain for further discussion and approval. In this way, the commissar and the union chair work together to promote seafarers’ interests within the permitted framework.

Understandably, there is a substantial overlap between the role of the commissar and the union branch at sea, especially in matters of crew care and welfare. This overlap

has an apparently self-contradictory effect: the commissar is instrumental in reducing the power of the trade union by providing support for union activities. Nevertheless, much of the commissar's work, including his vital role in mediating the captain-crew relations, serves the crew's practical needs and interests (detailed discussion follows in Chapter 8).

The captain and the union chair represent different parties in the shipboard community. As the highest representative of the shipping management on board, the captain prioritises labour discipline and the completion of production tasks during the voyage. The individual seafarer who chairs the union branch faces rather greater challenge in fulfilling his dual role. As a crew member, he must obey the captain; as union representative in the workplace, his responsibility is to protect the crew's interests. Given the trade union's generally weak position in the power structure of China's industrial workplaces, shipboard union representatives have managed to survive only by manoeuvring between seafarers and the captain with the help of the commissar rather than openly clashing with or confronting the captain. Sometimes, however, conflicts are inevitable. In such cases, the commissar's intervention is vital. He steps in to mediate between the two parties and to help find a 'third way' by persuading them to compromise, hence preventing a worsening of the conflict. Several cases were reported where the commissar managed to persuade the captain to 'give more consideration to the crew' in matters such as task assignment and bonus allocation.

In a context where the official trade union is weak and seafarers cannot fend for themselves by other means, the commissar's role regarding the seafarers' interests and welfare is generally positive. All the union representatives interviewed said that the

commissar's presence on board ship was in the seafarers' interests. 'You may think the union branch was passive. It wasn't. As the union chair, I always took the initiative in voicing seamen's wishes and complaints. But I had to do so with the commissar's help either on formal occasions such as at the shipping business meeting or on informal occasions, for example when chatting with the commissar. Whatever the occasion, so long as the commissar considered my proposal could really improve seamen's welfare, he would approve and help promote it (Radio Officer/Union Chair, D:10.' 'Without the support of the commissar, the role of the trade union would be even more limited (Doctor, B:11).'

## **Chapter 8. Multiple Roles in the Shipboard Community**

The commissar plays several important roles in the shipboard community. He supports the captain in ship operation, mobilises the crew to work hard, lubricates shipboard social relations and cares for and controls the crew throughout the voyage. This chapter examines how the commissar juggles these roles and their significance for seafarers.

### **8.1. Supporting the Captain**

Supporting the captain in ship operation is the commissar's top priority during the voyage. Everything he does must arise from this responsibility. The commissar accepts his supporting role and it is recognised by crew members, as the following accounts demonstrate:

The captain plays a decisive role in decision-making during the voyage. What he says counts at crucial moments... My job is to support him in production. I make every effort and take initiative in sharing work with the captain in order to reduce his workload. When something happens on deck that requires assistance from the engine room, the captain usually has to coordinate the work. In such cases, I contact the chief engineer on behalf of the captain and persuade the engine hands to cooperate with the deck hands. I then contact the chief mate, hand over the work to him and help him assign tasks to the engine hands. Thus, the captain can concentrate on ship operation, things like loading and unloading etc., without being troubled (Commissar, A:2)

Our commissar was in charge of many things, including checking ship security, managing food, talking with depressed crew members and helping organise recreational activities. Our captain was under pressure as a result of running the ship, he was too busy to deal with this kind of routine things. He was good at shipping or technical matters but found it difficult to handle these routine matters (AB, B:12)

As the captain, I am responsible for running the ship. The commissar is responsible for all other business. To me, the commissar's cooperation and support is a must, I can't do my job smoothly without him (Captain, D:7)

Seafarers emphasised the importance of the commissar's support in emergency situations by citing cases from their own experiences. One captain in Company B recalled:

Whenever I was confronted with difficulties, the commissar would come forward to support me by boosting the crew's morale. One day, our ship was sailing along the shore of India and was buffeted by a strong typhoon.... We were in a critical situation. At this crucial juncture, the commissar started working on the crew. Instead of resorting to high-sounding speeches, he started out from the crew's personal interests and those of their families. He told them if the ship suffered losses, the company and the state would undoubtedly be affected. The crewmen would be the first victims - they would lose income. And if they earned too little, how could they support their families? Encouraged by the commissar, my crewmen exerted themselves. They spent two sleepless nights and stuck to their posts and succeeded in weathering the storm. The cargo remained largely intact (B:6).'

An experienced commissar also showed his support for the captain by means of his daily routine contact with, and sometimes practical care for him during the voyage.

Two commissars noted their experiences:

When sailing in fog, a captain has to stay on duty on the bridge. At such times, the commissar should take good care of him, because he can rarely eat on time. Whenever this happened, I would go to the galley and prepare a noodle dish or a snack and take it to him myself. If he has to stay on the bridge over night, I go and stay with him for a while to keep him company and have a chat to make him feel better. This is a worthwhile investment: it improves our mutual trust and relationship (A:2).

I keep timely and frequent contact with my captain and visit him in his cabin almost every day. If I'm free after supper, I play cards with him or we have a chat. If I have time before going to bed, we have another chat. I tell him what I have been doing that day, what's going on among the seamen, what requests the seamen have and so on. I also talk about future work plans, such as the voyage, things that need doing and issues to talk about at the seamen's meetings (D:4).

Reflecting on the need to have the commissar's support, most captains 'naturally' compare their own situation with the power structure on foreign ships. In their view, despite the Captain Responsibility System, the captain on PRC ships is not the ship's

master. The relationship between the captain and the crew was shaped in Mao's time, when equality was the dominant ideology. Although the captain's decision-making power has grown significantly in the reform years, ship culture still does not support his exercise authority and discipline. He does not 'master' the crew like his foreign counterpart. This is generally accepted and referred to as the 'special feature of Chinese ships' as the following comments show:

On foreign ships, there is no such a thing as the commissar. There is no particular post to coordinate or lubricate interpersonal relations aboard. It is purely an employer-employee relationship. If a seaman fails to do a good job, the captain simply lets him go. Things are different on Chinese ships. The captain does not have so much power. For example, according to standard navigation regulations, if a captain orders a seaman to do something, the seaman must obey. There is no need for a captain to give a reason. On a Chinese ship, however, you must explain 'why' - this is usually the commissar's job (Captain, A:7).

I have worked on foreign ships where I found that their captains were not necessarily unreasonable. However, unlike on our ships, the captain never explained things patiently or in detail. He simply issued orders and expected the seaman to obey. If the seaman did not do so, he would simply warn him or even fire him. He has the power to be rude. Things are different on our ships. We have to educate the seaman patiently and rationally. If the seaman makes a mistake, the captain or the commissar, or both, talk with him and explain why he made the mistake, how not to do so, what to do next time and so on (Captain, A:6).

As indicated above, some captains have a history of employment on foreign ships. In cases where the entire crew was Chinese, the captain would also be asked to act as the commissar. Captains with experiences of dual responsibilities have a different opinion when asked to review and evaluate their experiences as sole decision-maker – they found themselves becoming more appreciative of the commissar's support.

Over the past two years, I have been captain-cum-commissar on three foreign owned ships. One was Norwegian. The other two were Hong Kong ships. None carried a professional commissar. I was the captain-*and*-commissar on these ships and did a very good job. But I was really exhausted and longed to have a commissar by my side. If I had had one, I would only need to talk

about captain's work at meetings, things like port state control checks in foreign ports, health and safety issues, shipping schedules, etc. But I was captain with commissar's responsibility. I had to talk a lot about things that a commissar should have said. I was really exhausted... In my experience, a good commissar can greatly reduce the captain's burden. Now when a good commissar leaves my ship, I really want him to stay (Captain, A:8).

A small number of 'doubly-burdened' captains evaluated their experiences differently.

I have always worked on foreign-owned ships. Recently the company's general manager proposed that captains working on foreign-owned ships should come back and work in the main fleet. I am against this idea. I told him, "General Manager, I don't think it's a good idea. I used to work on foreign-owned ships and I might not be able to do as well on our ships. Why? Because I feel unable to act freely as I did on foreign ships. The commissar might be some problem to me. He also represents the company and is free to do whatever he likes on the ship, I may not be able to stop him" (Captain, C:7).

Two captains interviewed for the study expressed such opinions. However, they virtually have no experience of working with commissars.

## **8.2. Mobilising the Crew to Promote Production**

The safe and effective running of the ship is supposed to be a shared goal of all on board. To support the captains achieving this goal, the commissar must mobilise the crew to the same end. An experienced commissar needs to adopt several 'effective methods' to ensure that the mobilisation succeeds. These methods include holding education and promotion meetings; mixing with the crew; educating the crew through 'political thought work' by participating in shipboard labour and other crew activities'; and mediating when seafarers' interests conflicts.

### ***8.2.1. Promotional and Educational Meetings***

The commissars uses crew meetings to mobilise seafarers and keep them focused on production. The entire-crew meets each month. The commissar consults with the

captain and other department heads before setting up the agenda. 'I contact the captain before each meeting. I say, 'Look, I am going to talk about this. Can you speak on that - shipping business, safe production, specific tasks of the voyage? And should we ask the chief engineer to talk about things concerning the engine room (Commissar, A:2)?.' 'It is important to have the key officers informed and involved before the meeting. They are the ship's backbone. If the commissar has a particular agenda, it is important for him to get these officers' support before he reveals it to the entire crew (Commissar, A:1).'

At the meeting, the commissar reads company documents passing messages or instructions from 'the higher authorities (company management and party committee)' to the crew, states or reiterates the goal of the voyage and the implications of its success or failure (potential gains or losses to the crew) and informs seafarers of current domestic and world news and affairs. Usually, the commissar chairs the meeting and makes the main speech, but the captain and department heads also take the opportunity to deliver their messages.

Regular political study meetings are organised throughout the voyage. They too are held monthly, for an hour or so around 18:00, when the ship needs minimum crew coverage. All seafarers, including the captain, are required to attend. They are divided into different study groups according to their position in the ship hierarchy and their relationship to the party. Different groups get different study materials. 'Officers, party members and those who have applied to join the party are allocated to one group. Seamen in this group are asked to focus on party theory, for instance Deng Xiaoping thought, and other relevant documents or articles. The rest of the crew go to



another group where they are briefed on company instructions and things like domestic news or world affairs (Captain, B:7).’

Seafarers compared the old political study meeting with the new one and reported on some substantial changes. They found that the meeting now is shorter, more pragmatic and centred on production rather than on party ideology and politics.

When I sailed on my first ship in 1975, the commissar was in charge of political study. The whole afternoon would be spent on study, even after supper. We studied everyday. We read the same single article again and again and then had a discussion. We repeated it the day after when we might have to read the same article and discuss, digest and try to understand it again. Now, we continue to meet for political study and we still read party documents. But we focus more on company’s documents, such as documents on total quality management. It takes much less time now (Chief engineer, A:10)

Unlike in land-based factories where workers find it difficult to accept political study meetings, most seafarers seem to welcome or at least to accept them. Many found that ‘study is useful in keeping up the crew’s morale and helping them aim high in the ship’s operations (Captain, D:7)’

As the captain, I encourage the commissar to hold the meeting., because I found it can indirectly help shipboard production. At the same time, it can help the crew aim high and make them more enthusiastic about production (ibid)

Isolation at sea makes seafarers cherish occasions when they can meet and talk with shipmates. Regular meetings like political study provide such an opportunity. ‘Most crewmembers welcome political study. This is because, I think, life on board ship is very confined and isolated and seafarers have little chance to get access to news or discuss issues. At these meetings, people can meet and talk about news and issues (Chief Engineer, B:9).’

Some seafarers specified their likes and dislikes when asked about the content of the study. What they like most is ‘study that combines theory with practices on board ship, study that is relevant to our work and life and can help improve us (AB, B:12).’ ‘Seafarers like the kind of study where the topic is not heavily charged with politics or ideology. Many times, seafarers found it relaxing and a change to meet with their shipmates after days or weeks of hard work and the boring life aboard (Captain, D:7).’ ‘They are also interested in learning about some major domestic and world events and hope the commissar can tell them more in this respect, for example about Falungong, and the conflict between the US and China when our plane was smashed by an American spy aircraft and so on (Third Mate, D:11).’

Just like the commissar himself, the political study he organises is not always popular, or with all seafarers. Some informants made negative comments about these meetings: ‘(We) just passively obeyed. The commissar wanted us to attend it, so we just went and attended. In fact, it would be difficult not for us to go, because everyone was expected to participate (Second Mate, B:10).’ However, this view was only found among a minority of seafarers.

The commissar’s ‘usefulness’ as a source of news lies in his control of knowledge and information. As the second most important man aboard, he has the authority to use shipboard resources to get access to information including phone, fax., e-mail etc. Company and party documents and even newspapers and magazines pass through his hands. However, his privileged control of information seems under threat from the rapid development of shipboard communication technology and the slow but steady liberalisation of Chinese society in recent years. These changes have increased the openness and transparency on board ship and give seafarers greater access to channels

of information. All this is likely to undermine the effectiveness of political study as organised by the commissar. Some seafarers have already picked up the change:

Study is still part of the ship life. But I have noticed that it is gradually weakening. It is that conditions on board have been improved a great deal. Now, the ship has newspapers, company documents, TV and other such things, which makes it a lot easier for crew members to obtain information. In addition, crew members can learn about the outside world by means of phone calls – nowadays, nearly everybody has a mobile (Captain, D:8).

In the past, study materials were kept by the commissar and most seamen had no access to them. Nowadays the commissar is required to keep these materials in public places where seamen can have a look whenever they want to. The materials and the newspapers are displayed in the mess and lounge. When they are not working, anyone can read them. For example, they can easily find out about state regulations or company policy on labour insurance (Boson, C:12).

Promotion meetings for closely defined tasks are organised by the commissar when the crew has to carry out urgent tasks. The commissar has to boost the crew's morale by informing them of the situation and the significance of the task and keeping them focused on completing the immediate task. At the same time, an emergency party branch meeting is called so that the 'three great heads', the captain, the commissar and the chief engineer (all party branch members) can meet and talk about emergency measures.

### ***8.2.2. Political Thought Work***

Political thought work is frequently mentioned by all the informants – seafarers, shipping managers, party officials and trade union leaders alike when asked to comment on the 'roles and functions of the commissar on board ship.' Although a household word in Chinese, the concept is difficult to define and can cause confusion, especially to those who are not familiar with the organisation of Chinese society since

1949. The following conversation between an informant (C:6) and a Japanese captain highlights how foreign the concept can be to non-Chinese (Box 6).

**Box 6. A Chinese Seafarer’s Conversation with a Japanese Captain.**

I worked on a Japanese ship as first mate for 16 months in the 1990s. The captain and the chief engineer were Japanese, and the rest of the crew were Chinese. One day I was chatting with the captain...

Japanese Captain:	Hay, First Mate, does the ship in XXX (name of the company) carry a commissar?
Chinese First Mate:	Yes, sir, it does.
Japanese Captain:	What kind of work does the commissar do?
Chinese First Mate:	He does political thought work to educate the seamen, sir.
Japanese Captain:	What is political thought work?
Chinese First mate:	Political thought work means, for instance, sir, if a seaman doesn't work hard, or encounters problems, or gets troubles in his family, or gets into fights, or conflicts among seamen cause delays in production, then the commissar comes up to do political thought work, he talks to the seaman and helps solve these problems.
Japanese Captain:	Why do you need the commissar to do for these things? I think it is absolutely unnecessary. If a seaman doesn't work hard, you just dismiss him. That is it.
Chinese First Mate:	I am afraid, sir, this is your way of management. The management in Chinese ships is different from yours.
Japanese Captain:	That is the point.

As noted in Chapter 4, the Party Committee defines the concept of political thought work as ‘a branch of the applied sciences, a synthetic interdisciplinary science, and a science that convinces people by persuasion and reasoning (Wang, 1997:10)’ In addition to the interpretation by the first mate cited above, some seafarers summarised it as ‘a way used by the commissar to help clear up various kinds of negative feelings and emotions in seafarers’ thinking, and to help solve problems in their work and life (Chief Engineer, B:9).’ Others came up with more specific interpretations: ‘Conducting political thought work among the crew is a most important part of the commissar’s job. It includes many things: depression, **psychological** problems, problems with labour contracts, working hours, task assignments, wages, benefits,

insurance, health, family, rewards, punishments – you name it. Whenever seafarers have problems in these respects and can't handle them, they come to see the commissar (Radio Officer & Union Representative, D:10).’ Political thought work therefore focuses on seafarers’ practical problems closely associated with their work and life. The commissar employs political thought work to help solve these problems or at least to reduce the pressure caused by them on individual seafarers.

The commissar conducts political thought work by talking with seafarers. The talking is usually either collective or individual. Collective talking happens at educational or motivational meetings (as already discussed) and individual talking happens when seafarers have ‘negative emotions or feelings or behaviours’. When talking collectively at crew meetings, ‘(The) commissar promotes things like company policies on cost and efficiency and the importance of team-work and of individual obedience. He stresses that individual seafarers must equate their interests with those of the company and he cites examples of the intense competition in the world market to underline the importance of our role in shipping (Chief engineer, B:9).’ In contrast, ‘Individual talking is intended to remedy individual’s ideological and behavioural problems, for instance, when he feels low, when he violates rules, when he is at odds with others etc. In such cases, it is the commissar’s job to reason things out with the seafarer and to get him to recognise his shortcomings and mistakes (Captain, A:6).’ The commissar adopted a different strategy when talking to individuals. ‘In individual talks, the commissar usually talks differently from the way he talks at crew meetings. He seldom promotes company policies when he talks to us individually (AB, D:15).’

Nowadays, commissars rarely promote communist or socialist ideology or ‘the spirit of sacrificing one’s own interests for the sake of the others’ as they used to do under

the planned economy. On both public and private occasions, the commissar promotes 'team work' or the 'spirit of collectivism' by educating seafarers on how their own personal interest is tied up with the company's.

At present, with the country's rapid economic development and the emancipation of people's minds, political thought work as performed by the commissar becomes more pragmatic. It centres on safety in production. He chiefly advocates collectivism and the spirit of team work so as to enable the crew to grasp the truth that '(S)mall streams rise when the main stream is high; when the main stream is low, small streams run dry' (individual well-being depends on collective prosperity) (Captain, B:7).

Political thought work is not necessarily the commissar's monopoly. Sometimes captains and other seafarers also participate in the process:

In the past, the commissar taught seamen to work hard and ensure safety for the sake of the country and the collective. Now, he cares about the personal interests of the seamen and guides them to combine their personal interests with their work on the ship. For example, when we have safety education, the commissar and I tell the seaman, 'As a seaman on this ship, your safety is first of all important to your own life, and your life is also important to your wife, your children, your relatives and your friends. When you have an accident, if it is a small one, the company will withhold your bonus and you will suffer a loss of income. If it is a serious accident that damages the ship and human life, then both you and the ship will be finished, and your wife and children will also be affected. Even if it is not that bad, for example, if you get injured by breaking an arm or leg, how can you make a living in future?' (Captain, C:6).

You can tell when a seaman suffers from family stress such as relationship break ups or parents in ill health. On this occasion, I will conduct political thought work together with the commissar. Although I am not a political worker on board ship, it is also important for me to know the seaman and his family. Otherwise, it will be difficult for me to lead my team as a boatswain (Boatswain, C:12).

On Chinese ships, the shipboard management has only a limited influence on the seafarer's employment and income. His hiring and firing and his wages and bonuses are largely centrally controlled by the company management. The commissar and the

captain have to rely on political thought work, ‘persuasion and reasoning’, to manage the crew and to keep their morale high.

However, this traditional quasi-personalised management method has begun to suffer the impact of highly impersonalised market forces in recent years. In the following extracts, seafarers report on pressure for ‘increased awareness of obedience’ and the ‘decreased demand for political thought work’ on today’s merchant ships.

Now seamen feel worried about their job security. If they are not happy with your performance, there will be no ship for you to sail. Everyone knows what it means if you have no ship to sail. You earn at least 4,000 (*yuan*) a month at sea; you receive no more than 300 (*yuan*) a month if you stay ashore. 13 times less! Many seamen have become more obedient, because no one wants to lose his job. Now it’s getting a lot easier to manage the crew, and the ship needs less of the commissar’s political thought work than before (Chief Engineer, A:10)

Seamen have now become more appreciative of their job and more obedient (Doctor, B:11)

Clearly, the human face of political thought work is fading away. The change is most marked in the case of seafarers working on foreign ships. There, instead of political thought work, economic incentives are often adopted as the most effective means of boosting seafarers’ morale and enthusiasm for production. One captain with employment history on Norwegian ships observed that ‘although the ship had a commissar among the Chinese crew, his political thought work paled in significance compared with economic incentives, for example, big bonus or overtime pay. When they were needed for overtime, seamen needed little persuasion. Dollars usually were more persuasive in most occasions (Captain, A:6).’

### ***8.2.3. Mixing with the Crew in an Exemplary Way***

However important meetings are, talking is not enough. To mobilise the crew, a successful commissar must associate not only with the captain and other senior officers but also with ordinary crew members. Working alongside with the crew and participating in other crew activities is crucial if he is to win seafarers' respect and trust.

Both seafarers and the shipping company expect the commissar to participate actively in labour and other crew activities. In the view of the company's party committee, while the commissar is a mental worker, his 'appropriate' participation in physical labour and crew activity on board ship should help him to 'understand and appreciate the thoughts and feelings of rank-and-file seafarers as well as to create and consolidate links between cadre seafarers and mass seafarers (Wang, 1997:227).' From the seafarers' perspective, 'we may not really take him seriously unless we are sure he knows the trade and works like the rest of us', as one AB in Company A explained.

Given their peculiar backgrounds and experiences, most commissars cannot and are not expected to work in the same way 'as the rest of us'. One boatswain in Company C observed:

Nowadays, all commissars work alongside the crew. However, most of them know little about shipping techniques and business. Many would be useless in the engine room. So the commissar comes up to the deck and work alongside me, the boatswain. He usually comes to work with us in the morning. While he is with us on deck, he finds work for himself, or I give him some. Most commissars are getting old and can't really work hard. So I normally ask him to do some light work, such as painting zebra lines on the deck. As a chief sailor and his junior, I should not treat him as an ordinary seaman. (C:12).



The commissar's participation in physical labour is primarily symbolic. It is intended to create and maintain an image that the commissar is always linked to the 'mass seafarers (ratings)' rather than simply confine himself to the small circle of 'cadre seafarers (officers)'. Both the commissar and crew are well aware of this intention. However, both take it seriously. One captain observed, '(The) commissar has to work alongside the crew. The crew expect him to take a leading role in shipboard labour, especially when confronted with hard tasks. His exemplary role impresses crew members and encourages them to work harder, so the overall work on board is improved (A:6).' One chief engineer noted, '(Our) commissar worked so hard that the entire crew became really touched. He used the opportunity to move and mobilise the crew and set a good example, a signpost, for all the seafarers aboard (C:8).'

As expected by the company party committee, mixing with the crew in daily production and other activities has a practical function. It allows the commissar to grasp what is going on in the grassroots and to convey messages from the company 'authorities'. '(The) commissar merged with us at work chatting with us all the while. He also made jokes and told us funny stories. Sometimes he took the opportunity to convey messages from company meetings, for example, policy changes on bonus distribution. Some seamen raised questions and the commissar answered them directly. As you can see, the commissar makes good use of the occasion to do his political thought work (Boatswain, C:12).'

### **8.3. Providing Crew with Care and Welfare Support**

The introduction of market forces has increased the work pressure on seafarers. The drastically changed working environment, especially the ships' fast turnaround and the substantial reduction in crew size, have synthesized a big impact on the ship

community, affecting seafarers' work and lives in many respects. One chief engineer described the change as follows:

(M)any seamen used to drink a lot of beer. But they have largely stopped drinking in recent years. Why? Because of the pressure of work. Nowadays, along with the intensified competition in the shipping market, seamen have to work more and more and their lives are more and more stressful. In the past, people carried on chatting, playing chess or making jokes in the mess until 10 or 11 in the evening. Not now. All the seamen go to bed before 10 o'clock because they are exhausted as a result of the extremely high pressure of work and the tough demands on them (A:10).

The pressure of production creates a growing demand for crew care and welfare support. Traditionally, it is part of the commissar's job to 'look after' the crew during the voyage. Although essentially unintended by the party committee and the company management, this role helps mobilise the crew and boost their morale in production. Under the new circumstances with seafarers under increasing pressure, the commissar is found amplifying his role in this dimension in order to meet the growing demand. In seafarer's view, '(Our) commissars have also changed their working methods in recent years. They use fewer and fewer slogans and provide more and more practical care and help for the crew (Chief Engineer, C:9).'

The commissar shows his care for seafarers in various ways, especially when they are depressed by problems they cannot cope with and when they face crucial moments in their career development:

When we face issues like promotion, job transfer, family matters and other personal problems, the commissar usually talks directly to the seamen concerned. I was the youngest seaman on my last ship. The commissar took a particular care of me and gave me useful advice. I really appreciate that (Third Mate, D:12).

Seamen need spiritual support at sea. Without such support, they would be tortured by homesickness. During the voyage, our commissar often reminded

department heads to take particular care of the seamen when they are feeling low. If necessary, he also arranges for the seamen to call home to seek comfort and support from their families (Doctor, B:11).'

On my last ship, the commissar called on us to participate in his "cohesion project". You can imagine, a piece of cake, a small present and birthday wishes bring much comfort to seamen far away from their homes and country. A delightful tea party on holidays amuses and relaxes the seamen after days of hard work. Things like this had an immediate effect on crew cohesion (Third Engineer, D:13).

Sometimes, the commissar mobilised other seafarers to help individual seafarers with family or financial problems.

The commissar generally comforts the crew. Recently, our chief mate's daughter suffered from leucopenia. The commissar launched a 'warmth project' and we crew members donated more than 2000 *yuan* for her treatment (Captain, D:6).

Experienced commissars consider the day when mail arrives as an occasion when seafarers may need extra care or attention. 'Our commissar strove to ensure that seamen received their post without delay. Shortly after we sailed into port, he phoned the company rep and urged them to deliver the post to us on the ship (C:11).' 'Letters can bring both good news and bad news from seamen's families,' one commissar noted, 'I must look out on mail day for any change of mood after people have read their letters and I must talk with those who have received bad news. I usually go out of my way to talk with those who have not received mail in order to make them feel a bit better.' 'One day, our AB became really depressed after receiving a letter from his family. Our commissar had a chat with him and found it was because the man's family had suffered a bad loss because of a flood in his village. The commissar immediately set up a 'warmth project' and called on crew members to donate money to help the AB repair his house. The commissar was the first to donate and he gave the most (Boatswain, C:12).'

In some cases the commissar exercised pastoral care. Although officially off-duty when on shore leave, some commissars still visit seafarers' families and help them to sort out their problems.

Several commissars in our company are really thoughtful. They always think of their seamen, even when on leave. They visit seamen's families and do their best to help them. A short while ago, Xiao Wang's mother was sick and hospitalised. Our commissar visited her in hospital. When Xiao Wang and their shipmates learned about this at sea, they were deeply touched (Chief Engineer, C:9).

The commissar's apparent 'over-commitment' or 'over-attachment' was always highly appreciated by seafarers and encouraged by company managers and party officials.

Food is a crucial issue on board and is managed collectively by the food management committee under the supervision of the commissar. The committee includes the commissar, the steward, the doctor and the cook, with representatives from both deck and engine departments. It is usually headed by the radio officer. It is the commissar's responsibility to ensure that the food is clean, nutritious and kept within the budget (\$4.5 per day per seafarer). Most commissars said that food management was always at the top of their agenda and many described their experiences in details in the interview. One commissar said:

Food is such an important issue that seamen argue or fight if it is not handled well. On my ship there is no such a problem. The key is that as the commissar I must ensure that seamen eat well and especially that they get enough vegetables. To ensure all the seamen get vegetables every day, I arrange things as follows. I divide the month into three lots of 10 days and make sure that three kinds of vegetables (leafs, stalks and roots) are purchased. In the first 10 days, we eat the leafs that are difficult to keep. In the next 10 days, we eat the stalk vegetables that can be kept fresh for a long time, such as celery and garlic. In the final 10 days, we eat vegetables such as potatoes and radishies. Everyone is happy with this arrangement (B:2).

A chief engineer noted, 'Food is crucial, it concerns everyone. This is especially so on board ship, as seamen eat three meals a day, always in the same place. On land people usually have lunch at work and their other two meals at home. If lunch is no good, they can cook better food at home. Most seamen attach great importance to food during the voyage.... On my latest ship, the food was really bad until our commissar joined the ship. The day after he came, the food improved and the change was striking. There were at least two or three kinds of porridge in the morning, sometimes four and occasionally five or even six including rice gruel, soybean milk and noodles. That won him immediate support from the seamen (C:9).'

Crew recreation is another area that requires the commissar's attention. There is ample evidence that the commissar plays an important part in 'enriching seamen's spare time' by supervising the 'cultural and recreational activities' organised by the trade union. 'The trade union needs the commissar's help and support to organise and promote recreational activities among the crew. The recreation funds provided by the company union are insufficient to support these activities, so I need financial help from the captain. On board ship, money is in the captain's hands, he is in charge of expenditure. I therefore raise the issue with the commissar and the commissar talks directly to the captain. That's how we can get extra funds for our activities. Sometimes, extra dishes are needed for the recreational activities, and the chef follows the commissar's instructions. Our trade union aims to provide fun for the crew and the commissar helps me a great deal in organizing' (Chief Engineer, A:10).'

#### **8.4. Mediating between Conflicting Interests**

The ship is a small and highly confined working and living place for a compact workforce. Some 20 seafarers work and live together in this confined and constantly

mobile space for many months, largely out of touch with main society on land. Conflicts considered normal for workers in land-based industries can have graver implications and lead to serious consequences for the health and safety of the ship and crew (Chapman, 1992). This is ‘simply because unlike factory workers who can leave their workplace and go home at the end of the day, seamen stressed out by internal clashes can find no escape from the ship or sea (Captain, A:8).’

Mediating conflicts between seafarers is therefore the commissar’s most important role and his greatest contribution to the safe and effective operation of the ship. Such a contribution was clearly recognised and highly appreciated by all the parties interviewed in this study, including seafarers of various ranks and positions.

As the following extracts show, clashes and conflicts occur between the captain and the rest of the crew, sometimes as a result of differing interests and considerations in the work situation and sometimes because of their different positions in the ship hierarchy, which in turn often generate differing expectations. In all these circumstances, the commissar is expected to iron out the problems by mediating between the parties.

Sometimes contradictions arise between the captain and myself. The captain may want to sail faster and carry more cargoes whereas I as chief engineer tend to sail more carefully for the sake of the engine. Friction can therefore arise between us. The commissar steps in and mediates. He reasons things out with us and we get back on good terms. Without the commissar many things might have to be left undone (Chief Engineer, A:10).

When a confrontation takes place between me and the seamen, I need the commissar to smooth things over. It is impossible for me, the captain, to say to a seaman, ‘Hey, let’s talk about it.’ It is impossible for me to talk so intimately with a seaman. When I call a seaman, it is to tell him to do something. I don’t need to discuss things with him. Relations between the seaman and me are formal and can be tense. I therefore need the commissar to oil the wheels.

Unlike on foreign ships, our seamen need to know ‘why’ before they carry out instructions. I am the one who tells seamen what to do, whereas the commissar is the person who explains ‘why’ (Captain, A:7).

Although trade unions are weak on Chinese ships, tough union representatives were occasionally found who tried to defend their members from an excessive work load. One trade union leader recalled his clash with the captain in a New Zealand port, ‘It happened when we were unloading the ship at the port. The faulty arrangement of the cargo made it extremely difficult to unload. It was hard to finish the unloading on time. The captain ordered the seamen to work all day without eating or drinking. Many seamen complained about the excessive labour. As chairman of the trade union, I knew I had to stand by seamen and speak up for them. I asked the captain to allow them more time with the unloading so that they could take a rest. However, the captain refused to compromise. I could tell that the atmosphere was getting tense but I stuck to my request and refused to give in.’ Finally, the commissar came to mediate. ‘He asked us to calm down and at the same time called on other seafarers to suggest solutions. Eventually, the chief mate came up with an idea that proved to be timesaving and labour efficient. The dispute was finally solved (D:9).’

Sometimes, clashes may occur among seafarers themselves. Again, the commissar is expected to solve the problem by mediation. One chief engineer recalled what happened after a bad fight between a third mate and a motorman, ‘(The) commissar took me to the third mate’s cabin. Together we persuaded the third mate to say sorry to the motorman. He took me and the third mate to the motorman’s cabin, where the third mate apologised to the motorman (A:10).’

Many seafarers used the term of ‘lubricating oil’ when describing the commissar’s role in coordinating the work and social relations on board. They said, ‘(The)

lubricating role of the commissar is important in that it effectively coordinates shipboard relationships and helps lessen contradictions (Captain, A:8)

### **8.5. Conducting Party Work**

In essence, the commissar is the party's representative on board the merchant ship. Like his counterpart in land-based industries, he is expected to do party work in the workplace. Shipboard party work has three parts. First, the commissar is responsible for passing on the party's messages to seafarers and educating them to follow the party line in production. This is usually done by means of political study meetings organised by the commissar, as already noted.

Secondly, the commissar **identifies and grooms party members** from amongst the seafarers during the voyage, thus developing the human resources needed by the party to consolidate its base in the grassroots. One senior party official in Company D noted, 'In our company, the party committee draws up an annual development plan for individual commissars. According to the plan, at least one party member is expected to be developed and recruited from each ship each year. It is the commissar's responsibility to see that the plan is fulfilled.'

The commissar plays a key role. He identifies the candidate and helps him develop according to the standards set by the party committee until the committee considers he is ready to join as a full member. If the commissar has to go on shore leave, the 'new' commissar continues the grooming until the plan is realised. However, the commissar is not the only actor in the process. According to the procedure set by the party committee, other party branch members, especially the captain, who is deputy party secretary, must also take responsibility. 'The candidate is first recommended by the



commissar and the captain, sometimes in consultation with other party branch members. His file is then sent to the company party committee for preliminary examination and approval. If the committee approves, they contact the commissar and ask him and the shipboard party branch to start to help the candidate become a party member. The candidate then has a year or so to prove that he meets party standards by working hard, behaving well, getting on with his shipmates, etc. (senior party official, Company C).’

At the same time, the commissar exercises party control over the workplace by supporting the captain, caring for the crew, and his participating directly in the company’s assessment of the crew. As already noted, captains on the PRC ship do not have as much power as his counterparts on Western ships. Despite the Captain Responsibility System, the commissar remains a most influential figure. In the ship hierarchy, the commissar comes second to the captain and is formally expected to ‘support’, ‘serve’ and ‘assist’ the captain. In the party hierarchy, however, the commissar still occupies top position, with the captain as his deputy. Although the party no longer intervenes in daily operations, the Party’s Central Committee insists that the party branch continues to be built and consolidated at grassroots in industrial workplaces. The commissar’s position in the dual power structure aboard means that he still has a lot of control over shipboard decisions, especially those concerning crew management and promotion. Seafarers are reviewed by the captain, the commissar and the chief engineer - indeed by the entire shipboard party branch - at the end of each voyage. While they know that the captain and the chief engineer are central to this exercise, they are particularly sensitive to the commissar’s opinion. ‘This is because,’ as one second engineer explained, ‘the review form is always in the

commissar's hands. He is the one who writes the review. His opinion is very important for the seamen's future promotion, income and career development (B:10).<sup>7</sup> The captain and the commissar are not included in this post-voyage shipboard assessment. They are interviewed separately by the company management, so they have an opportunity to review each other's work. In addition, the commissar is expected to report to the party committee, where he gets the chance to express his views about the captain.

### **8.6. 'Crew Leaders' on Foreign Ships**

Commissars are sometimes found among Chinese crews on foreign ships, although there may not be a party branch aboard. In such cases, the commissar usually signs on as an ordinary seaman) or sometimes as steward or cook. He is placed aboard to 'look after our seafarers on the voyage', as noted by both the shipping management and the party committee interviewed for this study. Foreign ship owners and foreign seafarers, usually senior officers, are initially unaware but will find out later. In most cases, however, the Commissar is introduced by the Chinese crewing agency as 'crew leader'.

According to many seafarers, working on foreign ships is always harder, their own wages are lower than those received by seafarers from most other countries and the ship hierarchy is more rigid than on their 'own ships'. In these circumstances, many seafarers are happy to have a commissar sailing aboard. One chief engineer in a tanker fleet said, 'There (on foreign ships) we find we have suddenly lost the environment we are familiar with, the comrade-cum-brother environment that we always enjoy on our own ships. Many of us feel depressed. With the Commissar

aboard, he can talk with those seamen. The talk itself helps people articulate their distress (A:10).’

Many commissars said that they played a positive role in mediating between the Chinese crew and the foreign officers. One commissar with employment history on several Korean general cargo ships recalled,

Once our oiler was hit by the Korean Chief Engineer because he didn’t understand Korean and picked up a wrong tool. When I learned about the incident, I went to the Chief Engineer, explained to him why the oiler passed him a wrong tool and demanded he apologise to the oiler. He said sorry to our oiler under my threat – I told him that I would report the case to the ship owner if he refused to do so. At the same time, I asked the oiler and other Chinese seafarers to treat their Korean shipmates with respect including the Chief Engineer. Eventually, the entire crew, that is, seamen from both countries, got along with each other so well that when we 16 Chinese seamen left the ship, all the Korean seamen came to see us off on deck. Both I and the Korean Chief Engineer saw tears sparkling in each other’s eyes (B:3).

Another commissar described his experiences, ‘I was employed and formally introduced as the leading seaman for the Chinese crew. Foreigners didn’t know I was the commissar. They knew a bit about the Chinese Communist Party but little about sailing commissars.. When the foreign captain learned that I was the crew leader, he would always come to me when he had problems with Chinese seafarers (A:12).’

Working on foreign ships is very hard for the commissar. Since he plays a dual role aboard, his workload is heavier than on a PRC ship. A commissar recalled, ‘It was a Korean ship and I was employed as steward aboard. I had to work 12 hours a day, doing steward’s job. The only time I had to do the commissar’s job was in the evenings, when I could talk and hold meeting with our seafarers (Li, 2000).’

Political study meetings are also held by some Chinese seafarers on foreign ships. Due to the different social context, the meetings tend to be held less frequently, sometimes under some sort of disguise, and with a more recreational orientation. One third mate said, 'Political study was also organised on the foreign-owned ship I sailed. It happened less often, once every two to three months, and was normally carried out in the guise of crew meeting or training. The study was more recreational in nature – it included movies, watching TV and videotapes, etc. (D:11).'

On some foreign ships with no commissar, seafarers reported '(We) have even less communication with the outside world, and we are particularly badly informed about domestic news (ibid).'

This seems to suggest that the negative effect was at least partly due to the lack of a commissar on board. In this case, seafarers would usually turned to the radio officer as an alternative source of information. 'But it can be difficult, because the RO has his own job to do and he might not be part of the Chinese crew (ibid).'

Sometimes, meetings organised by the commissar made foreign seafarers, especially senior officers, curious or suspicious. 'The captain and the chief engineer were very sensitive about these meetings. Whenever such a meeting finished, they would contact some of us and ask "What did your commissar say at the meeting?"' In fact, the commissars were particularly cautious about working on foreign ships. 'He only reminded us of health and safety issues and talk about work. He did not touch on politics or ideology (A-12).'

## **Chapter 9. Role Conflict, Coping Strategies and Commitment**

The commissar faces conflicts inherent in the multiple roles he plays on board ship. Multiple roles carry with them multiple norms and expectations, which may come into conflict with one another under certain circumstances. When the commissar plays multiple roles at sea, role conflict is more likely to occur not only because the norms and expectations consistent with one role may prevent the commissar from behaving in accordance with the norms and expectations consistent with another role, but also because the workplace structure does not allow him the time and space to switch from one role to another. To play his roles ‘properly’, the commissar needs to develop good, or at least workable, relations with all the other major actors in the ship community, in particular the captain and the crew. At the same time he needs to maintain his relationship beyond the ship by meeting the requirements of the company management and the party committee that appointed him to the post. He therefore needs to cater to all these expectations. Doing so may drag him in various directions, hence the role conflict and the stress in many cases. This chapter analyses the causes and conditions that are responsible for the role conflict many commissars experience and notes the coping strategies they adopt in order to survive before closing with an attempt to measure the commissar’s commitment to his role.

### **9.1 Conditions for Role Conflict**

The cause of the role conflict lies first of all in the inconsistent demands made on the commissar by his employer - the company management and party committee. Requirements change with China’s political climate. As noted earlier, when politics were supposed to control production under the planned economy, the commissar’s role was clearly defined as the primary decision maker in shipboard production.

However, since the economic reform of the last two decades when profit and efficiency came to replace politics as the driving force in production, the commissar's position has become blurred. There is a substantial ambiguity and contradiction in the official expectations of and requirements for the post. On the one hand, the introduction of the Captain Responsibility System has created the theoretical and operational basis for the captain to be 'master' of the ship. Although this mastering capacity remains limited and is effective mostly in the technical sphere of ship operation and ship finance, the commissar's status has undoubtedly been reduced. On today's merchant ship, the commissar has become 'one of the two most important cadres' (rather than *the* most important cadre). In order to fulfil this role, the commissar is urged to focus on production by 'serving and supporting the captain'. At the same time, however, he remains head of the party branch, with the captain as his deputy. Here he is expected to play a 'leading role' in production. Indeed, the insistence on the commissar regime on board ship mirrors the party's persistence in keeping its hand on the pulse of the production and its influence and control in the workplace. While the contradiction may well reflect the overall contradiction and struggle between different interests in today's Chinese society, the contradictory expectations and requirements of the commissar's 'authorities above' inevitably bring confusion to the actor and his main collaborators in the ship community as the following account shows:

It's clear the deepening of the reform has significantly marginalized the political thought work the commissar is responsible for. We no longer have as much say as before. However, the company authorities insist that the spring time of political thought work, or of the commissar, has come. They ask us to play a leading role during the voyage. How can we? I can't see any sign of spring (Commissar, D:5).

The ambiguous status of the commissar also brings confusion and uncertainty to captains. One captain explained, '(The) company authorities do not seem to have a clear policy to define the role and function of the commissar. Sometimes, they pressure him to do more political thought work; sometimes, they urge him to concentrate on production. It can be difficult for him, and it can be difficult for me as well. Many of us captains are worried about building the commissar contingent in future. In fact, the key lies in the policy made by the upper authorities (D:7).'

The captain and the crew may have different agendas or objectives in shipboard production and this can also lead to role conflict for the commissar when he tries to integrate these agendas or objectives into a common plan. One union chairman explained:

True, the captain, the commissar and the seamen know very well they need to work together to fulfil the shipping tasks safely. They all share this goal. But, their specific aspirations vary. The company wants the voyage to be profitable and the captain mainly aims to accomplish this mission. The trade union aims to protect the interests of the seamen, while the seamen may care more about their individual interests. Sometimes, the commissar finds it hard to please anyone (D:10).

An extreme example of the role conflict experienced by the commissar was found in an investigation of an accident at sea reported by one captain. 'Under the pressure of the above authority, the commissar introduced some new rules aboard. According to one rule, seamen must tidy up their cabins before going on duty. One day, the commissar found a seaman's cabin was a real mess. He was furious and ordered the seaman to leave the bridge and tidy his cabin immediately. With this seaman absent, the third mate was left on watch on his own and the ship had a collision before the seaman could tidy up his cabin and return to the bridge. I was disappointed and angry with the commissar. He was supposed to support my work, but because of the

accident, he damaged all the credit I had accumulated by working so hard for so many years (A:9).’

Role conflict can cause tremendous distress to the individual. This study found a minority of seafarers reported that they had noticed signs of stress in their commissars and commented, ‘it must be harder for the commissar to do his job nowadays’. However, few commissars specified problems in this respect. Two reasons seem to explain their reservation. First, their concern to protect their own image might have prevented them from admitting the problem. As one captain pointed out, ‘(After) all, in the eyes of the company authority, the commissar is a trouble shooter. He is placed on board ship for that very purpose. How can the commissar himself have problems? If people know he has a problem, it simply proves that he is too weak to for the job (B:8).’ Secondly, a closer examination finds that many commissars have their own coping strategies that enable them to survive by manoeuvring between the complex social relations aboard.

## **9.2. Coping Strategies**

On Western merchant ships, the captain is put in charge by the ship owner and represents the ship owner’s interest when at sea. Any conflicts, negotiations and reconciliation between capital and labour take place chiefly between the captain and crew. On PRC merchant ship, the commissar regime is part of the ‘socialist market economy’. Whose interest does the commissar represent in such a situation? It seems that successful commissars made best use of their mediating role and cope by playing their multiple roles and manoeuvring on the basis of the complex shipboard social relations.



In most cases, the commissar would stand with the captains and does his best to support the captain's work. But his support is not absolute or unconditional. He has to take the interests of the crew into consideration and to balance his relationship with them and the captain accordingly. Mediating is used as a means to lubricate not only relations between the captain and the crew but also the commissar's own relations with the two parties. Mediating therefore allows the commissar a transitional space in which to switch from one role to another and at the same time to keep his distance from whatever role he was expected to play in the circumstances.

### **9.3. Commitment**

Commissars' commitment level varies from individual to individual. Different commissars seem to devote different amounts of energy to their work. Some commissars seem to work 'flat out', most actively fulfill their responsibilities and a handful are 'lazy'. Almost all the interviewees distinguished between 'good' and 'bad' commissars. One fully committed commissar said, '(On) average, I worked 17 or 18 hours a day until one or two o'clock in the morning. I rarely got to bed before midnight (C:3).' Several 'over-committed' commissars reported that they continued to work, mainly by visiting to seafarers' families, while on shore leave, when they are officially free of responsibilities.

Factors that determine a commissar's devotion to his role are identified as coming from a combination of two sources: the self-initiation and market pressures. As already noted, most commissars were recruited under the planned economy, when collectivism and altruism were the core ideology and at the centre of the Chinese value system. Despite the emergence of individualism and materialism in the reform

years, the value system many commissars believe in remains largely unchanged. They tend to have a strong sense of responsibility and their years of experience as political workers aboard have developed in many of them a keen personal interest or a ‘passion to do the job well.’ As one commissar noted, ‘(As) a commissar, I am working for the benefit of the ship as a whole. Whatever the task, if my efforts are needed, I will go ahead and do it (C:3).’ One seafarer observed, ‘(Our) commissar devoted his whole efforts to his work. I think it was because of his strong sense of responsibility and passion for the work’ (B:12).’

At the same time, ‘the desire for promotion’, ‘the aim to seek better review results and its related economic gains’ and ‘pressure from the higher authorities’ were also cited as incentives for commissars to keep their commitment level high. As mentioned before, some managerial efforts have been made since 2001 to review commissars’ performance ‘scientifically’ and measure their commitment level. ‘The company will examine a commissar’s previous work record of the commissar before assigning him to a ship. Commissars with better records get better ships and better opportunities for better payment (Captain, B:8).’

A small number of commissars demonstrated less enthusiasm at work. However, the existing cadre system does not seem to pose real risk of unemployment for commissars in this group. These commissars therefore just ‘make do with their work (Chief Engineer, A:8).’

## **Chapter 10 Existing Functions & Future Prospects**

The role of the commissar has both positive and negative functions with regards to the maintenance of the existing social economic system in and beyond the ship community. Such supportive or destructive functions manifest themselves in relation to the four major ship-related parties, namely, the party-state, the company management, the captain and the crew. This chapter examines the main functions of the commissar's role in relation to these institutions and individuals and concludes by looking at the future of the commissar regime in light of China's on-going social and economic transformation and the trend of globalisation, especially the worldwide shortage of qualified seafarers in a wider context.

### **10.1. Existing Functions**

In relation to the party-state, the commissar functions primarily as an agent exercising social control over the ship community while the ship is at sea. On behalf of the party-state, the commissar regulates the seafarers' attitudes and behaviour, so they accord with the dominant ideology and the relevant laws, rules and regulations of the party-state. He establishes and maintains social order aboard, educates seafarers on patriotism, safeguards the country's image and fulfils the assigned tasks. To the commissar, a most effective means of realising this function is by 'teaching' or educating seafarers on the voyage. For example, many commissars report that they consider it their responsibility to 'spread knowledge of government laws and regulations such as the Labour Law, the Company Law at crew meetings (B:2).' At the same time, thanks to the commissar's campaign to groom and recruit new party members, the Communist Party is able to establish and consolidate its control over the workplace even when away from home port.

To company management, the commissar's primary function is to promote the company's goals, i.e. production and economic efficiency. In order to play the part properly, the commissar needs to participate in ship management, improve his management skills, safeguard the image of the ship and the company, protect the safety of the ship and the crew and ensure that the ship operates safely and efficiently. At the same time, the commissar needs to formulate a 'positive ship culture' that agrees with the overall 'company culture'. He needs to direct seafarers' thoughts and behaviour to the tasks and targets set by the company so that seafarers' enthusiasm is brought into full play. To help seafarers identify with company goals, the commissar emphasises the importance of 'mutual benefits'. As an example of 'instilling the spirit of collectivism and guiding seamen to devote themselves to the company', one commissar observed:

Nowadays, a principal task for us is to educate the crew about "mutual benefits". While individual values and purpose compete with our traditional emphasis on collectivism, we commissars have the responsibility to tell seamen that it is not enough simply to realise their individual goals or values. We must make them aware of the company's collective interest. If the company goes bust, seamen will have no way of realising their individual interests (C:5).

With regards to the captain, the commissar's role is to assist him in carrying out his duties and provide him with support by sharing his responsibilities and work. For this purpose, the commissar focuses on the needs of the captain, helping him meet the work targets; sharing the work of logistic supplies and crew management 'so that the captain can concentrate on taking charge of more important issues, especially the operations of the ship; overcoming any conflicts between the captain and seamen; and ensures that the captain's instructions are properly carried out, and his authority is recognised and respected. However, the commissar's role is not always supportive or

positively from the captain's point of view. For the captain, the commissar regime also has 'negative' effects. It greatly weakens the captain's power in that the commissar shares the captain's power and responsibility aboard. While this may help prevent abuses of power by the captain, the commissar regime can at the same time reduce efficiency in shipboard decision-making. This explains why quite a few captains considered the commissar's role can be 'dysfunctional' and redundant in shipboard management.

For seafarers, the commissar's role has a dual function. On the one hand, he helps them with care and welfare support that they cannot get from other sources such as the world maritime charity organisations (available to most seafarers in other countries). By mediating between the captain and the crew, the commissar helps protect seafarers' rights and interests. This is particularly important when there is no effective political mechanism such as an independent trade union to help seafarers in this dimension. At the same time, the commissar informs seafarers about state laws and regulations, party rules and policies, company standards and instructions, national and international affairs, relevant information on foreign ports and countries and other relevant issues. He also helps seafarers solve practical problems concerning their work and life at sea and their families. He helps enrich seafarers' recreational activities aboard, maintain their mental and physical health at sea and co-ordinate social relations in the ship community throughout the voyage.

Nevertheless, the commissar regime also demonstrated some significant 'dysfunctions' that goes against seafarers' interest in certain ways. This typically includes its restriction of seafarers' freedom of action and its suppressive attempt to shape their thinking and wills in accordance with the political and ideological

programme of the party-state. Overall, however, to Chinese seafarers in the context, the positive side of the commissar's regime outweighs its negative effects from the seafarers' point of view.

## **10.2. Future Prospects**

The role of the commissar has never been static. Changes can be clearly identified over the regime's history of a half century. From the outset of the regime in the 1950s to the early 1970s, when the world was gripped by the Cold War and China was isolated from the world community, the primary function of the commissar regime was to establish and consolidate the party-state's control over the workplace by educating seafarers in patriotism, socialist and communist ideology and anti-capitalist propaganda. China was engulfed in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. During that time, party ideology and politics were prioritised over production across all sectors of the economy. In shipping, the commissar regime worked effectively towards that end, peaking in 1978.

The recent two decades have seen most significant changes in the commissar's roles and functions in connection to the shipboard society. In the context of the socialist market economy, the core function of the regime has shifted to embrace the newly defined company goal – profit making and economic efficiency. Meanwhile, the commissar regime helps shield seafarers from excessive market pressures and harsh management abuse as well as provide care and welfare support for seafarers during voyages. The commissar's mediating role also seems effective in reducing the chances of serious conflict and confrontations aboard, thus enhancing the safety of the ship and its crew. All these functions support the traditional and the most fundamental function intended for the regime, that is, effective party-state control of the workplace

to tighten its grip on the workforce at grassroots. These functions also contribute to the achieving highest goal set by the Central Party Committee: to maintain social stability at all costs in order to ensure the country's economic development.

What, then, is the future function, indeed the future, of the commissar regime?

The answers are controversial. Market-oriented shipping managers and maritime economists are especially cost-sensitive. They consider the post of the commissar on board merchant ships as 'pure waste'. In their calculation, since the post does not generate immediate economic gains, it therefore does not have legitimacy to continue. A handful of captains advocate abolishing the post on another ground. They believe further concentration of power aboard will reduce both cost and bureaucracy, thus improving the efficiency in decision-making.

On the other hand, seafarers, trade union leaders and the party officials seem to be overwhelmingly in favour of the continuation of the commissar regime. Most of the seafarers interviewed, regardless of rank or position and including most captains, believe that ships should continue to carry commissars. On the basis of their own experiences, they believe that they can benefit overall from the regime. For them, the positive functions of the commissar's role far outweigh its negative effects. Union leaders at both local (ship and company) and national levels support the idea. This is understandable. Given that it is unlikely that Chinese trade unions will function as an independent political force for seafarers in the foreseeable future, like their counterparts in Western economies, and that Chinese seafarers still have very limited access to the welfare facilities sponsored by world trade unions and world maritime charity organisations, the commissar regime seems the best guarantee in Chinese

seafarers' interests. All the party officials interviewed strongly opposed eliminating the post of commissar from the crew list. They have vested interests at both the macro and the micro levels. As both Jiang and Hu reiterated at the latest Party Congress, the Chinese Communist Party is determined to hold on to its control over the country's hundreds of thousands of workers in order to secure its grip on the country. In shipping companies, the party committee has already become marginalized in many respects in the face of the increasingly aggressive advance of market forces. The commissar and the shipboard party branch represent the cells of the party's infrastructure that nourish the party committee. The party committee cannot afford to lose the commissar regime. Most shipping managers, especially those with long seafaring histories, have mixed feelings about it. While their market-orientation tells them that the regime cannot last, their years of seafaring experience and their awareness of the increasingly high pressures that market forces put on seafarers cause them to sympathise with the idea of ships continuing to carry commissars for the benefit of seafarers.

The main research findings demonstrate in the above chapters that overall the political commissars have positive effects on the welfare of the crew and have been accepted, or even welcomed, by most seafarers. This regime is doubtless not an ideal way to provide full welfare support needed by seafarers during the voyage. It is still employed by the party to consolidate its control of the country's seafaring workforce. However, attention must be drawn to the fact that the roles and functions of the commissar in seafarers' real life at sea have had significant changes in recent years. Evidence found in this research indicates that, despite their expected roles by the party and management, commissars are actually the only agents that can and are willing to provide emotional and practical support to the Chinese seafarers on ocean vessels. As



individual seafarers themselves, the sailing commissars, despite their limitations, are found contributing positively to the welfare and wellbeing of the Chinese ocean seafarers. It can be reasonably expected that with the continuous dilution of ideology and politics in the Chinese people's life today, commissars will have to further switch their attention to the welfare aspects of the work and life of seafarers on board in order to earn seafarers' trust and support. This is important both for the survival of the commissar regime and for the best interest of the party (Shi *et al*, 2002; Feng *et al*, 2003).

While the debates and controversy are heated and different interpretations can be made out of the debates and controversy, the commissar regime seems facing a crisis of a different nature. The existing generation of commissars is rapidly ageing and the country's fleet of ocean-going ships will find it increasingly difficult to find commissars to employ, even if all parties agree on the need for them. According to company reports, the average age of commissars has exceeded 50 and those who are already in their mid-to-late 50s account for almost 60 per cent of the existing political workforce. In an era when most female workers have to retire at the age of 40-45 and most male workers at the age of 45-50 in China's industrial establishments, the current workforce of the sailing commissars really looks 'too old'. Indeed, shipping companies report that large numbers of their commissars have already reached that age and will retire 'in a couple of years'. A serious shortage of commissars is already apparent in the industry. According to one company's projection, 'there will be a serious shortage of 69 commissars by 2004' and one in four posts will go unfilled.

The shortage of sailing commissars in PRC fleet mirrors the worldwide shortage of qualified seafarers, especially well-trained and experienced officers needed for the

world fleets (BIMCO/ISF, 1995, 2000). The challenge to the Chinese therefore concerns not only the uncertainty caused by the debate between whether or not to employ commissars on board. There is also the problem of where and how to find qualified candidates to fill the vacancies left by retiring commissars. The questions of political economy aforementioned might not be able to find a clear-cut answer in the near future; the crisis of the shortage of sailing commissars is real and immediate. Unless quick action is taken to tackle the issue, the People's Republic will soon find that it has no commissars to crew its ocean-going ships in its national fleet.

END.

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