Welcoming the Year of the Pig with a Chinese crew

Dr Bin Wu of the Seafarers’ International Research Centre finds that social occasions on board ship, such as a party to celebrate the Chinese New Year, aren’t just fun and relaxing but also play an important role in building relationships.

On boarding the vessel a week before the start of the Year of the Pig, I was told that it would call at two Taiwanese ports to unload cargo during the Chinese New Year period. This meant that the crew could not have a day off, nor could they go ashore, over the three-day New Year period as the Taiwanese authorities prohibit seafarers from touching Taiwanese soil. Seafarers worried the crew would be depressed but it seems that I worried too much because the vast majority had got used to such scenarios, knowing that a seafaring life is always accompanied with loneliness and social isolation. Nevertheless, I was not sure that the right to go ashore had been eroded in recent years. I learned that at Chinese New Year the crew go ashore every two weeks, if not at every port.

In reality, unfortunately, seven out of 16 seafarers interviewed (44 per cent) said that they had gone ashore just once every month in their last contract period, five (31 per cent) about once every two months, and four seafarers (25 per cent) reported that they had been ashore only once every three months or less. The growth of a sense of isolation from the lack of shore breaks, according to them, leads to the decline of work enthusiasm and concentration.

Two days before the Chinese New Year, the officers continued their watch duty or prepared loading/unloading plans while all ratings, except for the catering crew, cleaned public and private spaces in the morning, is a bad habit in the afternoon. A New Year party was held at 6pm, when officers and ratings went to their own mess rooms. Separately, all the crew toasted each other and other officers. This was followed by the engine and deck cadets expressing their special thanks for their supervision. The most active people during the party were the chief and second cooks who moved feverishly around the tables, and all the crew expressed their appreciation to them for their past services and the delicious meal that they were serving.

During the evening, everybody knew his real motivation: he wanted to express his gratitude to the chairman of the board who had been promoted. The chairman was delighted and expressed his satisfaction. But while the cooks completed the main-course meal, the captain went to the crew’s mess room to raise a toast with all the ratings. He was followed by the chief engineer, the chief officer and then other officers respectively. A hierarchy order was clear from this activity. Afterwards, the bourses and fitter, the two oldest crew members onboard, went to the officers’ mess room to toast the captain, chief engineer and other officers. This was followed by the engine and deck cadets expressing their special thanks for their supervision.

By the time the party ended, the chief and second cooks had spread the rest of the partymaker’s food to the tables, and all the crew were standing up to express their sincere hopes and best wishes for a happy and healthy New Year. The crew were concerned because not all Taiwanese ports provide local mobile network access for seafarers to ring home. Luckily, the local agent in the first port had prepared plenty of SIM cards for the crew and US$5 phone cards which totalled about US$10 on phone calls which gave them 100 minutes. Of these, 60 per cent were used for their parents, relatives and friends, 25 per cent for seafarers and 15 per cent for friends in case of those who were single. This cost, however, was only a quarter of their expenditure on phonecards each month which totalled US$38 on average, excluding expenditure in Chinese ports.

On the evening of Chinese New Year’s day, many crew members told me that in spite of no sleep the previous night, they were very happy indeed because they had successfully got through to everyone they had really wanted to talk to. I hoped that the Pig would bring good fortune to everyone. I met the Chinese crew I met, but all seafarers worldwide.

CHINESE seafarers: no time off for New Year but happy to have made contact with families and friends. (SIRC photo)