



Dr Minghua Zhao, deputy director of the Seafarers' International Research Centre,

looks at how social and economic changes have affected seafarers' welfare in China

Different world systems or social institutions, intentionally or not, adopt different strategies to meet seafarers' needs for welfare support at sea. In western capitalist economies, missions and other charity organisations developed various programmes including ship visitors and sailing chaplains, and built seafarers' centres at major world ports to accommodate seafarers' practical and spiritual needs at sea. This tradition is probably as old as capitalism and is still alive and well in most part of the world.

Socialist countries created different regimes when dealing with issues concerned with seafarers. Although introduced as means of the party-state control and political propaganda, international seafarers clubs were built with generous state funds in St Petersburg, Kiev, Guangzhou, Shanghai and other ports. Over several decades in the 20th century, these clubs accommodated hundreds of thousands

China's shipboard commissars take on welfare role

of seafarers of all nationalities from both socialist and capitalist countries.

At the same time, political commissars were placed on board merchant vessels, sailing together with the crew. Of course, these "political thought workers" were intended to exercise political and ideological control over seafarers as eyes and ears of the party-state. In practice, the fact that these sailing commissars worked and lived with the crew on a daily basis for long periods of time at sea allowed the regime some unintended functions. Seafarers in Shanghai, for example, reported cases where they were helped and looked after by commissars in "those good old days".

Today's world has become fundamentally different from that of twenty years ago. Communism and socialism are largely gone and the world is increasingly driven by market forces towards capitalism. The social-economic change and the changes in other dimensions since the late 1970s in former socialist countries – USSR, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia and China – have had their effect in all respects of people's work and life

and across all industries, including shipping.

This includes the international seafarers' clubs in China (ICS) which, since the 1980s, have become commercialised. Most of these clubs are located in prominent positions on the waterfront, so are attractive to developers. In Dalian, Shanghai, Xiamen and other major ports in China, for example, the clubs have been converted into top-market hotels, and few seafarers can afford the accommodation there. In most cases, the ISC still keep a seafarers section dedicated to serve world seafarers when their ships call at the port. However, with a meagre annual budget and a drastically reduced staff size, the clubs' services for seafarers have little substance to benefit seafarers. The ISC in a major port in China, for example, used to have a 50-strong team of ship visitors fluent in a dozen languages. Now, the club has been converted into a four-star hotel, with an annual budget of only \$30,000 and three staff designated to handle seafarers' matters.

The three staff members work extremely hard by visiting as many ships and meeting as many seafarers as they can every day.

Indeed, they find themselves exhausted and overwhelmed by the huge increase in the number of seafarers whose ships call at the port every day as a result of the phenomenal growth in the international trade going through the port. The section head observed: "Actually, the port has been moved to a location forty miles away from us. It can take two or three hours for us to see the ships, or for any seaman to visit us. The traffic is always heavy. We have no idea how those poor seamen can cope. The accommodation here has been upgraded into top hotel rooms. Meanwhile," he said, "we have noticed more and more seamen are from poor countries like India, the Philippines and Vietnam, no longer from Britain, Germany, Norway or Japan. They can't afford to stay with us in the club. And, we have long stopped holding parties for visiting seafarers or showing them around the city, in order to reduce costs. Our budget is just too tight. We really feel sorry for today's seamen."

The changes to the international seafarers' clubs in former socialist countries' ports clearly have negative implications

for seafarers and are most likely to affect those from other countries.

Sailing political commissars have also disappeared in Russian and other eastern European ships with the collapse of their socialist regimes. China is now probably the only country in the world still carrying commissars on its ocean-going merchant ships. However, the commissar regime has undergone some major transformation during the reform years, with interesting implications regarding seafarers' welfare at sea.

In the past, the commissar was the most important decision-maker aboard. But in line with the country's reorientation to market values, the status of the commissar on Chinese ships has declined since the late 1980s. The captain is now the most important person in the ship's hierarchy. However, the commissar, as the second highest post-holder aboard, still has significant influence on seafarers' work and lives.

Research conducted by myself and two Chinese senior social scientists, with support from the Seafarers' International Research Centre (SIRC) at Cardiff University in the UK, found that

commissars are playing an increasingly important role in providing welfare support for the crew during a voyage. This support mainly takes the form of talking to and listening to seafarers when they encounter emotional or practical difficulties. Although the commissar may not be able to help solve all the problems for seafarers, our research found that it is vital, for the sake of seafarers' welfare and well-being, to place on board ship a person to whom seafarers can talk when they feel desperate.

Commissars are usually placed on Chinese-owned and Chinese-crewed ships. Sometimes, they are also found among Chinese seafarers on foreign-owned or managed ships. In this case, they usually have an openly designated paid post and conduct the commissar's work – talking and listening to seafarers – quietly and unpaid in their off-duty time. Foreign shipowners were initially suspicious of these commissars. Over time, however, many reported understanding and even appreciation when they realised that commissars tended to help maintain good crew morale at sea. In addition, commissars were also found

playing important mediating roles ironing out clashes among seafarers.

All the commissars interviewed expressed a strong commitment to their work and identified themselves as "real seafarers", being accepted by the crew as "one of us". The positive role of the commissar is recognised by most seafarers especially captains. Particular emphasis has been made by seafarers of lower ranks on the necessity of the mediating role of the commissar, particularly when there were problems between the captain and the crew.

Some seafarers compare the commissar's role with that of the priest or chaplain, believing that the commissar plays a vital part in helping to maintain the spiritual health and mental stability of the crew, although commissars are usually members of the Communist Party and regard themselves as atheists or as having no religion.

Pressed by the market, however, shipping companies have begun to re-evaluate the cost-benefits of having a commissar on their ships. Some companies, usually the small ones, consider the post as an

unnecessary "non-productive" cost and have eliminated the post on their ships. Many simply add the responsibilities to the captain and change his title to captain-commissar. The doubling of the master's burden during a voyage is likely to have a negative impact on the safe operation of the ship at sea. This point was confirmed and emphasised by most of the captains interviewed for the SIRC study.

Our observation of the changes to the ISC and our analysis of the political commissar's role on board Chinese merchant ships indicate that these institutions, despite the party's intention, have had positive effect on the welfare of the crew and have been accepted or even welcomed by most seafarers. These institutions are certainly not ideal to fully meet seafarers' need for welfare support and they are still under considerable control of the party, especially the commissar regime. However, attention must be drawn to the fact that the political commissars are actually the only agents who can, and are willing to, provide emotional

and practical support for seafarers on ocean-going vessels. The complete phasing out of the post will inevitably have a negative impact on seafarers' welfare and well-being on Chinese ships.

Meanwhile, the commercialisation of the ISC in China's ports has serious implications regarding the welfare of seafarers of all nationalities. Given that these clubs have now become top-market hotels priced beyond seafarers' reach and that there is an increasing number of seafarers calling at China's ports from all over of the world as a result of the phenomenal growth of the country's international trade, we cannot help feeling deeply concerned about seafarers' welfare during their stay in the country. Where do seafarers go when they have shore leave or before they embark upon their ships? How can they get help when they have unexpected difficulties when their ships call at Chinese ports? What can be done to help seafarers when they "get stuck" in China, a country experiencing rapid social-economic changes and yet without the presence of world charity organisations for seafarers such as The Mission to Seafarers or the Apostleship of the Sea? Clearly, to answer the questions further study is needed.