

THE SIRC COLUMN

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 New Year, aren't just fun and relaxing but also play an important role in building relationships

THIS is the Year of the Pig in the Chinese calendar, which is considered a very fortunate year because the pig is a fun and enlightening personality blessed with patience and understanding. As a researcher, I was very lucky to spend an unforgettable time with Chinese seafarers on a chemical tanker to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Having been on board a bulk carrier for nearly two months, I had already learned that social isolation is a big issue for seafarers, while strict port security worldwide has made the situation even worse. This is particularly true for seafarers who work aboard cargoships such as chemical tankers. So I was anxious to know how the Chinese crew could overcome their difficulties and celebrate the Chinese New Year.

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 Chinese seafarers from touching Taiwanese soil.

I was concerned 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. Many complained, however, that the right to go ashore had been eroded in recent years. Ideally, for instance, they felt they should go ashore every two weeks, if not at every port.

In reality, unfortunately, seven out of 16 seafarers I 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 often than that. 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, then had a break in the afternoon. A New Year party was held at 6pm, when officers and ratings went to their own mess rooms. Several bottles of Chinese wine, red wine and beer were distributed to dinner tables, with the quantity of alcohol supplied having been carefully calculated. To begin with

people toasted each other without movement between rooms and tables. But while the cooks completed the ten-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 bosun 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. The most active people during the party were the chief and second cooks who moved frequently 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, I was impressed by the the role the party played in changing relationships between crew members. One seafarer, for



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

instance, was dissatisfied with another who had recently blocked his promotion. So he followed the seafarer in question to the officers' mess room and proposed a toast to him. Everybody knew his real motivation: he wanted an explanation as to why his promotion had been blocked. This was a tense moment because, if he could not gain a reasonable explanation, a conflict was inevitable.

After the seafarer accused of blocking the promotion

replied, the captain, chief engineer and chief officer stood up to express their support for him. All acknowledged that the unpromoted seafarer was a hard worker with technical competency. This, however, was not enough for the post, they explained, because he paid insufficient attention to communication with deck ratings, which could block effective co-operation in deck operation. All expressed their sincere hopes and best wishes

for him to overcome this deficit and improve personal relations in the new year. The seafarer seemed to accept the explanation and returned to the crew mess room peacefully.

A senior officer later told me that a party, including the New Year party, was not limited to the release of physical fatigue but played a role in alleviating or removing psychological pressure caused by interpersonal or inter-department stresses. It was also a good time for the captain and chief engineer to pick up important information which they might not necessarily get through formal channels.

Besides the celebration party, another important event for all the crew was to contact family members and friends. 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 gave a talk time of 45 minutes. When our vessel arrived at the port on the

evening of Chinese New Year's eve, almost all the crew were busy throughout the night unloading the cargo and also ringing home as it was not easy to get through at such a peak time.

I found that, on average, each crew member spent about US\$10 on phone calls which gave them 100 minutes. Of these, 60 per cent were used for their parents, relatives and wives and children, and 40 per cent for friends and/or girlfriends 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 with Chinese cash.

On the morning 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 as they had successfully got through to everyone they had really wanted to talk to. I hoped that the Pig would bring good fortune not only to the Chinese crew I met, but all seafarers worldwide.