

## **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 demonstrated in the above chapters show that the political commissars have overall played a positive role regarding the crew welfare and have been accepted, or even welcomed, by most seafarers. This regime is doubtless not ideal in providing full welfare support needed by seafarers during at sea and 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, 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 in the party's best interest (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.