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China Maritime Report No. 40

Onboard Political Control

The Ship Political Commissar in Chinese Merchant Shipping

Conor M. Kennedy



Summary

Since the creation of the People's Republic of China's merchant fleet, the Chinese Communist Party has implemented a system of political control aboard oceangoing vessels through ship Party branches and ship political commissars. This report focuses on the ship political commissar, a Party representative assigned to oceangoing merchant ships, particularly within state-owned shipping enterprises, to carry out political and administrative work in the management of ship crews. Having peaked in authority and power during the Cultural Revolution, the ship political commissar position has evolved over the decades following economic reforms in the 1980s. Despite years of problematic implementation, the ship political commissar system is currently undergoing a revitalization in state-run shipping companies. The position has supporting roles to play in carrying out national tasking such as evacuations of overseas Chinese citizens. Most ship political commissars are former PLA officers. Chinese roll-on/roll-off ferry operators constitute a special case where the ship political commissar may have greater authority in the ship hierarchy and potentially a role in supporting PLA use of those vessels. This report focuses on the ship political commissar system over the last 20 years, providing a needed update on this understudied topic in the English-language literature.

Introduction

The leadership structure aboard People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy warships is typically structured around a Communist Party Committee, led by co-equal political commissars and captains.¹ This arrangement ensures Party control over the navy's warships as they operate at sea. Seldom discussed is a similar structure of Party control aboard the oceangoing vessels of the People's Republic of China (PRC) state-run shipping fleet. This arrangement involves the assignment of ship political commissars (船舶政委) on oceangoing ships to establish and lead the shipboard Party branch (党支部).

The use of the political commissar in PRC shipping is an underrecognized and understudied aspect of global shipping. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) requires the means to assert control and influence through the ship Party branches and the ship political commissar system because the maritime transport sector is critical for national development. The CCP has long implemented an organizational system within the major state-owned shipping enterprises that runs down through their subsidiaries and aboard the ships themselves. COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited (COSCO Shipping) is the PRC's largest state-run shipping conglomerate and is a prime example of the assertion of political control over the maritime transport industry. Ship Party branches and ship political commissars are present on many, if not most of the company's oceangoing fleet. The political commissars on these PRC ships play a unique role in managing vessels, but remain largely unfamiliar to the rest of the world's shipping industry.

Little has been written about the system in the English-language literature over the last 20 years. This report attempts to fill this gap and examine recent developments to the ship political commissar system. It first describes the position and its roles, then examines key enterprises that continue to employ ship political commissars. The third section explores continued problems related to the system, as well as the latest initiatives to bolster political commissar ranks and strengthen their overall quality, as part of a revitalization of the position in the Xi Jinping era.

¹ There are significant details and nuances in this system, better expounded upon in: Jeff W. Bensen and Zi Yang, "Party on the Bridge – Political Commissars in the Chinese Navy," Center for Strategic & International Studies (June 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/party-bridge-political-commissars-chinese-navy>.

Lastly, the positions potential roles in supporting national security and nationally-relevant tasking of the merchant shipping fleet are examined, with special focus on the ship political commissars serving aboard Roll-on/Roll-off (RO-RO) passenger ferries – many of which are involved in training activities to support the military and may feature a uniquely enhanced role for the ship political commissar.

The Role of a Ship Political Commissar

The ship political commissar is a representative of the Party-State assigned to PRC oceangoing merchant vessels, particularly within state-owned shipping enterprises, to carry out political and administrative work in the management of ship crews. The status, prestige, and roles of the position have changed with the transformation of the PRC's economy from the Mao era to the period of reform initiated under Deng Xiaoping. This period is excellently documented in the study *The Political Commissar and His Shipmates – Transformation of the Commissar's Role on Chinese Ships* (海洋上的社会 – 中国商船政委与船员的航海生活). Its authors explore the ship political commissar system in great depth and describe how the position's power and influence has waned from the 1980s to the early 2000s as the position was forced to adapt to a market-oriented enterprise climate.² The ship political commissar system has persisted after their book was published, despite a gradual decline in the position's significance and implementation due to reductions in crew sizes and ever-intensifying competition in shipping markets.³ As discussed below, the system has seen a revitalization in recent years, although problems persist.

Broadly speaking, the ship political commissar has four main roles in their work. First and foremost, they act as representative of the Party-state and must maintain social order on ships, uphold PRC laws and regulations, protect the national image, and implement broader national goals as direct by the government. They are front-line elements of the CCP and must establish and lead the ship Party branch, conduct political work aboard the vessel, guide crew in political study sessions, and recruit prospective Party members from the crew.⁴

Ship political commissars fulfill the following specific responsibilities, in addition to other supporting functions.

- Ensure the functioning role of grassroots Party organization is fulfilled through the ship's Party Branch and strengthen political ideological education and moral values among seafarers.
- Serve the primary tasks of the ship by facilitating communication and coordination, resolving issues between ship departments and between members of the shipboard community. Fostering unity and cohesion assures production and completion of the ship's work.
- Guide the work of various shipboard committees such as the trade union, youth league branch, mess committee, and security committee to raise enthusiasm among the crew, especially in guiding younger crew members. The political commissar plays a large role in supporting the work of the mess committee as it directly impacts crew morale and cohesion.

² 赵明华 [Zhao Minghua], 石秀印 [Shi Xiuyin], and 冯同庆 [Feng Tongqing], 海洋上的社会 – 中国商船政委与船员的航海生活 [The Political Commissar and His Shipmates – Transformation of the Commissar's Role on Chinese Ships], 社会科学文献出版社 [Beijing (2004) Social Services Documentation Publishing House], 北京 (2004) [Beijing (2004)].

³ Ibid, p. 56.

⁴ 构筑浮动国土上的“生命线” [“Building a ‘Lifeline’ on Moving Territory”], 经济日报 [Economic Daily], 26 December 2011, <http://news.enorth.com.cn/system/2011/12/26/008381672.shtml>.

-As of 2010, an important mission of grassroots Party organizations is to participate in innovation and excellence initiatives. As the leader of the ship Party Branch, the political commissar is responsible for facilitating activities that promote innovation and excellence in ship and crew work.

-Fulfill security functions aboard ships to prevent pollution, implement security and emergency response measures, conduct safety inspections, and prevent personnel and property loss. The political commissar is responsible for implementing the “ship security plan.”⁵

The ship political commissar is responsible for meeting company goals by enhancing the efficiency and safety of ship operations. They protect the ship’s image and ensure security by managing the crew, encouraging unity, coordination, and work quality. Ideological education and behavioral monitoring ensure crewmembers listen to management and follow the rules. The political commissar also plays a role in resolving interpersonal or interdepartmental conflicts and stabilizing and raising crew morale.⁶

The ship political commissar shares authority with the ship captain. Officially, the captain and political commissar are the two most senior personnel on board. The captain focuses on ship operations while the political commissar focuses on handling personnel and social issues. The relationship between the captain and the political commissar has changed over the decades in-step with the overall reduction in Party interference in enterprise operations. Prior to PRC economic reforms, ship political commissars exercised much greater power. Their power peaked near the end of the cultural revolution, when the “Political Commissar Responsibility System” (政委负责制) was put into force in 1975, ending in 1978. During this period, ship political commissars were in charge of most ship affairs.⁷ They subsequently lost much of their power after economic reforms were enacted and companies focused on profitability and efficiency. By 1988, the “Captain Responsibility System” (船长负责制) was established, giving captains the greatest responsibility and decision-making power aboard ships. The political commissar was expected to assist the captain and fulfill responsibilities in crew management. This arrangement relieves the captain of some burdens so they can focus on ship operations. Focusing on crew management, the political commissar ensures the captain’s instructions are executed.⁸

Despite the loss of authority, the numerous shared responsibilities and authorities between the captain and the political commissar can be detrimental to the captain’s position at the top of the ship hierarchy. The political commissar still sits atop the ship’s Party structure, i.e. the Party branch. The Party branch is typically comprised of the political commissar, the captain, and the chief engineer, referred to as the “Three Chiefs” (三长).⁹

⁵ 王莱华 [Wang Caihua], 新时期加强船舶政委队伍建设的思考 [“Thoughts on Strengthening the Construction of Ship Political Commissars in the New Era”], 国企 [China SOE], No. 9, 2022, pp. 45-47.

⁶ Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, p. 62.

⁷ Ibid, p. 17.

⁸ Ibid, p. 62.

⁹ 中国海运表彰长期服务航运事业的船舶“三长” [“China Shipping Honors the ‘Three Leaders’ of Ships Who Have Served the Shipping Industry for a Long Time”], 中国海运（集团）总公司 [China Shipping (Group) Company], 6 August 2014, <http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n2588025/n2588124/c3783093/content.html>.

Serving as secretary of the Party branch, with the captain as deputy Party secretary, the political commissar exercises significant influence on the ship and ashore with the enterprise's Party committee. This is especially due to their influence on promotions and evaluations of personnel, including the captain. Evaluations are conducted at the conclusion of every voyage, during which the captain and the political commissar will assess each other's performance and the performance of the crew. The political commissar, in their administrative capacity, can yield influence through their duties in crew management reporting, such as through the individual sailor review forms.¹⁰ This ability to supervise the captain's performance can have the effect of balancing out their authority.¹¹



Exhibit 1: The “Three Chiefs” of the 20,000-TEU containership COSCO SHIPPING LEO’s Party Branch during a 2018 media event in Shanghai’s largest container port marking the 40th anniversary of China’s reform and opening. Their respective positions are readily identified by shoulder patches, with the chief engineer (left, propeller), the political commissar (center, star), and the captain (right, anchor).¹²

The ship political commissar plays a significant role in supporting the crew. They promote their professional development, track their performance in the evaluation process, and protects their legal rights and interests.¹³ The political commissar helps educate crew of laws and regulations, Party rules, company standards and policies, domestic and international affairs, and relevant information on foreign ports and countries. Security in ports and strict management of personnel going ashore is also a key responsibility of the political commissar. The political commissar may also help crew members resolve problems during their time at sea, such as familial problems back home.¹⁴

¹⁰ Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, pp. 48-49; 54-56; 92.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 62.

¹² 来吧, 和“中远海运狮子座”零距离 [“Come and Get Close Up to the ‘COSCO Shipping Leo’”], 信德海事网 [*Xinde Marine News*], 15 July 2018, <https://www.xindemarinenews.com/m/view.php?aid=5450>.

¹³ Zhao Minghua rightfully notes that there is no independent labor organization to protect worker's rights as the ship political commissar exercises leadership over the ship trade union committee. Zhao Minghua], Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, p. 98.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 98.

Most ship political commissars are former PLA officers. Prior to the 1970s, when the PRC merchant fleet was much smaller, active-duty PLA regimental and battalion-grade officers were selected to serve as political commissars aboard oceangoing ships. These positions were later converted to civil political commissars by the 1970s. COSCO is historically a big recruiter of former regimental and battalion-grade political officers to serve as political commissars. This is still generally the case since political officers offer personnel that are essentially ready to serve in the position with relatively little additional training and the post provides some employment opportunities for transitioning servicemembers.¹⁵ Other sources of political commissars may come from within the company organization. Personnel in some redundant positions aboard ships that were gradually phased out, such as stewards and radio officers, were also retrained as political commissars.¹⁶

As part of the crew, the ship political commissar should attain minimum maritime qualifications, typically registered on vessels as an ordinary seaman rating.¹⁷ Ship political commissars undergo some company provided management and seamanship training, taken at mariner training and education schools.¹⁸ Given their roles, the ship political commissar is not hired for their seamanship, but rather their loyalty to the Party, adherence to Party rules and discipline, ability to conduct political work, and ability to lead personnel and groups. Nevertheless, basic seamanship is necessary for the political commissar to be effective on the ship and managing its crew.¹⁹ They will, after all, be working with the crew at sea for seven to nine months.²⁰

Ship Political Commissars in the State-owned Shipping Conglomerates

The PRC's largest state-owned shipping company, COSCO Shipping (originally China Ocean Shipping Company), has been a critical support for PRC economic development since it was founded. Established in 1961, COSCO has implemented the practice of establishing Party branches and assigning political commissars on its oceangoing vessels. This was strongly influenced by the PLA practice of establishing Party branches at company-level units (支部建在连上), which in this case, vessels would carry the Party branch.²¹ The state-owned merchant fleets were subject to international influence, but also represented the PRC around the world, thus requiring a shipboard political organization to ensure Party control over crews and to manage international contact.²²

COSCO Shipping still implements the Party branch and ship political commissar system today in its fleet of over 1,400 vessels across different shipping industries. These sectors includes container shipping, dry bulk, petroleum and chemicals, general and specialized cargo shipping, and RO-RO shipping.²³

¹⁵ 赵晓亮 [Zhao Xiaoliang], @自主择业军转干部 中远海运船员招聘船舶政委了! ["Military Cadres Electing to Change to Civilian Careers, COSCO Shipping Seafarers is Recruiting Ship Political Commissars!"], 青岛市退役军人事务局 [Qingdao Veterans Affairs Bureau], 26 May 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/w4israYPqXOyBgykz8awpQ>.

¹⁶ Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, p. 27.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 15.

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 29-32.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 15, 23.

²⁰ "Military Cadres Electing to Change to Civilian Careers, COSCO Shipping Seafarers is Recruiting Ship Political Commissars!"

²¹ Wang Caihua, pp. 45-47.

²² Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, pp. 12-13.

²³ 集团概况 ["Group Overview"], 中国远洋海运集团有限公司 [China COSCO Shipping Corporation Limited], https://www.coscoshipping.com/col6858/art/2016/art_6858_45176.html.

The size of this fleet is a result of the 2016, \$8.7 billion USD merger between China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO) and China Shipping (Group) Company (China Shipping), previously the PRC's two largest state-owned shipping conglomerates.²⁴ Both COSCO and China Shipping implemented the Party branch and ship political commissar system. COSCO, for example, had about 750 ship political commissars serving aboard nearly 800 ships prior to the merger.²⁵ After the merger in 2017, the newly created COSCO Shipping Corporation was reported to have 895 shipboard Party Branches and around 1,200 ship political commissars serving in the fleet.²⁶ These numbers would decrease somewhat over the following years, hitting over 1,000 ship political commissars, supplemented by some temporary commissars, overseeing 768 ship Party branches in 2021.²⁷

To manage these grassroots Party structures and the ship political commissars, COSCO's Leading Party Group (集团党组) institutes a system of regulations, organizations, and management. They include formal rules for Party branch work, qualification standards for ship political commissars, and performance evaluations. Such structures are portrayed as a "bastion" for the Party on every ship, ensuring ship society has a "backbone" for meeting the various tasks required of shipping.²⁸ COSCO also has formal training programs for its ship political commissars. These programs are held within COSCO's own seafarer training schools in Qingdao as well as in branch vocational institutes. For example, the Qingdao Ocean Shipping Mariners College provides ship political commissar training for COSCO crews.²⁹ This school also has formal training programs to build up its ranks of "reserve ship political commissars" (后备船舶政委). Reserve commissars are made up of captains, chief engineers, and Party members in other positions, serving as "hybrid" backup political commissars to fill in when needed.³⁰

²⁴ Lee Hong Liang, "Cosco Shipping – A Guide to the Merger of Cosco and China Shipping," *Seatrade Maritime News*, 17 January 2017, <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/asia/cosco-shipping-guide-merger-cosco-and-china-shipping>.

²⁵ 李予阳 [Li Yuyang], 中远集团海外资产和收入已超过总量的半数以上 ["COSCO Group's Overseas Assets and Revenue Account for More than Half of Total Revenue"], 中国经济网 [www.ce.cn], 29 April 2011, http://www.ce.cn/cysc/newmain/right/zg/201104/29/t20110429_20971782.shtml; 石庆贺 [Shi Qinghe] and 马云芹 [Ma Yunqin], 国有航运企业船舶政委队伍建设刍议 – 基于对中远集团的调研与思考 ["A Preliminary Discussion on the Construction of Ship Political Commissars in State-owned Shipping Enterprises – Based on Research and Thinking on COSCO Group"], 青岛远洋船员职业学院学报 [Journal of Qingdao Ocean Shipping Vocational College], No. 3, 2015, p. 34.

²⁶ 蔡梦晓 [Cai Mengxiao], 中远海运：国企重组如何实现涅槃重生? ["COSCO Shipping: How Can the Restructuring of State-Owned Enterprises Achieve Nirvana and Rebirth?"], 新华网 [Xinhua], 16 August 2017, https://www.cs.com.cn/ssgs/gsxw/201708/t20170816_5426294.html.

²⁷ 国有企业党建工作系列专访强根铸魂 奋力开创国有企业党的建设和改革发展新局面 ["A Series of Interviews on Party Building Work in State-Owned Enterprises: Strengthen the Roots, Building the Soul, and Strive to Create a New Situation in Party Building and Reform and Development in State-Owned Enterprises"], 人民网 [People's Daily Online], 28 October 2021, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1028/c117092-32267078.html>.

²⁸ 孟歆迪 [Meng Xindi], 中国远洋海运集团：以党建工作掌航行之舵、铸强企之魂 ["COSCO Shipping Corporation: Party Building Work is Used to Steer the Ship and Building the Soul of a Strong Enterprise"], 光明日报 [Guangming Daily], 3 January 2020, <http://dangjian.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0103/c117092-31533261.html>.

²⁹ Shi Qinghe and Ma Yunqin, pp. 32-25.

³⁰ 公司举办首期后备船舶政委培训班 ["The Company Held the First Training Course for Reserve Ship Political Commissars"], 搜狐-中海国际上海分工 [Sohu – COSCO Shipping International Shanghai Branch], 11 October 2018, https://www.sohu.com/a/259034219_786513; 中远海运船员管理有限公司第二期后备船舶政委培训班在我院举办 ["The Second Training Course for Reserve Ship Political Commissars of COSCO Shipping Crew Management Co., Ltd. Was Held in Our College"], 搜狐 – 船院新声 [Sohu – New Voice of Shipping University], 9 May 2019, https://www.sohu.com/a/313018769_100007703.

While COSCO is the largest company implementing the ship political commissar system, other state-owned shipping enterprises do as well. Another key state-owned conglomerate engaged in shipping is China Merchant Energy Shipping, Co. (招商局能源运输股份有限公司 / CMES). In fact, it predates COSCO in its creation of the ship political commissar system. After the founding of the PRC, a system of military representatives was used to help deal with the predations of Nationalist forces on communist shipping. The Ministry of Transport officially changed these representatives to political commissars in March 1954.³¹

Today CMES, operates over 300 ships, including 109 tankers, 52 of which are very large crude carriers (over 200,000 deadweight tons), making it the second largest state-owned oil tanker fleet next to COSCO Shipping. It also operates up to 37 very large ore carriers, as well as many other coastal and international car carriers, liquified natural gas ships, container ships, and other general cargo vessels.³² Embarked on some of these critical inputs to the PRC economy are ship political commissars leading shipboard Party branches.³³ CMES reported having 100 ship Party branches in late 2020, committing to the company's goal of "building Party branches on all vessels requiring them" (应建全建).³⁴ However, it is unclear how many and what types of CMES vessels carry political commissars and how extensive the system is implemented. It is likely the largest and most critical ships on international voyages that carry a political commissar.

Problems in the Ship Political Commissar System

The ship political commissar system is plagued by persistent problems. The system has significant historical baggage and is not well understood outside of China, resulting in PRC attempts to reduce its international exposure. The system was covertly implemented in the beginning with political commissars often referred to as "deputy captains." The PRC officially recognized the presence of ship political commissars in 1967 as international commercial actors gradually became aware of their existence.³⁵ Moreover, in regulatory terms, the position lies outside of the PRC's professional mariner field and instead exists within Party structures. Ship political commissars are absent from the PRC's 2020 *Sailor Regulations* (船员法) or the annual "China's Sailor Development Report," both published by the Ministry of Transport.³⁶

³¹ 坚持“支部建在船上”为航运事业持续蓬勃发展提供坚强政治保障 [“Adhere to the Principle of ‘Building Party Branches on Ships’ to Provide a Strong Political Guarantee for the Continued Vigorous Development of the Shipping Industry”], 国企杂志研究 [Research on State-Owned Enterprises Magazine], 20 November 2020, http://msoer.norincogroup.com.cn/art/2020/11/20/art_7114_240584.html.

³² “The Global Oil Tanker Market: An Overview as It Relates to Sanctions,” Congressional Research Service, 18 March 2024, pp. 6-7, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R47962/2>; 招商局能源运输股份有限公司 2023 年半年年度报告 [“China Merchants Energy Shipping Co., Ltd. 2023 Semi-Annual Report”], 招商局能源运输股份有限公司 [China Merchants Energy Shipping Co., Ltd.], pp. 19-20.

³³ For one example of a tanker political commissar, see: “一心多用”的蒋林政委 (员工故事之八) [“Political Commissar Jiang Lin: A ‘Multitasker’ (Worker Stories No. 8)”, 招商局南京油运股份有限公司 [China Merchant Group Nanjing Tanker Corporation], 10 October 2014, https://www.njtc.com.cn/art/2014/10/10/art_16506_304672.html.

³⁴ 弘扬蛇口精神 传承海辽精神, “新海辽”轮标杆建设“实”字篇 - 组织建设 [“Carry Forward the Shekou Spirit and Inherit the Spirit of the Hailiao, The ‘Real’ Part of Building the Model Ship ‘New Hailiao’ – Organizational Construction”], Sohu Account of China Merchants Energy Shipping Co., Ltd., 24 December 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/440219425_744934.

³⁵ Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, p. 14

³⁶ 中华人民共和国船员条例 [“The Seafarer Law of the People’s Republic of China”], 中华人民共和国国务院令 第 494 号 [Order No. 494 of the People’s Republic of China State Council], initiated on 1 September 2007, amended version promulgated on 2 March 2019, https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2019/content_5468939.htm; For the latest report, see: 2020 年中国船员发展报告 [“China’s Seafarer Development Report 2020”], 中华人民共和国交通运输部 [People’s

These and many other official documents on shipping contain no references to ship political commissars, despite their leadership position aboard thousands of vessels. The PRC may have intentionally omitted them to avoid problems in aligning PRC regulations with established international maritime standards, such as the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers and other widely followed international standards. Indeed, some PRC writings suggest the ship political commissar system presents a major challenge in reconciling PRC regulations with international practices.³⁷

At the mercy of market forces and political requirements, some companies struggle to implement the ship political commissar system due to their personnel structures. In some cases, there are simply not enough political commissars to deploy among the fleet.³⁸ While COSCO has been steadfast in its commitment to maintaining a force of ship political commissars, other SOEs have adopted more moderated approaches. Guoneng Yuanhai Shipping Co. Ltd. (国能远海航运有限公司) operates 59 bulk carriers that ensure steady coal supplies to China Energy Group's regional power plants.³⁹ Like many other shipping companies, it faces challenges in building ship Party structures because the majority of crew do not belong to the enterprise itself but are instead outsourced to professional crew management companies. Of the 1,397 personnel aboard the fleet, only 85 belong to Guoneng Yuanhai Shipping. Of the 1,397 personnel, 161 are Party members, but only 5 of those actually fall under the company itself. With high turnover rates and low quality among outsourced crew members that have Party membership, it is difficult to equitably distribute these members across the fleet.⁴⁰ Guoneng Yuanhai Shipping struggles to achieve the three-Party member minimum required to establish Party branches aboard each ship.⁴¹

To fix this problem, Guoneng Yuanhai Shipping adopted the “floating political commissar mechanism” (流动政委机制). Beginning in 2019, 8 personnel were chosen from the company's ranks to serve as these floating ship political commissars. Each were assigned to 5 or 6 vessels and would serve one to two months aboard each, providing political commissar coverage for up to 40 vessels. While aboard, they would conduct Party building work and complete their task lists and evaluation activities. The solution envisions a fleet divided into four groups, each forming a “clustered” Party branch that would incorporate both shore-based managers and the Party members among the ship crews.⁴² This case demonstrates a compromise between SOE Party building requirements and the challenges of operating under competitive market conditions.

Republic of China Ministry of Transport, 25 June 2021, https://xxgk.mot.gov.cn/2020/jigou/haishi/202106/t20210625_3610590.html.

³⁷ “Adhere to the Principle of ‘Building Party Branches on Ships’ to Provide a Strong Political Guarantee for the Continued Vigorous Development of the Shipping Industry.”

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Guoneng Yuanhai Shipping is a subsidiary of China Shenhua Energy (中国神华能源) and a COSCO minority-owned SOE. Its fleet includes 30,000 to 50,000-ton handy domestic trade bulk carriers and 70,000-ton Panamax domestic and foreign trade ships. 公司简介 [“Company Overview”], 国家远海航运有限公司 [*Guoneng Yuanhai Shipping Co. Ltd.*], <https://hygs.chnenergy.com.cn/hygsww/gsjj/listcontent.shtml>.

⁴⁰ China National Energy Shipping Group Co., Ltd. delivered a report on these issues. See: 《以“五大创新”推动船岸联动的集群化船舶党支部建设》 [“Promoting the Construction of Clustered Ship Party Branches for Ship-to-Shore Linkage with the ‘Five Major Innovations’”], 中工网 [*China Workers Network*], 4 December 2023, <https://www.worker.cn/c/2023-12-04/8067796.shtml>.

⁴¹ 中共中央印发《中国共产党支部工作条例（试行）》 [“The Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Issued the ‘Regulations on the Work of Party Branches of the Communist Party of China (Trial)’”], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], 25 November 2018, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-11/25/content_5343236.htm.

⁴² “Promoting the Construction of Clustered Ship Party Branches for Ship-to-Shore Linkage with the ‘Five Major Innovations.’”

The system has also suffered from qualities issues in among the ranks of ship political commissars. One ship political commissar from the Guangzhou Branch of COSCO Shipping Seafarer Management Co., Ltd., COSCO Shipping's company dedicated to personnel management, noted in 2022 that some commissars are inadequate in their responsibilities and cannot meet the high expectations set by crews and companies. They lack political awareness and ethics, lack professional skills, are unsuitable role models for crew. This causes poor results in their ideological and political work. Critically, a poor performing political commissar will fail to gain the trust of the crew and captain. They would thus struggle to effectively manage crew members, understand crew issues, and adequately perform their duties on board.⁴³

Some issues in the ship political commissar system stem from contemporary socioeconomic dynamics and a lack of receptiveness by the crew. The PRC's rapid economic growth has resulted in many youth pursuing other careers ashore, making the merchant mariner life less appealing. They are also less open to the guidance of political commissars. Those youth that do join the seafaring life are difficult for ship political commissars to manage. One political commissar noted that current younger crew members are more difficult to understand and the spread of communication platforms, such as smart phones and social media, has compounded the situation; unlike past generations of ship crews, who were typically more obedient.⁴⁴ In general, the merchant mariner career in the PRC has declined in its prestige and relative economic standing, resulting in increased skepticism among crews toward the ideological work of political commissars.⁴⁵ Societal influence and a general lack of clarity on the responsibilities of the ship political commissar has also caused confusion among the commissars themselves. Some ship political commissars have lost their sense of mission and have let ship Party branch discipline slide.⁴⁶

The ship political commissar career is generally viewed as a dead end with few prospects for advancement, unlike the career trajectory of other ship officers and technical positions. Many political commissars serve their entire careers in the same position, resulting demotivation and poor work performance.⁴⁷ In addition to poor career prospects, the position has long suffered from obsolescence. The political functions of the role and standing among the crew has weakened. Previous reductions in political and ideological work for the sake of supporting the commercial operations of companies, the inability to adapt Party ideology to maintain relevance for modern crews, and the increasing technological sophistication of shipping has likely further diluted the importance of ship political commissars.⁴⁸ In some cases, ship political commissars may resort to filing reports to impress their company superiors.⁴⁹ To improve their relevance, one expert recommends strengthening their sense of mission, enhancing their status as role models in morality and ethics for the crew, asserting greater discipline, and continuing implementation of company training programs for political commissars.⁵⁰ These are hardly innovative solutions to issues that have persisted for decades.

⁴³ Wang Caihua, pp. 45-47.

⁴⁴ 我国船员来源不足: 80%航校毕业生工作 5 年后离开 [“The Sources of China's Seafarers are Insufficient: 80% of Navigation School Graduates Leave After 5 Years On the Job”], 新华社-瞭望东方周刊 [*Xinhua – Oriental Outlook*], 7 July 2014, <https://finance.sina.cn/chanjing/gdxw/2014-07-07/detail-icesifvw9409848.d.html?from=wap>.

⁴⁵ Shi Qinghe and Ma Yunqin, p. 35.

⁴⁶ Shi Qinghe and Ma Yunqin, p. 35; Wang Caihua, pp. 45-47.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 35.

⁴⁸ Wang Caihua, pp. 45-47.

⁴⁹ Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, p. 183.

⁵⁰ Wang Caihua, pp. 45-47.

In 2015, experts with direct knowledge of training ship political commissars published an article that argued for potential solutions. They called for greater clarification and definition of the ship political commissar's roles and responsibilities to fix the issue of the position being maintained for the purpose of having the position, rather than the actual utility and qualification of a political commissar. Instead of having political commissars fulfill numerous roles on board each ship, they should focus on their core mission as a Party representative and political worker on board. They should be evaluated accordingly and ship captains should exercise greater patience and support them. Professional training should be strengthened at merchant marine training institutes in conjunction with a formal and standardized certification process as well as a more robust evaluation system. Interestingly, they recommended the creation of a rank system for political commissars that would incentivize current commissars to work harder and promote the position to new seafarers.⁵¹ This further highlighted the reality of ship political commissar as a career track with low expectations for future growth.

A Revitalization of Ship Political Commissars in COSCO Shipping

The PRC's economic development since it opened to trade and investment gradually culminated in a broad alignment of national interests that would lead Hu Jintao to announce a strategy to become a maritime power during the 18th Party Congress.⁵² This strategy would accelerate under Xi Jinping through stronger emphasis on the merchant fleets carrying inputs and outputs globally, the merchant fleets. The State Council's issuance of "Opinions of the State Council on Promoting the Sound Development of the Shipping Industry" in 2014 set forth the importance of the national shipping industry for social and economic development and outlined a number of reforms to strengthen its structure and international competitiveness. These opinions noted the overarching goal of development was to build the PRC into a "powerful shipping country" (海运强国).⁵³ Subsequent official documents and announcements, including the State Council's release of "The Outline for Building a Powerful Transportation Nation" and the cross-governmental issuance of the "Guiding Opinions on Vigorously Promoting High-Quality Development of the Shipping Industry" would further highlight the sector's importance. Xi himself declared that the shipping industry would be the top priority.⁵⁴ With this consistent top-level guidance, the PRC has worked to improve the overall structure and operations of the shipping industry, with state-owned shipping giant COSCO leading the way.

⁵¹ Shi Qinghe and Ma Yunqin, p. 35.

⁵² 胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告 ["Hu Jintao's Report to the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China"], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], 17 November 2012, https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-11/17/content_2268826.htm.

⁵³ Key tasks outlined included optimizing the structure of the shipping fleet, promoting mergers and consolidation to build scale, deepen the reform and development of state-owned shipping, and other measures. See: 《国务院关于促进海运业健康发展的若干意见》 ["Opinions of the State Council on Promoting the Sound Development of the Shipping Industry"], 国务院 [*State Council*], Document No. 32, 3 September 2014, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-09/03/content_9062.htm.

⁵⁴ 中共中央 国务院印发《交通强国建设纲要》 ["The CPC Central Committee and the State Council Issued the 'Outline for Building a Powerful Transportation Nation'"], 新华社 [*Xinhua*], 19 September 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-09/19/content_5431432.htm; 《关于大力推进海运业高质量发展的指导意见》政策解读 ["Policy Interpretation of the 'Guiding Opinions on Vigorously Promoting the High-Quality Development of the Shipping Industry'"], 交通运输部网站 [*Ministry of Transport*], 3 February 2020, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-02/03/content_5474236.htm.

A key part of this effort would require improvements to the management and organization of the PRC's large merchant marine. Enhanced Party leadership acts as a core guarantee of this development. Initiatives would be conducted as part of the broader national reforms of SOEs in 2016 that aimed to strengthen Party corporate governance and influence within the enterprise system.⁵⁵ Xi emphasized the importance of strengthening grassroots Party organizations in his remarks during the National Conference on Party Building in State-Owned Enterprises held on October 10, 2016.⁵⁶ In response, COSCO decided to further enhance coverage of its fleets using the ship Party branches and ship political commissars.⁵⁷

To strengthen ship crew leadership, COSCO worked on improving the quality of its ship political commissars through training as well as growing the ranks through increased recruiting and other alternate methods. This effort began in earnest after the multi-year merger of COSCO and China Shipping Group, involving complex reorganization of many businesses, was completed.⁵⁸ To guide efforts at strengthening ship political commissars and further define their roles, COSCO Shipping's Leading Party Group released measures such as "Several Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of Ship Political Commissars Under the New Situation."⁵⁹ While there is limited information made public on this guidance, descriptions indicate it provided more specific requirements for the ship political commissar system.

To fix personnel work quality issues, the talent development arm of COSCO, COSCO Shipping Maritime University, launched a three-year training program for all ship political commissars on September 1, 2020. This would be conducted at the newly built campus in Qingdao and reportedly received unprecedented levels of attention by senior company leaders. Twenty courses were held for groups of political commissars for one month, during which they were strictly evaluated and ranked to identify and address poor performers. This was a closed, military-style course with individuals marching in navy-like uniforms. Political commissars learned methods to resolve problems in Party building aboard COSCO ships, providing more comprehensive training content than they had previously received.

⁵⁵ Scott Livingston, "The New Challenge of Communist Corporate Governance," CSIS Briefs, January 2021, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/210114_Livingston_New_Challenge.pdf; 坚定不移做强做优做大国有企业 - 党的十八大以来国有企业改革发展的理论与实践 ["Unswervingly Strengthen, Optimize, and Expand State-owned Enterprises – Theory and Practice of State-owned Enterprise Reform and Development Since the 18th CPC National Congress"], 求是 [Theory], 16 June 2017, <http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n2588025/n2588119/c4599036/content.html>.

⁵⁶ 习近平出席全国国有企业党的建设工作会议并发表重要讲话 ["Xi Jinping Attended the National State-owned Enterprise Party Building Work Conference and Delivered an Important Speech"], 新华社 [Xinhua], 12 October 2016, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/6606.html>.

⁵⁷ 陈龙兵 [Chen Longbing], 以高质量的船舶政委集中轮训 锻造新时代船舶党建带头人队伍 ["High-Quality Concentrated Training of Ship Political Commissars to Forge a Team of Ship Party Building Leaders in the New Era"], 中国远洋海运报 [China COSCO Shipping News], 24 November 2023, https://npcs.coscoshipping.com/col/col25714/20231117/20231124/dB02bcayx/art/2023/art_1843878802.html.

⁵⁸ The reorganization of these two shipping giants spanned many business sectors, including management companies, finance, manufacturing, overseas networks, etc. See: 经济日报: 中远海运“深改”“快改”奔向世界一流 ["The Economic Daily: COSCO Shipping is Striving to Become a World-Class Company Through 'Deep Reform' and 'Rapid Reform'"], 经济日报 [The Economic Daily], 30 June 2017, <http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n2588025/n2588139/c5374342/content.html>.

⁵⁹ Original Chinese title is 《关于新形势下加强船舶政委队伍建设的若干意见》. Wang Caihua, pp. 45-47; 吴春增 [Wu Chunzeng], 周作友 [Zhou Zuoyou], and 冯明月 [Feng Mingyue], 坚持“支部建在船上”, 创新加强船舶党建管理机制建设 ["Adhere to 'Building Party Branches on Ships' and Innovate to Strengthen the Construction of the Ship Party Building Management Mechanism"], 中国企业网 [www.zqcn.com.cn], 2 March 2022, <https://www.zqcn.com.cn/910/10349.html>.

The objective was to improve the overall quality of ship political commissars by addressing identified shortcomings and fixing problems that can negatively impact crew effectiveness. Understanding discipline and law was a key module in their education, where participants learned to see the “red lines” and pitfalls in ship operations using case studies. Completing the mission to train all ship political commissars on November 21, 2023, the envisioned return for COSCO was to be a force of commissars that can serve as frontline leaders of the nation’s merchant crews, enhancing the shipping industry’s ability to serve the nation through their leadership in the ship Party branch structure.⁶⁰



Exhibit 2: COSCO Chairman and head of the COSCO Party School Wang Haimin leads a symposium with six ship political commissar representatives taking part in the first round of training.⁶¹

COSCO’s three-year training program also enabled the company to strengthen and solidify the institutionalization of the ship political commissar training system. The drafting of training and education materials, data collection, and discovery of best practices has produced a series of guidelines, standards, and rules for evaluation of this training. Recordkeeping of political commissar performance during the training program also factored into their future prospective career development.⁶²

In addition to training all existing political commissars, new sources of personnel from within the company would be retrained and temporarily reassigned to bolster the political commissar ranks. This period saw classes held for “shore-based personnel temporarily serving as ship political commissars” (陆岸人员挂职船舶政委) as well as “hybrid” ship political commissars.

⁶⁰ Chen Longbing, “High-Quality Concentrated Training of Ship Political Commissars to Forge a Team of Ship Party Building Leaders in the New Era”; 担当有为 筑梦远航, 集团船舶政委第一期集中轮训班顺利结业 [“Taking Responsibility and Building Dreams for a Long Voyage, the First Concentrated Training Course for the Group’s Ship Political Commissars was Successfully Completed”], 搜狐 – 中远散运船员中心 [Sohu – COSCO Bulk Shipping Seafarer Center], 5 October 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/422770579_813190#google_vignette.

⁶¹ 担当有为 筑梦远航, 集团船舶政委第一期集中轮训班顺利结业 [“Taking Responsibility and Building Dreams for a Long Voyage, the First Concentrated Training Course for the Group’s Ship Political Commissars was Successfully Completed”], 搜狐 – 中远散运船员中心 [Sohu – COSCO Bulk Shipping Seafarer Center], 5 October 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/422770579_813190#google_vignette.

⁶² Chen Longbing, “High-Quality Concentrated Training of Ship Political Commissars to Forge a Team of Ship Party Building Leaders in the New Era.”

According to COSCO, this initiative was designed to create new mechanisms for developing hybrid shore-based and shipborne talent, strengthen the development of younger ship officers, promote the building of ship Party structures, and optimize the ranks of ship political commissars. By early 2024, the fourth annual training period for such temporary ship political commissars would be completed at the COSCO Shipping University, providing fresh recruits to serve in the company's shipping fleets.⁶³ Furthermore, personnel were drawn from the main headquarters and those of subsidiaries. By the end of 2020, COSCO would select a total of 71 temporary ship political commissars from its headquarters and subsidiaries to strengthen coverage.⁶⁴

COSCO's task, given by Party leadership, was to "strengthen the construction of Party branches and ship political commissars in all aspects" to create a pool of political commissar personnel.⁶⁵ Subsidiaries like COSCO Shipping Lines, the international container shipping branch of COSCO, would combine traditional sources of ship political commissars with new sources of personnel. In 2021, it described selecting 68 outstanding former military personnel to take up political commissar posts and supplementing them with 28 temporary commissars chosen from company staff.⁶⁶ COSCO's multi-pronged approach would likely achieve a modest strengthening of the ship political commissar force across its different shipping sectors. However, the extent of this growth is difficult to verify. As noted previously, the total number of COSCO ship political commissars had dropped to over 1,000 in 2021 and there are no updated figures publicly given after the launch of COSCO's program to improve the ship political commissar system. Improvements in political commissar work performance is even harder to verify without extensive interviews and surveys of company officials and the personnel serving aboard PRC ships.

⁶³ The 2023 class, completed by early 2024, comprised of 42 participants from various COSCO subsidiaries conducting 62 days of training at the COSCO Shipping University. 苑培轩 [Yuan Peixuan], 集团 2023 年陆岸人员挂职船舶政委培训班圆满结业 ["The Group's 2023 Training Course for Ashore Personnel Secondment as Ship Political Commissars is Successfully Completed"], 中国远洋海运报 [*China COSCO Shipping News*], 2 February 2024, https://newspaper.coscoshipping.com/wq/20240202/20240202dA04b/art/2024/art_01a9ea369d664a2daa6816f11d358c14.html.

⁶⁴ 中远海运集团: 党建压舱 行稳致远 ["COSCO Shipping Group: Party Building as a Ballast to Ensure Steady Progress"], 中国远洋海运报 [*China COSCO Shipping News*], 31 August 2021, <https://acin.org.cn/12573.html>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ 中远海运: 把基层党组织建设成为航运报国的坚强战斗堡垒 ["COSCO Shipping: Build Grassroots Party Organizations into a Strong Bastion for Serving the Country Through Shipping"], 中国组织人事报 [*China Organization and Personnel News*], 10 June 2021, <http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n4470048/n16518962/n17700045/n17700066/c19059100/content.html>.



Exhibit 3: A class of reserve ship political commissars receive training in November 2020. This involved retraining other ship management posts (engineers, officers, etc.) to obtain the skills needed in ship political commissar work.⁶⁷

The last several years also saw a surge in demand for COSCO's ship political commissars due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. At that time, a number of temporary political commissars were recruited from shore-based positions and underwent two months of concentrated training before riding along other ship political commissars at sea as trainee commissars. The challenges strict anti-Covid measures would impose on crews made boosting the ranks of onboard crew managers—the primary role of the political commissar—an important mission assigned by company leadership. Since company rules restricted debarkation and provisioning in foreign ports, their task was to help crews deal with the long-term inability to go ashore and improve life conditions through activities and food preparation aboard vessels. Preventing the spread of Covid by implementing a regime of testing and control also became an important duty for ship political commissars.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ 勤学苦练 比学赶超, 第四期后备船舶政委培训班第一阶段纪实 [“Study Hard and Learn From Each Other to Catch Up, A Record of The First Phase of the Fourth Training Course for Reserve Ship Political Commissars”], 搜狐 – 中海国际上海分公司 [Sohu - CSISCSH], 24 November 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/434074451_786513#google_vignette.

⁶⁸ 船岸一线, 我的船舶挂职政委生涯 [“The Line Between Ship and Shore, My Career as a Temporary Political Commissar on the Ship”], 中远海运船员 [COSCO Shipping Seafarer Management Co., Ltd.], 11 June 2021, https://www.sohu.com/a/471624228_121123843.



Exhibit 4: Liu Ningyu was retrained with a group of 70 other temporary ship political commissars throughout 2020 to begin their assignments aboard COSCO ships. Liu was assigned to serve aboard the CS SALUBRITY, a 180,000-ton ultra-large bulk carrier that primarily transports coal and iron ore.⁶⁹

Maintaining stability in the merchant fleets would be critical during the pandemic. One temporary ship political commissar serving on a very large crude carrier would describe, “as the main force in ensuring stable and smooth flow of domestic and international logistics supply chains, ships are not only the front line of [COSCO Shipping] Group’s production and operations, but also the front line of epidemic prevention and control.” Ship Party branches were tasked with communicating information and supervising the implementation of and adherence to pandemic control measures. Members of the ship Party branch carried out the bulk of testing, cleaning, and monitoring work. Critically, ship political commissars counseled and guided crew members during difficult times, building psychological files on individuals and reporting issues to company management. Through encouragement, communication, propaganda, and cultural activities, the commissars reportedly helped calm the shipboard atmosphere, stabilize and unite crews, and execute the Party’s guidance.⁷⁰ During such times of crisis, the political commissars were a tool for instilling stability and discipline.

National Security Responsibilities

The merchant marine is required by law to provide support for the military and support economic development and national security.⁷¹ Like many militaries, the PLA relies on civilian support to enhance its logistics capacity and provide supporting functions. PRC shipping companies have long provided support for military operations and other nationally important tasks.

⁶⁹ “The Line Between Ship and Shore, My Career as a Temporary Political Commissar on the Ship.”

⁷⁰ 肖滨江 [Xiao Binjiang], 面对疫情, 如何更好发挥船舶党支部的作用 [“How to Give Full Play to the Role of the Ship Party Branch in the Face of the Epidemic”], 中国远洋海运报 [COSCO Shipping News], 27 June 2022, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA3NDMyNjIwOQ==&mid=2649511360&idx=3&sn=03ca2b1a5485a1fe3436aa2582d204b5&chksm=87197c6eb06ef5784f2b606a3948064cbd856055fc2cdd482d17915f40464f960f360612708b&scene=27.

⁷¹ See: Chapter 5, Article 36, 《中华人民共和国国防交通法》 [Law of the People’s Republic of China on National Defense Transportation], 中国人大网 [China National People’s Congress Online], 3 September 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-09/03/c_1119506255.htm.

These include supporting overseas evacuation of PRC nationals, providing transportation services to PLA forces, supporting Belt and Road Initiative projects, opening arctic navigational routes, and many other tasks. The system of ship Party branches and ship political commissars are an important support and guarantee for crew leadership during such challenging tasks and ensures they are aligned with Party guidance.⁷² For example, the COSCO containership *TIAN FU HE LUN* (天福河轮) evacuated 559 personnel from Libya in 2011 during its return voyage from Europe. Upon receiving orders from COSCO headquarters dispatch at the behest of the Central Government, the ship political commissar had a significant role in supporting planning and execution of the mission, and more importantly, ensuring order, safety, and provisioning during the sudden embarkation of hundreds of passengers on a ship designed to carry only 24 crew.⁷³

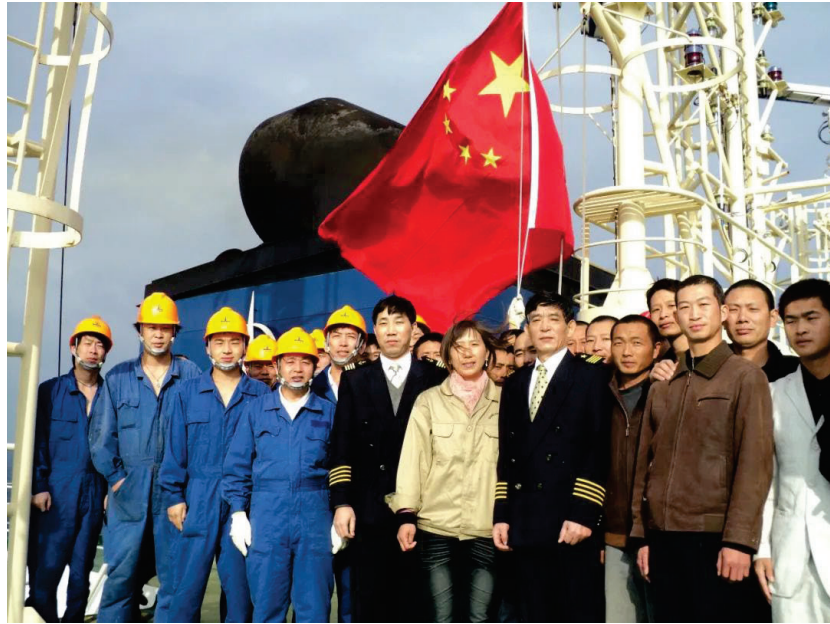


Exhibit 5: COSCO containership TIAN FU HE LUN's captain (center-left) and political commissar (center-right) shown with crew and evacuees during the 2011 Libya operation.⁷⁴

In recent documented PLA exercises, extensive COSCO and China Merchants Group participation raises questions on how these ships, the leadership structure on board through the Party branch, and their crews interact with the military and what arrangements facilitate that interaction.⁷⁵

⁷² "COSCO Shipping Corporation: Party Building Work is Used to Steer the Ship and Building the Soul of a Strong Enterprise."

⁷³ 党旗，指引着“天福河”轮利比亚撤员行动 [“The Party's Flag Guides the ‘Tian Fu He Lun’ During Its Evacuation of Personnel from Libya”], 上海智慧党建 [www.shzhdj.sh.cn], 11 March 2011, <https://www.shjcdj.cn/djWeb/djweb/web/djweb/newestindex/newinfo.action?articleid=4028811b2c552097012e9edb40256981>.

⁷⁴ 探秘红色航海，海外撤侨 [“Exploring the Mystery of Red Voyages, Overseas Evacuation”], 中国航海博物馆 [China Maritime Museum], 25 September 2021, https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_14656798.

⁷⁵ See Michael J. Dahm's series of reports documenting the use of PRC civilian ferries to support PLA transportation, including those of key state-owned shipping companies such as COSCO. For the latest, see: Dahm, J. Michael, "China Maritime Report No. 35: Beyond Chinese Ferry Tales: The Rise of Deck Cargo Ships in China's Military Activities, 2023" (2024). CMSI China Maritime Reports. 35. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/35>.

While much is unknown, there are some clues that suggest an important role for ship political commissars to support mobilization and manage militia organizations aboard ships. For example, a job advertisement posted in 2011 to fill 40 to 60 ship political commissar positions in China Shipping Group included “militia armed work” among the post’s responsibilities, whereby they would be responsible for leading the construction of militia organizations.⁷⁶ The militia comprise personnel drawn from society and enterprises and organized into military formations that are official components of the PRC armed forces and act as a reserve and assistant to the PLA. They are jointly organized and managed by the military and government and can be mobilized under military command to carry out combat readiness, non-war military operations, and defensive combat operations.⁷⁷ The maritime militia are a subset of the national militia that are trained to operate at sea in support of PRC maritime objectives and national security. Within shipping companies, personnel are trained and organized into militia transport units (民兵运输分队), leveraging existing commercial capabilities for government or military use.⁷⁸

Party branches and their cadres are essential tools to ensure militia or general crew personnel are responsive to military authorities when tasked for missions or training. Consistent with other requirements for Party control of the armed forces, Party branches provide core organizational leadership for implementing training, conducting political education, maintaining discipline, and ensuring mental and organizational readiness of personnel.⁷⁹ Compared to fishing industry-based Maritime Militia units, organizational dynamics are likely quite different aboard oceangoing merchant ships. State-owned shipping companies are far more centralized, possess greater organizational and material resources, and offer higher levels of sailor professionalism. Having a robust link to the Party-state at the grassroots levels may enhance the availability of resources and assets to the military.

Fundamentally, the ship Party branch and its political commissar are rooted in the PLA’s tradition of “building the Party branch at the company level” and the military’s political work system.⁸⁰ In the words of one PLA Air Force veteran pilot who later became a ship political commissar, the roles of the position are equivalent to a “political instructor in a [military] unit” (相当于部队的指导员), referring to the military-style of management conducted aboard PRC merchant ships.⁸¹

⁷⁶ 湖南军转干部中招聘船舶政委 (需要招: 50 人) [“Recruiting Ship Political Commissars from Hunan’s Transferring Military Cadres (Required Recruitment: 50 People)”], 传播招生网 [www.pxems.net], 6 April 2015, <https://www.pxems.net/course-141345.html>; 于海亮 [Yu Hailiang], 客轮政委怎么当 [“How to Serve as a Ferry Political Commissar”], 东北之窗 [Window into the Northeast], No. 3A, p. 69.

⁷⁷ See Article 2 of 民兵工作条例 [“Militia Work Regulations”], 中央政府门户网站 [www.gov.cn], 15 September 2005, https://www.gov.cn/banshi/gm/content_63632.htm; Article 22 of 中华人民共和国国防法 [“National Defense Law of the People’s Republic of China”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 27 December 2020, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/fqwx/flfg/4876050.html>.

⁷⁸ For a good example of local maritime militia construction, including developing militia transport units in shipping companies, see: 罗文义 [Luo Wenyi], 刘金鹏 [Liu Jinpeng], and 严秋涛 [Yan Qiutao], 联合作战, 民兵不能缺席 [“In Joint Operations, the Militia Cannot be Absent”], 中国国防报 [China Defence News], 25 January 2016, <http://military.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0125/c1011-28081634.html>.

⁷⁹ Here is one example of using Party organization and leadership to strengthen maritime militia force management and readiness from the Ningbo Military Subdistrict’s area of responsibility in Zhejiang Province. 何军毅 [He Junyi], 赵继承 [Zhao Jicheng], 罗正然 [Luo Zhengran], 海上民兵动员征召: 行政命令曾不如“船老大” [“Maritime Militia Mobilization: Administrative Orders Were Once Inferior to Those of the ‘Skippers’”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 28 November 2016, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/m/mil/2016/11-28/8076635.shtml>.

⁸⁰ Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, pp. 12-13.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 126.

A political instructor is the political officer in charge of a company-sized PLA unit, equal in authority to the company's commanding officer. Despite the vastly different nature of their work, the functions of ship political commissars and political officers in the PLA are quite similar. Both fulfill responsibilities in maintaining discipline, conducting political education, attending to morale and the needs of personnel, and other leadership roles.⁸²

Ship political commissars have largely been recruited from PLA political officers since the position was created because of their leadership skills, military experience, and political loyalty. For example, one former PLA officer recounted their experience conducting an evacuation mission of PRC nationals from South Yemen in 1986. Serving as ship political commissar leading the Party branch and in coordination with the ship's captain, he credits his military background in benefiting mission organization and planning, successfully evacuating over 400 personnel.⁸³ Today, COSCO job recruiting advertisements continue to require hiring of battalion-grade PLA officers that were commanding officers of grassroots units with experience leading troops. These positions span all sectors such as containerships, tankers, bulk cargo carriers, special ships, and others.⁸⁴

A Special Case for Ferries

RO-RO ships, such as passenger ferries represent a special case in the ship political commissar system. This is due to the services they provide in support of PLA forces. One prominent example is Bohai Ferry Group (渤海轮渡), which operates ten large RO-RO passenger ferries running routes across the Bohai Gulf between Shandong and Liaoning Provinces.⁸⁵ While these are oceangoing vessels, they are typically not engaged in international voyages and usually remain close to the PRC coast. The company extensively supports PRC national defense needs by providing transportation services to PLA forces. To facilitate such support, the company has also organized its ships into a transport group (海运大队) as part of the Strategic Projection Support Forces, civilian-based forces meant to provide “force projection and logistics support in diversified military missions...”⁸⁶ For more than 15 years, the company, to much public acclaim, has made support for national defense a priority in its shipbuilding and design, personnel recruitment and training, and annual operational planning. According to official news, it has striven to achieve “the seamless integration of production and operations management with the management of military transportation.”⁸⁷

⁸² For a description of political officers in the PLA, see: Kenneth W. Allen, Thomas Corbett, Taylor A. Lee, and Ma Xiu, “Personnel of the People's Liberation Army,” *Blue Path Labs*, 3 November 2022, pp. 17-20, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-11/Personnel_Peoples_Liberation_Army.pdf.

⁸³ Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing, p. 33.

⁸⁴ 月薪 3.5W+, 大专起报! 中远海运船员管理有限公司招 50 人! [“Monthly Salary of 35,000+, Junior College Graduates or Above! COSCO Shipping Seafarer Management Co., Ltd. Recruiting 50 People!”], 北京中公国企考试咨询 [*Beijing Offcn State-Owned Enterprise Examination Consultation*], 1 September 2020, https://k.sina.cn/article_6500495429_18375b04500100q6ye.html.

⁸⁵ 我们是谁 [“Who We Are”], 渤海轮渡集团股份有限公司 [*Bohai Ferry Group Co., Ltd.*], <https://www.bhferry.com/brief.html>.

⁸⁶ 何国本 [He Guoben], 邹伟 [Zou Wei], 鲍文华 [Bao Wenhua], and 陈龙 [Chen Long], 战略投送支援船队训练现状及对策 [“Current Situation and Countermeasures of Strategic Projection Support Fleet Training”], 军事交通学院学报 [*Journal of Military Transportation University*], no. 5 (May 2017), p. 2.

⁸⁷ The company has received significant attention and support from the PLA. These included high-level inspections, including an inspection by Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission Fan Changlong. 刘开才 [Liu Kaicai] and 唐忠超 [Tang Zhongchao], 行业拥军千帆竞发—山东省烟台市“渤海轮渡”现象观察 [“Industry Supports the Military and Thousands of Ships Compete to Set Sail – Witnessing the Phenomenon of ‘Bohai Ferry’ in Yantai City, Shandong Province”], 中国军网 [*China Military Online*], 21 December 2019, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfdy/4857241.html>; 渤海轮渡成国内首家安全生产一级达标客滚企业 [“Bohai Ferry Becomes the First RO-RO Passenger Ferry Enterprise in

The military background of key personnel, including ferry political commissars and the rest of the crew is an essential component of the company's goals of supporting the military. All of the company's ship political commissars are former military officers, reporting that over 40 regimental or battalion-grade military officers had joined the ranks in 2019. The company also reports recruiting large numbers of former military personnel for all other positions aboard these ferries and implementing a militarized system of management involving regular military training sessions, including closed training sessions with military units. One report states military units send personnel to provide 40 or more training hours for company personnel to improve their emergency support capabilities in military transportation. This management system is closely linked with the company's military organization, designed to interface with the PLA. Party Secretary and general manager of Bohai Ferry Group Yu Xinjian explained in 2019 "I serve as political commissar of the transport group and the company's executive vice president serves as its commander. We have also set up the transport group office, political department, liaison department, information support department, and other organs to support the front and facilitate a prompt integration with the military and receive tasking."⁸⁸ This PLA-style dual-command structure of a political commissar and commander, enforces Party control of the company's key assets and ensures their availability to the military when needed. According to the political commissar of the *BO HAI CUI ZHU*, a 36,000-ton RO-RO passenger ferry, the company's ferries are under a "dual command system" (双长制), a departure from the Captain Responsibility System in most shipping companies.⁸⁹ Another report states this system "maintains military unit structure in vessel management" (船舶管理保持了部队的建制).⁹⁰ This likely portends a much stronger leadership role for the ship political commissar aboard these ferries.

With national defense requirements permeating the company's leadership, organization, personnel, and ship design, the company is an exemplar of military-civilian fusion. Indeed, Bohai Ferry Group's ferries have extensively participated in major PLA maritime transportation exercises over the past several years.⁹¹ Furthermore, modifications have indicated a direct amphibious combat support role, whereby PLA amphibious assault forces train to conduct their landing operations directly using some of the company's ferries.⁹²

China to Meet the First-Class Safety Production Standards"], 胶东在线 [www.JiaoDong.net], 13 September 2013, <https://www.jiaodong.net/news/system/2013/09/13/012032433.shtml>.

⁸⁸ 刘洁 [Liu Jie], 王文 [Wang Wen], and 慕溯 [Mu Su], 烟台掀起“爱我人民爱我军”共建新浪潮 [“Yantai Sets Off a New Wave of ‘Love Our People, Love Our Military’ in Joint Construction”], 烟台文明网 [yt.wenming.cn], 1 August 2016, http://yt.wenming.cn/wmbb2016/201608/t20160801_2733869.html; Liu Kaicai and Tang Zhongchao, “Industry Supports the Military and Thousands of Ships Compete to Set Sail – Witnessing the Phenomenon of ‘Bohai Ferry’ in Yantai City, Shandong Province”; “Bohai Ferry Becomes the First RO-RO Passenger Ferry Enterprise in China to Meet the First-Class Safety Production Standards.”

⁸⁹ Liu Kaicai and Tang Zhongchao, “Industry Supports the Military and Thousands of Ships Compete to Set Sail – Witnessing the Phenomenon of ‘Bohai Ferry’ in Yantai City, Shandong Province.”

⁹⁰ Liu Jie, Wang Wen, and Mu Su, “Yantai Sets Off a New Wave of ‘Love Our People, Love Our Military’ in Joint Construction.”

⁹¹ For much greater detail in documented training support activities, see Michael J. Dahm's series of China Maritime Reports. Dahm, J. Michael, "China Maritime Report No. 35: Beyond Chinese Ferry Tales: The Rise of Deck Cargo Ships in China's Military Activities, 2023" (2024). CMSI China Maritime Reports. 35. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/35>; "China Maritime Report No. 25: More Chinese Ferry Tales: China's Use of Civilian Shipping in Military Activities, 2021-2022" (2023). CMSI China Maritime Reports. 25. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/25>; "China Maritime Report No. 16: Chinese Ferry Tales: The PLA's Use of Civilian Shipping in Support of Over-the-Shore Logistics" (2021). CMSI China Maritime Reports. 16. <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/16>.

⁹² Conor M. Kennedy, “RO-RO Ferries and the Expansion of the PLA's Landing Ship Fleet,” *Center for International Maritime Security*, 27 March 2023, <https://cimsec.org/ro-ro-ferries-and-the-expansion-of-the-plas-landing-ship-fleet/>.

More intensive involvement in military operations likely place greater requirements on crew management, discipline, and operational safety, a role greatly suited to the ship political commissar. The embarkation of large numbers of military personnel, equipment, and materials would necessarily require the focused attention of a ship political commissar that can manage cabin spaces, the mess hall, and activities taking place on board.

Other ferry operators also have the ship political commissar system in place and provide support to the military. COSCO Shipping Ferry Co., Ltd., (中远海运客运有限公司) a COSCO subsidiary that operates twelve large ferries that also regularly run routes across the Bohai Gulf.⁹³ COSCO Shipping Ferry similarly has organized its ferries into a transport group and provides significant direct transportation support for PLA forces.⁹⁴ The company's organizational structure contains a People's Armed Forces Department, which would be responsible for working with the PLA in managing mobilization of the vessels and militia crewmembers.⁹⁵ The individual ship Party branch, led by the ship political commissar, acts as an important organizational backbone for crew organization and management, as well as management of the militia.⁹⁶

The role of the ship political commissar aboard RO-RO ferries is uniquely important, but much remains unknown. The extent of their involvement beyond the management of crew and the maintenance of shipboard order is unknown. It is also unclear how widespread militia organizations are in RO-RO ferry companies and whose control they fall under. Nonetheless, having former military officers serving in a capacity to assert political control and discipline and help captains ensure the vessel is available to carry out military or national tasks is likely the desired goal. The Party Branch on board serves as an important guarantee of this.

Conclusion

PRC state-owned shipping widely implements a system of ship Party branches and assigned ship political commissars aboard its oceangoing merchant fleet. This system is framed as an essential organizational and leadership guarantee for asserting Party control over the nationally strategic shipping industries. It draws on a historical arrangement that has continued since the founding of the PRC and is further emphasized in the current political climate of enhancing political leadership over key industries and state-owned enterprises. Despite the continued presence of ship political commissars aboard PRC global shipping operations, it remains an understudied and potentially misunderstood subject.

While the core functions of a ship political commissar are to establish the ship Party branch and act as a representative of the Party-State and the second most senior officer aboard a ship, the position entails many other supporting functions. These include promoting company goals for efficiency and work safety, educating crew members on political ideology and policies and regulations, ensuring ship security, assisting the captain in crew and departmental management and conflict resolution, supporting logistics functions, and many other responsibilities. Since switching to the "Captain Responsibility System," ship political commissars no longer exercise command over vessels and instead carry out their work in support of the captain and the crew.

⁹³ 公司简介 [Company Overview], 中远海运客运有限公司 [COSCO Shipping Ferry Co., Ltd.], https://ferry.coscoshipping.com/col6083/art/2015/art_6083_38386.html.

⁹⁴ "RO-RO Ferries and the Expansion of the PLA's Landing Ship Fleet."

⁹⁵ 组织架构 ["Organizational Structure"], 中远海运客运有限公司 [COSCO Shipping Ferry Co., Ltd.], https://ferry.coscoshipping.com/col6085/art/2015/art_6085_38384.html.

⁹⁶ Yu, "How to Serve as a Ferry Political Commissar", p. 69.

The position's authority and prestige has declined since the 1980s amid societal changes and the imperative for companies to focus on commercial profitability and market competition. These goals and inherent quality issues in the ranks of political commissars at times stand in the way of recent initiatives to strengthen the quality of Party management and grassroots organization in state-run shipping.

The ship political commissar has an important leadership and supporting role when ships are tasked to carry out missions of national significance or in support of the military. The position's origins come from military tradition and most ship political commissars are former military officers. The political commissar's influence and authority with the crew can help maintain work discipline during challenging situations. In some sectors, such as RO-RO ferry operators, the position may have a greater role in providing support to the military, perhaps through management of militia organizations. While the potential national security roles of the political commissar are not fully known, they are nonetheless an important Party-state presence that can enforce discipline and compliance aboard ships.

This report aims to serve as an update to 2003 book *The Political Commissar and His Shipmates – Transformation of the Commissar's Role on Chinese Ships* by Zhao Minghua, Shi Xiuyin, and Feng Tongqing. The authors' original research and field work has been invaluable in the research of this report. The unique ship political commissar system in PRC shipping deserves an examination in the years since the China joined the World Trade Organization. In particular, the PRC's strategy to become a maritime power has placed great importance on the strategic role of its maritime shipping industries. The primacy of politics in the Xi Jinping era has further highlighted the Party's role within state-run shipping and has resulted in efforts to revitalize the ship political commissar system in the largest shipping conglomerate, COSCO Shipping. Most importantly and not sufficiently raised in this report, international actors such as shipping companies, international port operators, and regulatory and law enforcement authorities can all benefit from a deeper understanding of PRC ship political commissars that sail into foreign ports globally.

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