

From Risk Bearers to Value Creators – Reflections on the Development of Seafarers in the New Era of Global Shipping

Speech by Mr. Terence Zhao, Chairman of Singhai Marine, at the World Seafarers' Day Event Organized by Shenzhen Maritime Safety Administration



Distinguished leaders, guests, colleagues from the shipping industry, and friends from the seafarer community,

Good afternoon, everyone! It is a great honour to be invited by the Shenzhen Maritime Safety Administration to participate in the 2026 World Seafarers' Day event. First, please allow me to express my sincere gratitude to the leaders at all levels who have long cared for and supported the development of the seafaring profession! At the same time, I would like to extend my highest respect and warmest greetings to all the seafarers working diligently on the world's oceans!

This year, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has set the theme for World Seafarers' Day as: "Carrying World Trade, Carrying the Risks." This is not merely a slogan; it is the most authentic portrayal of the seafaring profession.

As a practitioner in seafarer services, management, and training, I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on the development of seafarers in the new era of global shipping.

I. Global shipping continues to grow, and the importance of seafarers is more prominent than ever

If someone were to ask today, in an era of rapid artificial intelligence development and increasing levels of automation, why should we still pay so much attention to seafarers? My answer is simple: because seafarers remain one of the most irreplaceable forces in the global trading system.

According to statistics from international organizations, approximately 90% of global trade is carried by sea. The transportation of energy, food, industrial raw materials, and most of the goods we need in our daily lives depends on shipping. Looking back over the past four decades of development, the global shipping industry has demonstrated remarkable resilience. According to data released by institutions such as Drewry and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), global seaborne trade has generally maintained a growth trend since 1980, with only

a very few years experiencing brief declines. Neither the Asian financial crisis, the international financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the complex geopolitical conflicts in recent years has altered the long-term growth trend of global seaborne trade.

全球贸易持续增长，航运需求从未停歇



After the pandemic, sectors such as global container shipping, energy transportation, and dry bulk shipping have all resumed growth. This illustrates a fundamental fact: global trade will continue to grow, shipping demand will continue to grow, and the number of ships will continue to grow. And behind all of this, seafarers are indispensable. In a sense, seafarers do not only serve the shipping industry; they sustain the normal operation of the global economy. When the world focuses on cargo transportation, we should pay even more attention to the people who transport the cargo; when the world focuses on supply chain security, we should pay more attention to the people who support the supply chain. Those people are the seafarers. They spend years far away from their families, working on the vast oceans; they may not often appear in the public eye, yet they silently shoulder the crucial responsibility of ensuring the normal functioning of global trade. Therefore, no matter how technology advances, no matter how techniques develop, seafarers will always be the most valuable and core resource of the shipping industry. Without seafarers, there is no modern shipping; without modern shipping, there is no global trade.

II. The global shortage of seafarers is becoming a critical challenge constraining industry development

However, in stark contrast to the sustained growth of the shipping industry, the global supply of seafarers is far from ample. The shortage of senior officers, in particular, has never been fundamentally alleviated over the past several decades.

全球高级船员缺口已超6万人，未来五年将加剧至9万人

年份	缺口人数	说明
2025年	57,500人 ^{9.2%}	短缺占可用高级船员池的9.2%，全球航运业面临严峻的人力资源挑战
2026年	62,200人	持续扩大
2031年	90,900人	预计缺口 随着全球船队以比以往更快的速度扩张，预计新增约6,700艘船舶，高级船员的需求也随之增加

数据来源：Drewry Manning Report 2026/27

The Seafarer Workforce Report jointly published by BIMCO and the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) shows that there has long been a shortage of senior officers globally. With the expansion of the global fleet and the rapid development of new-energy vessels and digital ships, the demand for senior officers will continue to grow in the future. If the seafarer issue is not effectively addressed, it is likely to become one of the key factors constraining the further development of the shipping industry.



China's development trajectory is actually very representative. After the reform and opening-up, China gradually grew into one of the world's most important seafarer supply countries. For a considerable period, China's seafarer supply exceeded demand. It was against this backdrop that China gradually formed its distinctive seafarer overseas placement industry. But today, the situation is undergoing profound changes. As China has become the world's largest shipowning country, the

scale of the Chinese-controlled fleet continues to expand, and the demand for crew, especially senior officers, keeps growing. At the same time, the salary levels of Chinese senior officers have been rising continuously and are now significantly higher than those in traditional seafarer supply countries such as the Philippines, India, Myanmar, and Indonesia.

Therefore, we are witnessing a new trend: in the past, Chinese seafarers went out to the world; today, the world's seafarers are coming to China. More and more Chinese shipowners are beginning to accept and employ seafarers from countries such as the Philippines, India, Myanmar, and Indonesia. This change not only reflects the development of China's shipping industry but also the accelerating integration of the global seafarer market. If the competition in the global shipping industry over the past few decades was about ships and capital, then over the next decade, one of the core resources in the competition will very likely be high-quality seafarers. Yet today, young people have far more diverse career choices than in the past. How to enable more outstanding young people to understand the seafaring profession, identify with it, and join the seafarer workforce has become a crucial challenge facing the entire industry. In my opinion, enhancing the attractiveness of the seafaring profession depends not only on income but also requires professional dignity, clear career development pathways, and society's recognition of the value of the seafaring profession. The establishment of World Seafarers' Day by the IMO, and the successive hosting of World Seafarers' Day events by the Shenzhen Maritime Safety Administration for many years, are significant not only in paying tribute to seafarers but also in enabling the whole society to re-recognize the important value of the seafaring profession. Only by making more young people willing to go to sea can the talent foundation of the future global shipping industry be truly secured.

According to employment tracking data from national maritime institutions, the turnover rate for graduates of some majors after ten years of work has exceeded 60%. This indicates that the challenge facing the industry today is no longer just about training seafarers, but more importantly about how to retain them, develop them, and enable them to achieve success.

III. Risks are increasing, and this year's World Seafarers' Day theme holds special practical significance

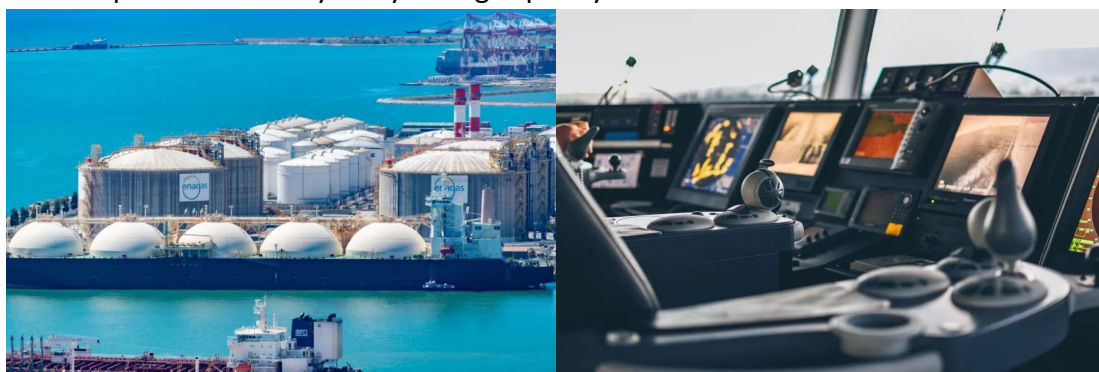
Over the past year or so, the global shipping industry has faced unprecedented challenges. The Red Sea crisis has continued to escalate. The recent deterioration of the situation in the Middle East and the increased navigation risks in the Strait of Hormuz have once again drawn global attention.

A large number of ships have been affected. Tens of thousands of seafarers have been in high-risk areas for extended periods. Crew change difficulties have intensified, work cycles have been forcibly extended, psychological pressure has continued to mount, and personal safety faces new uncertainties. When cargo cannot be delivered on time, people focus on supply chain issues; when energy prices rise, people focus on market fluctuations; but when seafarers cannot return home on time, very few truly focus on the pressure and risks they bear. In fact, they

shoulder not only the responsibility of transporting cargo but also the vital responsibility of maintaining the stable operation of global trade. Therefore, I believe that this year's IMO theme – "Carrying World Trade, Carrying the Risks" – is the truest and most profound description of the seafaring profession. It reminds us that while we pay attention to cargo, ships, and trade, we should pay even more attention to the people who make all this happen.

IV. New energy and artificial intelligence are reshaping the seafaring profession

As a practitioner who entered the shipping industry in the 1990s, I have personally experienced the transformation of Chinese seafarers from an oversupply and large-scale overseas deployment phase to today's new stage of international crewing. Over the past three decades and more, I have witnessed many cyclical fluctuations in the shipping market, as well as China's gradual progression from a major shipping nation towards a strong shipping power. But never before have I felt as profoundly as today that the seafarer issue has evolved from a corporate concern into a strategic industry issue. In the past, we paid more attention to ships, markets, and prices; today, we increasingly realize that talent is the key resource determining the industry's future. If the competition in the global shipping industry over the past few decades was about ships and capital, then in the future, one of the core resources in the competition will very likely be high-quality seafarers.



Currently, the global shipping industry is undergoing two profound transformations. The first is the green and low-carbon transition. The second is the digital and artificial intelligence transformation. LNG-fuelled ships, methanol-fuelled ships, and ammonia-fuelled ships are increasing. Artificial intelligence, big data, smart navigation, and remote monitoring technologies are developing rapidly.

These changes mean that the future shipping industry will require not only more seafarers but also higher-quality seafarers. Future seafarers must possess stronger professional competence, safety awareness, digital capabilities, international communication skills, and a commitment to continuous learning. At the same time, they will need to gradually acquire abilities in data analysis, human-machine collaboration, and intelligent system application to meet the requirements of the smart shipping era. I have always believed that artificial intelligence will not replace seafarers. However, seafarers who are adept at using artificial intelligence will replace those who are not. In the future, seafarers will not only be ship operators but should also become technology users, risk managers, and value creators.

V. Shenzhen and the development of seafarers in the new era

Shenzhen is one of China's most internationalized port cities and an important hub for the development of international shipping in the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. For a long time, the Shenzhen Maritime Safety Administration has attached great importance to seafarer development, the protection of seafarers' rights and interests, and international seafarer exchange and cooperation. Hosting World Seafarers' Day events for many consecutive years not only reflects respect for the seafaring profession but also demonstrates Shenzhen's responsibility in building a global maritime centre and an international shipping hub. I believe that in the future, Shenzhen will play an increasingly important role in areas such as high-quality seafarer training, international training cooperation, and digital service innovation.

VI. From observer to practitioner – Singhai's twenty-one years of exploration

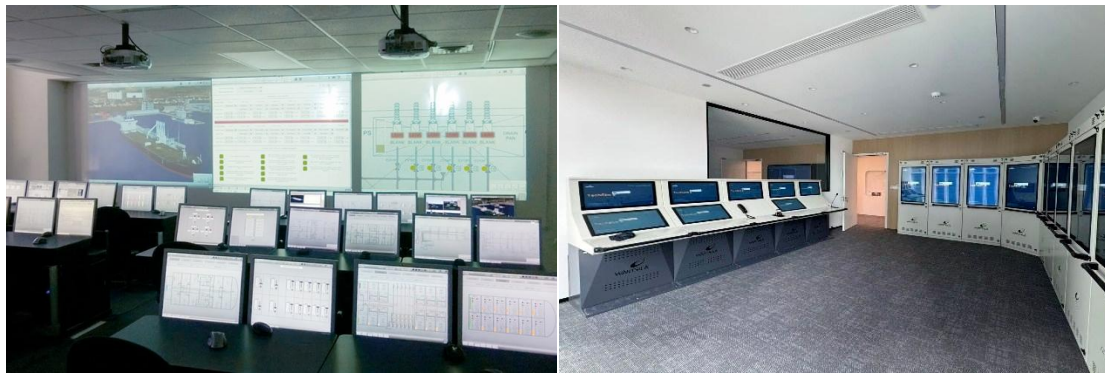


Facing the opportunities and challenges of seafarer development in the new era, we need not only reflection but also action. Founded in 2005, Singhai has now gone through twenty-one years of development. Over these twenty-one years, we have consistently adhered to the development philosophy of "seafarer-centricity," continuously investing in and exploring seafarer services, training, management, and digital development. To date, Singhai has dispatched over 100,000 seafarers cumulatively, provided full crew management services for more than 400 vessels, currently maintains a pool of over 10,000 active seafarers, and serves over 100 shipowners and ship management companies globally, covering multiple sectors including container ships, bulk carriers, oil tankers, chemical tankers, gas carriers, offshore vessels, and luxury cruise ships.



Over these twenty-one years, our greatest realization has been: in the past, we worried about not being able to find ships; later, we worried about not being able to find seafarers; and today, we are even more worried about not being able to find high-quality seafarers who can adapt to future development. This change precisely reflects the fact that China's shipping industry is transitioning from a phase of scale expansion to a phase of high-quality development. This is also why, in recent years, we have invested increasing resources into the fields of training and digital development.





First, empowerment through training. Starting from 2011, Singhai has successively established Singapore (Nantong) International Maritime Institute (SNIMI), Shanghai Singhai Training Center (SSTC), and Shenzhen International Maritime Training Centre (SIMTC), gradually forming a training network covering the Yangtze River Delta and the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Shenzhen International Maritime Training Centre is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities, including a full-mission bridge simulator, a full-mission engine room simulator, dual-fuel simulators for LNG and methanol, and ECDIS simulators, with a focus on serving the talent training needs of the new-energy and smart shipping era. As of now, Singhai's three training centres have cumulatively trained over 30,000 seafarer attendances, offered more than 70 training courses, and established cooperative relationships with over 70 shipping enterprises. We have always believed that past training was more about meeting certification requirements; the more important role of future training is to help seafarers adapt to the future.

Second, empowerment through digital technology. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence and digital technology, we began to consider: can we use digital means to help the industry address long-standing issues such as fragmented seafarer information, inefficient matching, and insufficient career development support? Based on this thinking, AiSailings was born. From the very beginning, our goal was not merely to build a recruitment platform, but to create a future-oriented digital service platform for seafarers. By leveraging data and artificial intelligence technologies, it connects seafarers, shipowners, training institutions, and industry service resources, enhancing talent allocation efficiency, enabling more precise training, and making services more convenient. In the future, we hope to gradually build an open and shared seafarer ecosystem, providing seafarers with full-lifecycle services covering employment, training, growth, and development. Because we believe that the future competition in seafarer management will be a competition not only for talent but also for data and ecosystems.

VII. Conclusion

Distinguished leaders, friends,

Seafarers have propelled the development of world trade in the past;

Seafarers are sustaining the operation of today's global supply chain;

Seafarers will also determine the competitiveness of the future shipping industry.

No matter how times change, no matter how technology advances, the most

important asset of the shipping industry has never been ships, but people.

Looking to the future, we need not only more seafarers but also better seafarers; not only seafarers who can navigate ships, but also seafarers in the new era who can harness technology and create value. If we wish to build a strong shipping nation and a strong maritime power, we must build a new-era seafarer workforce that is sufficient in number, excellent in quality, and internationally competitive. This is not only a need for the development of the industry but also for the development of the nation; it is not only the responsibility of enterprises but also the responsibility of our generation of shipping professionals. Let us work together to enable more young people to understand seafarers, respect them, and join their ranks; let us work together to enable seafarers to grow from risk bearers into value creators; let us work together to contribute new strength to the development of China's shipping industry and the global seafaring profession. Thank you all!