# Qualitative or Superficial Shift Toward Politics?

## Nan Li

In the second chapter of his book, entitled "Civil-Military Relations," Professor David Shambaugh argues that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had departed from its post-Mao professionalization path by being remobilized into societal politics following the military intervention in Tiananmen (　　) on June 4, 1989 (pp. 20-31). He has offered three sets of evidence. First, the PLA became heavily involved in interrogating demonstrators, carrying out party propaganda among the populace, and occupying a few civilian institutions known as the "major disaster zones" in Beijing. Second, recalcitrant troops were investigated and "extreme indoctrination" was conducted within the PLA not only on the necessity of the absolute leadership of the party but also on the need to fight both "bourgeois liberalization" and "peaceful evolution." Third, political purges were revived, which triggered factional rivalry among the leadership ranks of the PLA. As a result, Shambaugh maintains that "a qualitative shift in party-army relations" toward a focus on politics had taken place after Tiananmen (p. 26). He then states, however, that the rules of the game changed after the personnel reshuffling at the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Fourteenth National Congress of September 1992, which led to a decline of the PLA involvement in politics; he attributes this change to the complaints by senior retired or active service officers (pp. 29-30, 31).

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Shambaugh's argument has raised an important question: how can a "qualitative shift" be reversed so quickly? By definition, a qualitative shift should reflect major structural change and thus *cannot* be changed so easily. I would argue that apparent change may look dramatic, but can often in fact be superficial. Such change may represent a short aberration from the professionalization path, but not a qualitative and structural shift toward politics. A closer and comparative examination of Shambaugh's evidence may explain why the current shift is superficial and temporary, but not qualitative and structural.

*First Set of Evidence*

While it is true that some PLA units left their barracks to interrogate citizens, carry out party propaganda, and occupy a few civilian compounds in Beijing, such involvement in societal politics was temporary rather than entrenched or institutionalized. In comparison, the PLA involvement in societal politics of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) can be regarded as entrenched and institutionalized: an average of 80-90 percent of the key party and government positions at provincial, municipal, and county levels were held by PLA officers, and PLA membership in the CCP Central Committee and Politburo had reached as high as 50 percent.[1] In comparison, the post-1989 involvement was limited and short: the PLA had largely terminated these activities and returned to their barracks following the lifting of martial law in Beijing in January 1990.

Shambaugh writes that PLA membership in the 1992 Central Committee had risen to 24 percent (p. 30) because of Tiananmen, but the actual number is 23.3 percent (44 out of 189, though note that some observers have counted 42). Shambaugh also did not count the PLA alternate membership. If both types of membership are combined, the PLA membership declines to 19.1 percent (61 out of 319), only about a one percent increase

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[1] For numbers, see Nan Li, "Political-Military Changes in China, 1978-89," *Security Studies* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1994-95): 428, 429. For a well-researched account of PLA entrenchment in societal politics in the Cultural Revolution, see Ellis Joffe, "The Chinese Army after the Cultural Revolution: The Effects of Intervention," *The China Quarterly*, no. 55 (July-September 1973): 450-77.

over the 18 percent representation on the 1987 Central Committee. Some may argue that full membership is more important politically because higher positions indicate an increase in political importance. In the 1992 Politburo, the highest policy institution, however, there were only 2 PLA members out of a total of 22 seats, constituting only 9 percent, a decline from the 11 percent of the Thirteenth Congress in 1987. One of the two, Yang Baibing (       ), did not even hold any official PLA position.[2]

*Second Set of Evidence*

In terms of indoctrination, again, it is difficult to argue that the change is qualitative and structural. In his earlier article (the basis of this chapter), Shambaugh cited an interview with the General Political Department (GDP,         ) that maintained that those who were court-martialed for recalcitrance in Tiananmen were "extremely few" in number.[3] This citation is curiously missing in this chapter, however, maybe in order not to contradict his claim that "it is clear that disciplinary action was taken against large numbers of officers and soldiers" (p. 24). Shambaugh is still not able to produce conclusive evidence, however, except to cite the report noted by Harlan Jencks that "3,500 PLA and PAP [People's Armed Police] commanders and commissars were investigated, with the majority being reprimanded rather than charged" (p. 24). The GDP interlocutor(s) may be right.

Such political education in the PLA on party leadership and the need to guard against "unhealthy" tendencies is not particularly unusual; it belongs in the category of what PLA vocabulary terms "positive education" (          , *zhengmian jiaoyu*), which is different from the "negative campaigns" similar to those waged before and during the Cultural Revolution. The former is mainly intended to strengthen the Leninist hierarchy. The latter, however, assumes a struggle between "two lines" in the higher leadership of the PLA, and the need to mobilize the lower levels to criticize

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[2]For this interpretation, see Li, "Political-Military Changes in China," 456.

[3]David Shambaugh, "The Soldier and the State in China: The Political Work System in the People's Liberation Army," *The China Quarterly*, no. 127 (September 1991): 554 n. 98.

and expose those at higher levels who follow the "wrong" line. These campaigns usually cause the erosion and even collapse of the Leninist hierarchy. They have also traditionally involved political persecutions that produce large number of political criminals, triggering severe factional rivalry in the PLA.

To stress the PLA's reemphasis on politics, Shambaugh goes on to say that efforts were made to strengthen the political commissar and party committee systems, and to establish party committees at the company level (p. 29). However, the political commissar system was not abolished before 1989. Similarly, the party committee has been a central decision-making mechanism that integrates the commanders and commissars of all the PLA units at and above the battalion level—regardless of whether there exist politically chaotic events as Tiananmen or not. Also highly doubtful is that the party committee would replace the party branch at the company level, mainly because the two have similar functions (the change would thus make little difference). Moreover, there are too few party members in a company to hold a party congress to produce a party committee. A recent GPD circular that commends thirty-four advanced grass-roots party organizations shows that all are party branches, but not party committees.[4]

### Third Set of Evidence

Shambaugh's supporting evidence that political purges trigger factional rivalry is also impressionistic and inclusive. The commander of the 38th Group Army is the only higher-ranking officer who can be identified as having been removed, not for political reasons, but for disobeying orders during the Tiananmen crackdown (p. 24). Shambaugh argues that "widespread personnel changes took place in the upper reaches of the armed forces. Six of the seven military region commanders and commissars were replaced or reshuffled, and there was an even more thorough housecleaning at the military district level" (p. 25). The names of those who were purged,

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[4]"GPD Issues Circular to Commend All-Army Advanced Party Organizations and Outstanding Party Members and Party Workers," *Liberation Army Daily*, June 30, 2004, 1, 3, available at http://www.pladaily.com/gb/pladaily/2004/06/30/20040630001004.html.

however, are not provided and Shambaugh recognizes that "to some extent, the personnel changes must be seen as part of a routine rotation" (p. 25).

*Modernizing China's Military* particularly notes the attempt by GDP Director Yang Baibing to "build up his network of cronies" by promoting "those who had distinguished themselves or had demonstrated loyalty during the 1989 crackdown ... along with a large number of ideologically pure political commissars" (p. 25). This attempt, according to Shambaugh, triggered a backlash, which led to Yang's removal from the GDP directorship at the CCP's Fourteenth Congress and "set off a long process of personnel changes in the military" (p. 30). Again, no names of those who were victimized by this backlash are identified. Oddly, Yang was promoted to the Politburo. Also, some of the alleged "Yang loyalists" retained their positions or even received promotions. Yu Yongbo (　　　), for instance, was promoted from a deputy position to the GDP Director. Zhang Gong (　　), the PLA spokesman at Tiananmen and the Political Commissar of the Beijing Military Region (　　　　), became first the Political Commissar of the Chengdu (　　) Military Region, and still later the Political Commissar of the Academy of Military Sciences (　　　　).[5]

The nondescript and ephemeral nature of the opposing "factions," and the seeming absence of deadly "antagonistic contradictions" and struggles that produce large number of political casualties, make it difficult to argue that there has been a qualitative shift toward the identifiable, sustained, and highly competitive and lethal factional balancing that we witnessed during the Cultural Revolution.

*A Final Observation*

It now appears that the real qualitative and structural shift actually took place years before rather than after Tiananmen, and the shift was not toward an emphasis on politics but toward developing (1) a sustentative measure of specialization-based institutional boundaries, and (2) authority differentiation-based bureaucratic boundaries that mediate the relations be-

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[5]Li, "Political-Military Changes in China," 456.

tween superiors and subordinates. These two major indicators of hierarchy represent a move away from the anarchy of the Cultural Revolution. The PLA's quick retreat from societal politics in the post-1989 period shows that the first change has continued.

The short life of the so-called Yang "faction," on the other hand, not only demonstrates that the second change has been sustained but also validates the theory of bureaucracy articulated by Michael Crozier, Anthony Downs, and Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott.[6] According to this theory, power dynamics and relationships in the form of informal politics and groups may develop around the uncertainty of bureaucracy, and can be caused either by ambiguous directives or technical breakdowns (such as Tiananmen). Such politics and groups, however, are not stable and cannot be sustained for long. This is because a major function of bureaucratic hierarchy is to mitigate and reduce the uncertainty and informalities by issuing clearer directives, reshuffling personnel, and installing better technical maintenance (such as developing riot control capabilities). As a result, the odds of personal aggrandizement can be reduced and the chances of enhancing organizational goals improved.

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[6]See Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964); Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); and Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, *Formal Organizations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963).