

Modernizing China's Military: A Dialectical Critique

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In the preface to *Modernizing China's Military*, Shambaugh mentions Ellis Joffe's oft-quoted book, *The Chinese Army After Mao*, adding that it was the last book to offer a comprehensive study of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA).¹ There is no question that Shambaugh's book will also be read, quoted, and cited by almost every student of the PLA, including those in mainland China, and be included in the syllabus of courses related to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Chinese armed forces.

In this essay, I seek to discuss Shambaugh's book in terms of dialectics. In late 2002, Shambaugh and I were on the same panel at an international conference on the PLA, which was sponsored by the Chinese Council of Advanced Studies (CAPS) and the RAND Corporation. During the panel I mentioned that I had spotted the word "dialectics" in his paper (and in others), and I made a plea for China watchers to study the Chinese Communists *first* from a dialectical approach. At the end of the session, Shambaugh asked me for the Chinese word for dialectics, to which I replied "*bianzhengfa*" (辯證法).

Shambaugh is certainly aware that the Chinese Communists apply different versions of dialectics. In *Modernizing China's Military*, he twice

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¹Ellis Joffe, *The Chinese Army After Mao* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

cited my book, *The Chinese PLA's Perception of an Invasion of Taiwan*,² the cover page of which depicts a dialectical model. Moreover, Shambaugh's 2002 book was dedicated to Michel C. Oksenberg, yet another scholar aware of the dialectical nature of Chinese Communist politics.³ In Jorn Brommelhorster and John Frankenstein's *Mixed Motives, Uncertain Outcomes: Defense Conversion in China*, Frankenstein wrote in note 1 of chapter 1: "... in the Chinese view, 'conversion' can swing both ways—from war production to civilian production and back again. This is consistent with the Chinese view that war and peace are—like *yin* [陰] and *yang* [陽]—two sides of the same coin...."⁴ I was, moreover, also able to spot at least one dialectical term in every chapter of *Modernizing China's Military*.

In this new book, Shambaugh mentioned "persisting in entrenched practices" (p. 8) and "[o]ld habits die hard" (p. 241). For more than 3,100 years, the Chinese mind has been accustomed to *Yin*, *Yang*, and the Five Elements (五行, *Wuxing*).⁵ In other words, the Chinese are more comfortable with navigating within a series of dialectical frameworks, which has five functions in three categories.⁶ Mao was one political figure who certainly creatively applied dialectics, especially during political struggles. The existence of two Central Military Commissions (CMC, 中央軍事委員會), moreover, is not contradictory (p. 115). At the macro-level, the relationship between Hu Jintao (胡錦濤) and Jiang Zemin (江澤民) after the Sixteenth Party Congress should also be understood in terms of *Yin* and *Yang*.

²Peter Kien-hong Yu, *The Chinese PLA's Perception of an Invasion of Taiwan* (New York: Contemporary U.S.-Asia Research Institute, 1996).

³Michel Oksenberg, "Sources and Methodological Problems in the Study of Contemporary China," in *Chinese Communist Politics in Action*, ed. A. Doak Barnett (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), 605.

⁴Jorn Brommelhorster and John Frankenstein, editors. *Mixed Motives, Uncertain Outcomes: Defense Conversion in China* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1997).

⁵The term "*Wuxing*" refers to the five primary elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth.

⁶Peter Kien-hong Yu, *The Crab and Frog Motion Paradigm Shift: Decoding and Deciphering Taipei and Beijing's Dialectical Politics* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002), chap. 1.

Shambaugh said that Oksenberg has the ability to see the big picture (p. xxii), which I have tried to accomplish dialectically in my 2002 book.⁷ As Shambaugh pointed out, war-fighting doctrine⁸ is intertwined with strategy, tactics, force structure, training, personnel appointments, military education, and protection of national security—which are collectively known as the corporate domain. Similarly, we should consider a series of dialectical models of thought and action in our fuller understanding of the PLA. Thus, we must first consider a framework of "rule of law" politics vs. "rule by men" politics, in between which lies "rule of dialectical politics." Then, we have to enter into the "communism vs. capitalism" model in this critique, and, if necessary, its variations.

After figuring out the mainstream economic line for each phase of development, we can then discuss state (國家, *guojia*), ideology, and politics (which embraces military issues)—in that order of importance. We should not forget that the CCP still wants to command the gun, not vice versa. In short, "people's war (under modern conditions or limited war under high-tech conditions) vs. non-people's war" does accordingly mandate changes in, for instance, battlefield tactics (p. 65).

By adding terms like "with Chinese characteristics," the CCP is seeking to keep a distance from the other extreme, namely, capitalism—at least in theory, if not also in practice. Because "people's war" is the super-structure, or reflected from (反映自) communism in the "communism vs. capitalism" model or in "socialism with Chinese characteristics" in the "socialism with Chinese characteristics vs. capitalism" framework, it will never be abandoned. After May 1953, another way to say "people's war vs. non-people's war" has been "revolutionization, modernization, and regularization vs. non-revolutionization-modernization-regularization." Fighting a "people's war" simply reminds the PLA that it should fight in the interests of the common people, whereas the armed forces in capitalist

⁷Since the ideas represented in this book are too complex to outline fully here, please refer to Yu, *The Crab and Frog Motion Paradigm Shift*, esp. p. 269.

⁸The Chinese characters closest to the meaning of this term appear to be "*junshi sixiang*" (軍事思想) or "*junshi fangzhen*" (軍事方針).

countries mainly fight to protect the interests of capitalists.

I would thus argue that it is a mistake for Shambaugh to mention the model of party-army relations (p. 12), to use terms like "party-army" and "civil-military," or to say that "it is now more analytically appropriate to consider civil-military rather than party-army relations" in mainland China (p. 13). This is because the PLA is the people's army and the CCP has not yet finished its sacred task of defending the interests of the people, and therefore still needs both to be the ruling party and to command the armed forces. Needless to say, the CCP acknowledges that the demise of the Soviet Union was a big setback for communism, but is convinced that communism will be able to come back and even prevail someday—even if only in the far distant future.

Because each dialectical model is interrelated with other frameworks, the CCP cannot abandon "people's war," even if the CCP becomes an opposition party. This is similar to what Shambaugh wrote: "In any military, it takes a long time to assimilate and operationalize new doctrinal innovations..." (p. 94). In addition, stressing weapons could bring about defeat (the CCP and the PLA would rely on a "men and weapons vs. non-men-and-weapons" model or even the "men vs. weapons" framework). Human history is fraught with surprises, and Shambaugh seems to agree when he states that "Although it may appear that the PLA is closing the gap with modern militaries, the opposite is actually the case" (p. 107).

Because the structure and properties (such as logic) of each framework are the same, military leaders can speak the same political language and can readily instruct the officers and soldiers to obey and carry out their missions. Shambaugh noted that when the CMC generals were briefed by specialists regarding information warfare, they were befuddled by the unfamiliar concepts and technologies (p. 83). If the specialists had been able to present the briefing dialectically, the CMC generals would have felt more comfortable and would have then been able to readily push for modernization at a faster pace.⁹ Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) once said that

⁹The April 1, 2004 issue of *Zhongguo guofangbao* (hereinafter *ZGGFB*) (Beijing) published

just as capitalism has its market economy, "socialism with Chinese characteristics" can also have a market economy.¹⁰ Thus, a justification has to be found for Jiang's March 2003 statement regarding "*junshi biange*" (軍事變革, military change or reform, as opposed to revolution) that just as capitalism can have advanced weapons, the PLA can have them, too.¹¹ This is because the mainland has been taking the market economy line since the CCP's Fifteenth Congress. To those non-dialectical China-watchers, this is the beginning of the end of "people's war."¹²

In sum, Shambaugh has written a non-dialectical, lucid, and excellent book on the PLA. While he does mention dialectical concepts and terms, there still remains much work to be done. The first is that Shambaugh should simplify his book into a model or a series of frameworks. Such an exercise would help readers better organize and remember all the data presented in this book. In addition, we could then test any such model after a period of time to see whether it is still valid. The second point pertains to furthering the general study of the PLA. One must apply the dialectical approach throughout any such research; otherwise, a methodological problem would have been created between dialectical and non-dialectical approaches, unless the academic or expert is conducting a comparative research effort. This means that someone must comprehensively apply a version of dialectics to the study of the PLA by using the same source materials as mentioned in *Modernizing China's Military*. Then, we can compare the two types of research to see which is closer to reality.¹³ If

an article about high-technology weapons entitled "辯證看待'不高'之處" which mentioned dialectical terms like "長與短" and "優與劣."

¹⁰The PRC's market economy must be understood in the context of "socialism with Chinese characteristics."

¹¹*Jiefangjun bao* (Liberation Army Daily) (Beijing), March 2, 2004, 1; *ZGGFB*, January 29, 2004, 3; and http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200403/12/eng20040312_137261_shtml, dated March 12, 2004.

¹²Needless to say, it is just the opposite, because, in late May 2004, the People's Militia has again been emphasized. See *Lianhe bao* (United Daily News) (Taipei), June 9, 2004, A13.

¹³As a reminder, a dialectical remark is just the opposite of a non-dialectical remark or, at best, they must meet only half-way.

possible, this job should be given to the Academy of Military Sciences (軍事科學院) in Beijing, which is a leading institution for formulating doctrine and strategy, because its researchers have been taught Maoist military dialectics since the early 1980s.

A Militarily Rising China: Issues of Interpretation and Response

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Shambaugh has given us a notably balanced work appraising the evolution of the Chinese military to date and for the coming years. His treatment combines serious historical depth, a systematic use of pertinent literature, and perceptive treatment of major Chinese sources. He gives substantial attention to the major aspects of the functions, institutional arrangements, and strategic rationales which in combination capture a nation's military capabilities, practices, and goals. He does that in a set of rich chapters about: civil-military relations; doctrine and training; command, control, and force structure; budget and finance; defense industries and weapons procurement; and threat perceptions. Finally, he concludes with a detailed review of the relationships between the U.S. and Chinese military security establishments, and provides recommendations for future ties. Those are major accomplishments in dealing

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