

more comprehensive development of China. Nor do recent American problems and domestic divisions suggest that time will be unavailable for China's military transition to come to fruition (with the possible exception of the Taiwan issue) before the PLA might be subjected to a critical test.

Author's Response:
**The Soldier, the State, and the Future
of PLA Studies—Breaking
down the Barriers**

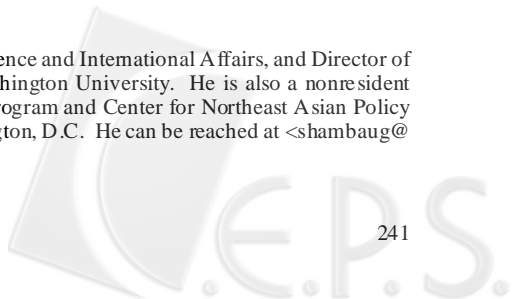
DAVID SHAMBAUGH



It is an honor to have *Issues & Studies* host this roundtable review of my recent study of China's military, and I am most grateful for the flattering words offered by most of the distinguished contributors to this roundtable. This book consumed a decade of my professional life, and receiving such positive feedback for these efforts is therefore very gratifying.

Despite a decade of work, this was a very difficult study to undertake given: both the limits on the available empirical data and the sensitivity of working on this subject in China; the complexities of military weapons

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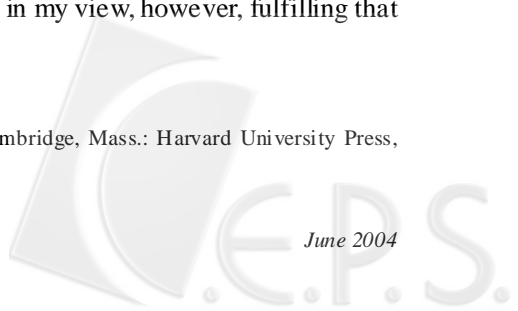


and technologies (perhaps the most challenging dimension of the study for me personally); the labyrinthine force structure and organization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA); the vagaries of the military budget process and extra-budgetary sources of revenue; the difficulties in determining actual training and exercises; the absence of official documents describing PLA strategy and doctrine; and many other uncertainties. The challenge of trying to understand each of these (and other) areas was compounded by the fact that each area is not static, but has been undergoing increasingly rapid change and restructuring ever since I began researching and writing the book. The subject simply is, as I note in the Introduction, a "moving target."

I also wanted to contribute a comprehensive and up-to-date account that would offer interested parties "one-stop-shopping," given that the last in-depth overview was Ellis Joffe's 1987 landmark study, *The Chinese Army After Mao*.¹ Joffe's book was a comprehensive assessment of PLA modernization during the late-Mao and post-Mao era and remains the field's bible on that period. The PLA has, however, changed rather considerably since then. My study attempted not only to update and catalogue the parameters of change, but also to provide a definitive (or as definitive as possible) assessment of how the PLA is organized and functions in the distinct issue areas captured in chapters 1-7. In chapter 8, I attempted to make the analysis of the preceding chapters "policy relevant" for the U.S. government—particularly insofar as the U.S. military carries out exchanges with the PLA.

Finally, I had one other goal: to write a study that, though aimed at the specialist, would also be intelligible to the non-specialist. Many fields of study, including strategic and military studies, are too often written in language that can only be understood by the cognoscenti. To be certain, one cannot write about a specialized subject without engaging and using the lexicon of that field to some extent; in my view, however, fulfilling that

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



requirement should not make the work difficult for others to understand. Language should illuminate, not obscure.

Hopefully, readers will learn from my study. If my book accomplishes one thing, however, I hope it is to negate the prevalent myth that the PLA is not transparent. How often do we hear and are told this? It has become accepted fact that the PLA is one of the least transparent militaries in the world, with much to hide, and that this obscurity is indicative of evil intent and secret programs. To be sure, the PLA is *not* as transparent as many militaries and has considerable progress to make, and no doubt the PLA has a variety of secret programs under way that it does not wish discovered. I hope that a careful reading of the text and footnotes of *Modernizing China's Military* will, however, negate this prevalent myth once and for all. This study should make abundantly clear that the PLA is *quite transparent*, if one only gains access to and reads Chinese-language sources published in China (and some published in Hong Kong and Taiwan). While not always easy to come by, these books, journals, and newspapers are available for purchase in China. Thus, in my view, those who trumpet loudest about the lack of PLA transparency—particularly the neoconservative community in the United States—are simply displaying their own ignorance and lack of access to such sources. Surely, not all PLA analysts read and speak Chinese (indeed only a minority in the United States do), which means that they are reliant on translations of such Chinese materials. Unfortunately, the U.S. government and other private translation services are not translating (much less acquiring) these materials—hence the myth continues to grow. The truly good news for PLA researchers who read Chinese is that they do not have to go to China in search of these materials. I am pleased to report that we have created a world-class archive of Chinese-language materials on the PLA—as well as on China's national security and foreign relations—in the China Documentation Center (CDC) in Gelman Library at the George Washington University (located just down the hall from the world-renown National Security Archive). With over four thousand books and backsets of more than sixty periodicals available, there are countless dissertations, articles, and books just waiting to be written based on the materials avail-

able in the CDC.²

So the above were my general goals in writing *Modernizing China's Military*. In the remainder of this essay, it is a real pleasure to have an opportunity to add a few thoughts to those of my colleagues. This is likely to be my last published piece on the PLA as I have, after more than a decade primarily working in the subject area, already intellectually "moved on" and am engaged in several new research projects.³ I have always considered myself, both by virtue of training and interests, to be a broad-gauged China specialist rather than just a China military specialist, and hence am moving back towards domestic politics and China's external relations.⁴ Nonetheless, my interest in the Chinese military has been enduring; it began while I was university undergraduate over a quarter century ago, and indeed my first few publications concerned the PLA.⁵ Since that time, however, my interest in and research on the PLA has been supplemented by enduring academic interests in different elements in China's foreign

²A fuller description of the CDC and materials catalogued through mid-2003 is available at: <http://www.gwu.edu/gelman/seeam/cdc/>.

³One project focuses on how the dynamics of the regional Asian sub-system of the international system are changing as a result of China's "rise," accrual of the traditional attributes of power, and increased multilateralism. See David Shambaugh, ed., *Power Shift: China and Asia's Changing Dynamics* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, forthcoming 2005). A second project is a study quite out of my normal scope, on the history of China's imperial art collection. See Jeannette Shambaugh Elliott with David Shambaugh, *China's Imperial Art Treasures: A History of the Collection* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, forthcoming 2005). This study has opened up many new vistas concerning the interaction of art, institutions, and politics in China. Both studies are in press. The third project, already well under way, is a book-length study of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that is intended to be a parallel volume to *Modernizing China's Military*. Once that is completed, I will likely undertake the third volume in my party-army-state trilogy: a treatise on China's government.

⁴While I welcome the opportunity to continue to participate in conferences and other forums concerning the Chinese military, it will likely be in the form of a "discussant" rather than contributor of primary research.

⁵My first four publications concerned the Chinese military. See "China's Defense Industries: Indigenous and Foreign Procurement," in *The Chinese Defense Establishment: Continuity and Change in the 1980s*, ed. Paul H.B. Godwin (Boulder: Westview Press, 1983); "The Role of the People's Liberation Army in Chinese Politics," *The Spring and Autumn Annals* 3, no. 1 (Autumn 1981); "Military Modernization and the Politics of Technology Transfer," *Contemporary China* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1979); and "China's Quest for Military Modernization," *Asian Affairs* 6, no. 5 (May-June 1979).

relations and China's domestic politics, to which I am now returning.

I tell this short biographical tale because I would like to use the opportunity of this essay to offer some observations—based on my twenty-five years of participating in the field—about the study of the Chinese military and particularly the role of the Chinese military in politics.⁶ Several of the preceding contributions to this roundtable have raised the latter issue, and have implicitly or explicitly questioned some of my arguments about civil-military relations in China.

Party vs. State—or Party and State in the PLA?

Several contributors to this roundtable commented on the arguments and evidence I put forward in chapter 2 of *Modernizing China's Military*. The comments centered around my discussion of the military's role in politics, the party's role in the military, and my arguments about the state's (government's) attempt to gain increased authority and control over the PLA. I know this is a controversial subject—one that Joffe, I, and others have debated at length in recent years. This is not the place to rehash these discussions or the arguments of chapter 2, as I devoted great care to framing and addressing the issue as clearly as possible in that chapter, and went to great pains not to overstate the case of what I see as an emerging triadic relationship between party, army, and state. Just to be clear, however, my essential argument was: that the party's authority over the military has *declined* in relative terms over the past fifteen to twenty years while the state's authority over the military has *increased* relatively, but that the "big winner" has been the PLA itself—which has carved out both substantially increased corporate autonomy and authority for managing its own affairs from both party and state.

The principal catalyst for these three processes has been none other

⁶Also see my "PLA Studies Today: A Maturing field," in *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age*, ed. James C. Mulvenon and Richard H. Yang (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1999), 7-21; and "Commentary on Civil-Military Relations in China: A Search for New Paradigms," in *Seeking Truth from Facts: A Retrospective on Chinese Military Studies in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. James C. Mulvenon and Andrew N.D. Yang (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 2001), 39-50.

than *professionalism* (職業化, *zhiyuehua*) in the armed forces. While some may argue that politics and professionalism are antithetical in militaries, I do not agree. To some extent all militaries—including the PLA—are political armies, subject to political control, indoctrinated with political ideologies, and organizationally composed of political units. This is as true of the U.S. military as it is of China's. Of course, the PLA has deeper political roots and control mechanisms owing to its Leninist heritage, but the point here is that as the PLA has become more professional, it has become less political and less susceptible to the unitary control of the CCP. PLA planners understand very clearly that military modernization requires military professionalization, and that professionalization requires *relative* depoliticization. As this process of declining party control proceeds, increased "space" is opened up for other institutions to exert authority over military affairs (just as declining party control over other spheres opens up "public space" in Chinese society). The argument of chapter 2 is that this has occurred in *relative* terms, with increased attempts by the state both to legislate such control (e.g., the National Defense Law) and to increase fiscal oversight over the military budget, while the PLA itself has established wide-ranging authority for managing its own affairs.

Some in the field and some contributors to this roundtable do not seem to have clearly understood this argument. In fact, I believe Nan Li completely misread and misunderstood some of chapter 2. Focusing his contribution to this roundtable solely on eleven pages out of a four-hundred-page book, Nan Li argues that I contradict myself by marshalling the evidence first for increased politicization in the post-1989 aftermath, and second for the increased depoliticization following the removal of the Yang brothers and the CCP's Fourteenth Congress in 1992. How, he asks, can such a "qualitative shift" be reversed so quickly? The answer is clear and spelled out in the preceding and subsequent pages, namely that the process of relative depoliticization and relative decline in party control began *prior* to 1989—so that when the Yang brothers were removed and the general post-Tiananmen clouds dissipated in 1992, the PLA (and the CCP) were in a position to continue the policies and trends evident before 1989. Thus, this three-year period is to be viewed as an interregnum or

deviation from longer-term trends. In this sense, Nan Li and I essentially seem to be arguing the same thing.

Dennis Blasko, Arthur Ding, and Peter Yu also seem to question whether it is possible for a Leninist military to undergo the process of "nationalization" (國家化, *guojiahua*) without democratization, i.e., to become a state-controlled military. Ding even boldly claims that "it is almost impossible for the Chinese military to become a state army. ... Without democracy, moreover, the concept of a state army is impossible." This may be true; then again, it may not be. Surely, Ding's views on this issue are influenced by Taiwan's own experience. China (and the CCP) have already proven quite capable of forging hybrids in many areas, displaying a tolerance for policies that many in the West consider antithetical and inherently contradictory. Why should we believe that party and state control of the military is any more contradictory than the existence of state and private sectors in the economy? China's neo-Leninist system has proven quite elastic and adaptable in other spheres—why not in this one?⁷

I do not think, and did not argue in chapter 2, that state control would *replace* party authority over the PLA—as this is surely not the case. As long as the CCP rules China, the PLA will be a party-army to some (considerable) extent. This is not a zero-sum issue, however, and I do not view party and state control as being any more contradictory than the coexistence of politics and professionalism in the PLA. As the Chinese military continues its professionalization (i.e., attending to the "software" side of military modernization, if you will), the PLA will become less and less a creature of the CCP. The question thus becomes one of state authority *supplementing* party authority over the military. Although Peter Yu says that I am thus overstating the situation by using the term "civil-military relations" instead of "party-army relations," I disagree—as this is the central argument of the chapter. With increased state authority and control over the PLA, the term "civil-military relations" is now more apt. As

⁷I further develop this argument in my "Civil-Military Relations in China: Party-Army or National Military?" in *Bringing the Party back In: How China is Governed*, ed. Kjeld Erik Brodsgaard and Zheng Yongnian (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2004), 92-114.

for his long exposition on the utility of dialectics to the study of the PLA, I would note here that I studied Hegelian, Marxist, and Maoist dialectical materialism rather intensively as a university student and am not unfamiliar with this methodology; I do, however, fail to see its utility for understanding the PLA today (or little else in today's China for that matter). The negation of the negation adds up to zero in my mathematical calculation. I also fail to understand Yu's call for me to simplify my book "into a model or series of frameworks." I believe that each chapter is already very clearly distinguished and that the parts ably add up to the whole.

While I am not sure that Peter Yu and Nan Li really grasped my argument(s), I am nonetheless grateful for their comments. I also wish to thank Davis Bobrow, Ellis Joffe, Tai Ming Cheung, and Dennis Blasko for theirs—and for being such important contributors to our field over the years. As PLA studies moves ahead, perhaps it is fitting to muse somewhat about the state of the field today.

PLA Studies Today: Knowing More About Less?

As I conclude twenty-five years of active interest and research in Chinese military studies, allow me to make a few observations and suggestions about the state of the field. It may surprise many in the China studies community to know that a *bona fide* subfield of "PLA studies" has only come into existence in recent years. While there have long been a few sturdy soles laboring in the vineyards, the field has experienced a real "growth spurt" over the past decade. Prior to that time, the field included a dedicated coterie of scholars and analysts which included the likes of Ellis Joffe, Paul H.B. Godwin, June Teufel Dreyer, Harlan Jencks, Jonathan Pollack, Michael Swaine, Tai Ming Cheung, Ronald Monteperto, Michael Pillsbury, Al Wilhelm, and several others. Over the course of the past decade, however, the field has grown quantitatively and developed qualitatively. There has been a new influx of "younger" scholars like Bates Gill, Andrew Scobell, Iain Johnston, Tom Christensen, James Mulvenon, Tom Bickford, Evan Feigenbaum, Evan Medeiros, Maryanne Kivlehan, and others. The field has also benefited not only by the addition of Chinese who have emigrated overseas, such as You Ji in Australia, Wang Shao-

guang in Hong Kong, Nan Li in Singapore, and Jianxiang Bi in Canada, but also those in Taiwan (such as Arthur Ding, Andrew N.D. Yang, Chong-pin Lin, and Peter Kien-hong Yu). The biggest source of "new blood" into the PLA studies community has, however, undoubtedly been the U.S. military itself. With their retirement from active service, Eric McVadon, Michael McDevitt, John Corbett, Lonnie Henley, Larry Wortzel, Dennis Blasko, Bernard Cole, David Finkelstein, Ken Allen, and others have infused new energy into the field. An additional stimulant has been the publication and availability of sources and data noted above—including the opportunity to interact with and interview PLA officers.

While these two catalysts have contributed much to the growth and development of the field, certainly one other factor has been of key importance: the development and modernization of the Chinese military itself, and the occasional "muscle flexing" that the PLA has displayed in the Taiwan Strait and South and East China Seas. If the PLA had remained as backward as was the case through the 1980s, and if it had continued to plod along with no real seriousness of purpose in its modernization program, then the world, region, media, and scholarly community would not have paid attention. Since the early-1990s, however, the PLA has displayed an unprecedented seriousness of purpose, has absorbed continually growing financial and other resources, and has occasionally acted assertively towards Taiwan.

Thus, the field has enjoyed a growth spurt as a result of these stimulants. It has also demonstrated an increased sophistication in analysis. This is evident by reading the successive years of edited volumes published in the three principal annual conference series that study the PLA: the RAND/CAPS/CNA series, the AEI/U.S. Army War College series, and the former Staunton Hill series. The field has quite literally been built at these meetings and in these subsequent published volumes. These meetings have also contributed much to building a true *esprit d'corps* among contributors to the field. The coordinators of these conferences and the editors of these volumes are to be congratulated in their choice of general themes and specific paper/chapter topics. They have not only pushed the field forward, but have also done much to create a real field of scholarly

inquiry in the first place.

We now know much more than ever before about the PLA—how it is structured, how it operates, how it trains, and what its technological capabilities and deficiencies are. We have a much better idea of the extent of its resources, its threat perceptions, its logistics network, its financing, its force deployments, its doctrine and strategy, its individual services, its command and communications infrastructure, and even civil-military relations. Certainly, our knowledge is far from complete or perfect—and our understanding continues to be constrained by relative lack of data, access, and transparency. However, the breadth and depth of knowledge and understanding displayed in the aforementioned conference volumes, as well as in the growing number of significant monographs, is very impressive.⁸

What I worry about is that with all the increased specificity of studies, the field will lose sight of the forest by failing to integrate the component parts together into a holistic picture. This is one reason I sought to write a comprehensive assessment in *Modernizing China's Military*. To some extent, specialization is necessary as the field "drills down" into various component parts of the PLA. I am concerned, however, that PLA studies will now experience the same phenomenon that has afflicted the rest of the China field over the past decade—the inability to generalize. To be sure, China today is extraordinarily complex. For every well-founded assertion, an equally valid counter-explanation is available. That is just the nature of reality and China today—the existence of various shades of gray. This characterization also holds true for the PLA. I would thus like to encourage my colleagues in PLA studies, as the field moves forward, to continue to ask "big questions" and try to comprehend macro trends, and

⁸Such monographs include Mel Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China's Security: The New Roles of the Military* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1998); You Ji, *The Armed Forces of China* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Solomon Karmel, *China and the People's Liberation Army* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Srikanth Kondapalli, *China's Military: The PLA in Transition* (New Delhi: Knowledge World Press, 1999); Bernard Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the 21st Century* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2001); and Srikanth Kondapalli, *China's Naval Power* (New Delhi: Knowledge World Press, 2001). Note also that Dennis Blasko is presently writing a study on the PLA's ground forces.

not be satisfied solely with mastering some minute sub-subject or specialty. Generalization not based on specific knowledge is not worth anything, but neither is empirical specialization worth much without the ability to extract from such expertise the ability to answer the "so what?" questions.

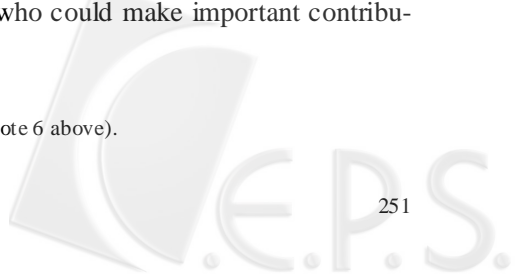
There are other things to be aware of, and keep an eye on, as the field develops. I have elaborated these elsewhere, and need not repeat them here.⁹ I would, however, make three general pleas.

First, the subfield of China military studies needs to join—and be welcomed in by—other subfields in contemporary China studies. As Ellis Joffe notes in his contribution to this roundtable, PLA studies is particularly divorced from mainstream political science in the West. It is even, I would further argue, divorced from strategic studies—although, to its credit, the field's leading journal, *International Security*, has made a committed effort to integrate the two. The same holds true for the studies of both Chinese foreign policy and domestic politics. There is no good reason for this lack of scholarly discourse and integration between PLA studies and these fields. A "dialogue of the deaf" hurts all concerned.

The second recommendation concerns comparative inquiry. China may be unique in many ways, but it is not *sui generis*. For many different aspects of Chinese military modernization and development, the PLA studies community needs to seriously read and understand the experiences of other nations and militaries. Understanding these comparative and historical experiences will enrich the perspectives of PLA specialists.

Finally—and this is more of a wish than an expectation, I would hope that scholar-officers in the PLA will someday be able to contribute to the growing international discourse and body of scholarship on the PLA. Of course, this is not a decision that can be made at the level of the individual, but would require high-level approval from the PLA itself to permit scholar-officers to participate in international conferences and contribute to publications abroad. There is no small number of knowledgeable and capable scholar-officers in the PLA who could make important contribu-

⁹Shambaugh, "PLA Studies Today" (cited in note 6 above).



tions to our field, and who could, in turn, themselves learn and benefit. Such an eventuality would, however, require a change of mind-set in the PLA from an inherent belief that all information should be protected to a recognition that a great deal is already known abroad about the PLA, that professional participation in this community can be undertaken without compromising real national secrets, and that such participation can serve as a positive force in the modernization of the PLA. I do not hold my breath on this wish, as I am fully aware of the potential impediments to such a change of mind-set occurring inside the PLA. There will, however, hopefully be a time in the not-so-distant future when outside observers of the Chinese military can co-author scholarly work and sit alongside our PLA colleagues at international conferences. This would be far better than the current practice of obliquely masking interview sources in footnotes.

At present, the state of PLA studies can be assessed as very healthy and growing steadily. I will continue to watch the field evolve and read new studies with interest, and hope to have contributed to the development of the field with *Modernizing China's Military* and other publications over the years.