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# Cronyism and Military Corruption in the Post-Deng Xiaoping Era: Rethinking the Party-Commands-the-Gun Model

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**ABSTRACT**

This article considers why cronyism and military corruption remained rampant in the post-Deng Xiaoping era, despite the PLA's progress toward modernization and professionalization. In theory, the bifurcation of civilian and military elites and the demise of 'supreme leaders' provide the PLA with greater autonomy vis-à-vis the Party, whereas the persistence of personalistic power in decision-making creates opportunities for upper-level leaders to place trusted associates in key posts. The lack of effective checks and balances thus facilitates the misuse of power for private ends and gives rise to cronyism and corruption. Relatedly, the Party's command of the gun is at risk if and when the promotion of military officers conforms more to the exercise of personalistic power than to the prescribed procedures of Party control. Moreover, several major cases of military corruption reveal that the weakening of Party oversight may be a remedy worse than the disease.

## Introduction

Since his takeover in November 2012, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has launched a vigorous anti-corruption campaign in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which has led to the arrest of over 50 general officers. Drawing lessons from the campaign, official Chinese analysts often identify cronyism as a major cause of military corruption. A commentary by the *People's Daily*, for example, charges Xu Caihou, former vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), with 'using his appointive power to foster a deeply entrenched network of corruption'.[1] Luo Yuan, a retired major-general, observes that 'it is demoralizing for active troops to see some people obtain abnormal promotions because of their links to senior leaders'.[2] The sharpest diagnosis comes from General Liu Yazhou, political commissar of the National Defense University:

> In the previous period, some leaders blatantly sold officer positions for private benefit, while others, placing a premium on personal, geographical, and service-unit affiliations, promoted their trusted followers and removed their opponents to organize cabals and cliques personally loyal to themselves rather than to the Party. Inevitably, bad examples at the top affect the behavior of the subordinates. … When those with connections could count upon their connections, those without connections have to create them, for preferment depends less on one's ability than on the cultivation of one's superiors. Meanwhile, the more professionally minded officers who concentrate

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[1]Liang Changjie, Jiang Bo and Qiu Yaozhou, 'Xin shejishi Xi Jinping: zhijunpian' ['Xi Jinping the new designer: managing military affairs'], *Renmin Net*, (14 November 2014), available at: http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1114/c1001-26026864.html (accessed 10 January 2017).

[2]Cha Shiju, 'Luo Yuan: Xu Caihou shijian cushi zhongyang junwei tiaozheng yongren silu' ['Luo Yuan: the Xu Caihou incident compels the CMC to readjust its cadre-selection policy'], *Xinlang Zhuanlan*, (23 November 2014), available at: http://news.sina.com.cn/zl/zatan/2014-11-23/09142695.shtml (accessed 10 January 2017).

> on the craft of war and refuse to join the game are marginalized. Furthermore, those who receive promotions by bribing their superiors are bound to cover their expenses by extracting bribery from their subordinates. … This culture of corruption is extremely contagious and damages the political integrity of our military significantly.[3]

The phenomenon of rampant cronyism and corruption, however, is puzzling in a double sense. First, it contradicts the general observation among China watchers that the PLA has made great strides since the 1990s toward modernization and professionalization.[4] If cronyism remains important in promotions and corruption contagious, it is a sure sign that military professionalism is not fully triumphant but undermined by some disturbing countertrends, as will be detailed in the following. Second, it contradicts the traditional Party-commands-the-gun model in communist polities, which assumes that a ruling Leninist party must keep the military as a loyal servant of the Party. Potentially, cronyism weakens Party control by creating separate patron–client networks that may compete with the Party for primacy and loyalty. Examining how cronyism arises and affects the PLA, therefore, offers the opportunity to reconsider some pivotal and long-standing questions about the evolution of civil–military relations in China.

Empirically, this article builds on two discoveries made by earlier PLA scholarship. First, due to the increasing functional separation of civilian and military elites, the PLA has gained greater autonomy and bargaining power vis-à-vis the Party. Second, despite efforts at institutionalization, the Chinese decision-making process remains heavily influenced by 'personalism' or personalistic power (*renzhi*). In theory, this article argues that these circumstances produce opportunities for upper-level leaders to build personalistic networks as a means of increasing their leverage in civil–military relations. Cronyism is an inevitable by-product of this situation, as leaders tend to fill key posts with their loyalists. In reality, cronyism often conflicts with due institutional procedures and generates possibilities of deal-making and corruption, which impact both Party control and military integrity negatively. Viewed from this standpoint, the Party's command of the gun is not necessarily injurious to the PLA's professional development: ironically, it is the dereliction of Party oversight that aggravates cronyism and military corruption.

This article unfolds as follows. The first section presents a theoretical overview of the causes and consequences of cronyism, as outlined above. The second section supports the preceding argument with evidence from four notable cases of military corruption in the post-Deng Xiaoping era, which, according to official news media, epitomize what has gone wrong in the Chinese military system.[5] Afterward, the third section evaluates the efforts of Chinese leader Xi Jinping to rectify the situation and reinvigorate the PLA. The last section concludes with a summary of findings and implications.

## The causes and consequences of cronyism: an overview

Since the 1980s, veteran China watchers have observed a continuous trend toward modernization and professionalization in the PLA.[6] Objectively, the need to operate more sophisticated equipment and conduct more complicated operations requires the PLA to concentrate more on professional expertise and technological proficiency than on political work and ideological indoctrination. This in turn separates the military elites increasingly from the civilian elites in education, experience and corporate

[3]Liu Yazhou, 'Zouchu jiawu, yingjie biange, zaichuang huihuang' ['Leave 1895 behind, meet new challenges, and revive national glory'], *The PLA Daily*, (15 May 2015), available at: http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2015-05/15/content_6491913.htm (accessed 10 January 2017).

[4]See, for example, Ellis Joffe, 'Party–army relations in China: retrospect and prospect', *The China Quarterly* 146, (1996), pp. 229–314; June Teufel Dreyer, 'The new officer corps: implications for the future', *The China Quarterly* 146, (1996), pp. 315–335; James Mulvenon, *Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1998); David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Nan Li, ed., *Chinese Civil–Military Relations: The Transformation of the People's Liberation Army* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[5]Liang Changjie *et al.*, 'Xin shejishi Xi Jinping'.

[6]See, for instance, Harlan W. Jencks, *From Muskets to Missiles: Politics and Professionalism in the Chinese Army, 1945–1981* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1982); Ellis Joffe, *The Chinese Army After Mao* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

identity. By the mid-1990s, this trend was already unmistakably ascendant.[7] Today, it remains a defining feature of Chinese civil–military relations.[8]

Relatedly, it is agreed that while the PLA remains largely loyal to the civilian leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), it has nevertheless gained greater autonomy and bargaining power vis-à-vis the Party.[9] To begin with, the demise of first- and second-generation Chinese leaders, personified respectively by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, marks the end of the reign of 'supreme leaders' with overarching authority over both civilian and military affairs. Unlike these towering predecessors, the ensuing generations of top Party leaders lack sufficient leadership credentials to command the obedience of the PLA automatically. Instead, they have to court the military by supporting its institutional interests and allowing it relative autonomy in managing affairs that belong to its realm of expertise.[10]

As a result, the Party's command of the gun becomes less absolute and more conditional, since the military is no longer an unquestioning instrument of the Party but develops a 'give and take' relationship with the latter.[11] Moreover, the Party's traditional mechanisms of control over the military seem to be waning over time. In the past, political commissars and political departments served as the Party's eyes and ears at various levels of the military establishment. After the focus of military work shifts from political education to professionalization, the political functionaries are gradually assimilated into the military organization and cease to act as independent supervisors.[12]

On the other hand, as Thomas Bickford noted in 2001, 'while the PLA was becoming more professionalized, it still was a long way from being professional'.[13] In his view, there were two principal impediments to the development of professionalism. First, the PLA's entanglement in commercial activities bred corruption and eroded discipline. Second, personalistic power still exercised a weighty influence over the politico-military command.[14] This argument is supported by other scholars who carefully examine the PLA's entrepreneurial activity and its adverse consequences,[15] or the persistence of personalism in civil–military decision-making.[16]

To date, these problems obviously endure in varying degrees. The task of getting the PLA out of business, for instance, has taken a longer time than anticipated, and military corruption now assumes new forms. In May 2014, writing for the popular newspaper *Global Times*, a PLA major-general identified two such forms. First, there is 'corruption in the use of personnel' (*lizhi fubai*), as manifested by the manipulation of evaluations, assignments, commendations and promotions from top to bottom. Second, there is 'corruption in the use of military property' (*junchan yunying*), as manifested by the manipulation of

[7]For useful overviews, see Dreyer, 'The new officer corps'; Mulvenon, *Professionalization of the Senior Chinese Officer Corps*; Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*.

[8]See Isaac B. Kardon and Phillip C. Saunders, 'Reconsidering the PLA as an interest group', in Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds, *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policy-making* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 33–57.

[9]For helpful overviews, see Thomas Bickford, 'A retrospective on the study of Chinese civil–military relations since 1979: what have we learned? where do we go?', in James Mulvenon and Andrew Yang, eds, *Seeking Truth from Facts: A Retrospective on Chinese Military Studies in the Post-Mao Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001), pp. 1–37; Michael Kiselycznyk and Phillip C. Saunders, *Civil–Military Relations in China: Assessing the PLA's Role in Elite Politics* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2010).

[10]This point is made especially clear by Ellis Joffe, 'The military and China's new politics: trends and counter-trends', in James Mulvenon and Richard Yang, eds, *The People's Liberation Army in the Information Age* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999), pp. 22–47.

[11]On this new mode of Chinese civil–military relations, see Joffe, 'The military and China's new politics'; James Mulvenon, 'China: conditional compliance', in Muthiah Alagappa, ed., *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 317–335; and You Ji, 'Hu Jintao's consolidation of power and his command of the gun', in John Wong and Lai Hongyi, eds, *China into the Hu–Wen Era: Policy Initiatives and Challenges* (Singapore: World Scientific Press, 2006), pp. 33–60.

[12]See David Shambaugh, 'The solider and the state in China: the political work system in the People's Liberation Army', *The China Quarterly* 127, (1991), pp. 527–568; Nan Li, 'Changing functions of the party and political work system in the PLA and civil–military relations in China', *Armed Forces & Society* 19(3), (1993), pp. 393–409; Joffe, 'The military and China's new politics'.

[13]Bickford, 'A retrospective on the study of Chinese civil–military relations since 1979', p. 15.

[14]*Ibid*., pp. 15–17.

[15]See James Mulvenon, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise of the Military–Business Complex in the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).

[16]An excellent example is Michael Swaine, *The Military and Political Succession in China* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992). Both Swaine and Bickford adopt the term 'personalism' in their research.

the disposal of military-owned land, purchases of military materials and the development of military construction projects. Furthermore, these two forms of corruption are closely interrelated, as those who profiteer from the misuse of military property often use their illegal gains to buy higher positions and therefore grab at broader corruption opportunities.[17]

In particular, 'corruption in the use of personnel' testifies to the endurance of personalism in decision-making. That is, if assignments and promotions are based strictly on the impersonal rules of merit, there ought not to be any room left for 'manipulation' and, worse still, the purchase of positions. In other words, the prevalence of manipulation shows precisely that some power-holders have retained much discretion in making personnel decisions, regardless of formal rules and regulations. Indeed, in April 2014, a commentary of the *People's Daily* admitted as much: 'A prominent feature [of military corruption] is that personalistic power (*renzhi*) outweighs the authority of laws and regulations, which are not complied with or enforced rigorously. Some leaders even intentionally override the laws and regulations to pursue private gains'.[18]

Against this backdrop, it is not difficult to understand the rise of cronyism. Given the bifurcation of civilian and military elites, the military enjoys greater autonomy in managing its own affairs, including the selection and promotion of officers. Given the endurance of personalistic power, however, military chiefs tend to place their trusted associates in key posts as a means of increasing their sway over the military system. This explains why, despite the regularization of procedures for officer evaluation and promotion, personalistic ties remain crucial to career advancement in the PLA, where places of birth, educational backgrounds and service affiliations may all provide a basis for personalistic networks.[19]

This does not mean, however, that the Party's command of the gun is irrevocably lost. To begin with, in ordinary circumstances the PLA may have little motivation to challenge the CCP, given its long and habitual acceptance of the Party's authority.[20] Rather, the increasing emphasis on functional specialization would have required the military to avoid political entanglements and concentrate on its professional missions as defender of national security.[21] Meanwhile, the CCP's organizational supervision of the PLA is exercised chiefly through the Party committee system (*dangweizhi*): in any military unit, there exists a Party committee comprising both commanding officers and political functionaries, who direct the unit's administrative affairs collectively and therefore keep it from attaining complete autonomy.[22] Finally, the top Party leader traditionally holds the position of CMC chairman concurrently, which endows him with the authority to oversee and approve all personnel shifts at and above the army-level (*junji*, with the rank of major-general).

Nevertheless, as long as personalism remains a potent factor in decision-making, nominal Party control does not necessarily constitute a safeguard against cronyism. Theoretically, for example, a Party committee is supposed to decide on personnel matters collectively and by consensus. Yet in reality, as former CMC vice-chairman Liu Huaqing noted in his memoirs, individual leaders in certain working-units (*danwei*) often monopolize the power to make personnel appointments in disregard of due procedures.[23] Under these circumstances, 'Party control' is likely to be ignored, bypassed or usurped by individual leaders. Incidentally, the Leninist discipline of the CCP requires the rank and file to obey the leading cadres, or a lower-level Party committee to obey a higher-level one. Thus, upper-level leaders might well invoke Party discipline to brush aside criticisms from below and impose unwelcome decisions upon their subordinates.



[17]Kunlun Yan, 'Jundui fanfu bixu zouzai qianmian' ['The anti-corruption work in the military must be prioritized'], *Global Times*, (12 May 2014), available at: http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_china/2014-05/4992289.html (accessed 10 January 2017).

[18]Wu Zhenghua, 'Yifa zhijun anxia kuaijinjian' ['The acceleration of managing military affairs by law'], *Renmin Net*, (14 April 2014), available at: http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2015/0414/c1003-26839024.html (accessed 10 January 2017).

[19]See, for example, Swaine, *The Military and Political Succession in China*; Cheng Li and Lynn White, 'The army in the succession to Deng Xiaoping: familiar fealties and technocratic trends', *Asian Survey* 33(8), (1993), pp. 757–786; Cheng Li and Scott Harold, 'China's new military elite', *China Security* 3(4), (2007), pp. 62–89.

[20]Joffe, 'Party–army relations in China', pp. 309–310.

[21]I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

[22]On the Party committee system, see Shambaugh, 'The solider and the state in China', pp. 548–549.

[23]Liu Huaqing, *Liu Huaqing huiyilu* [*The Memoirs of Liu Huaqing*] (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2004), p. 634.

Potentially, some personalistic methods of strengthening Party control may even aggravate the problem of cronyism. As You Ji contends, 'institutional posts are crucial, although what people can achieve in their posts depends on their power base'.[24] Since contemporary top Party leaders usually have no military record or experience, they have a compelling necessity to cement their institutional authority by forging a military power-base, and the quickest way of doing so is to create bonds of personal attachment through generous promotions. According to several scholars, this is one of the key strategies adopted by Jiang Zemin, former CCP general secretary and CMC chairman, to consolidate his control over the PLA in the early-to-late 1990s. Yet, as Jiang lacked the expertise to evaluate the professional qualifications of the officers he promoted, it is a safe bet that personal ties and acquaintances mattered in decision-making as well.[25]

After cronyism becomes ascendant, however, some negative consequences will inevitably follow. First, upper-level leaders are bound to attract a motley crowd of opportunists who are eager to please their superiors in exchange for lucrative assignments and promotions. Such a development not only creates the potential for corruption and deal-making but corrodes the military morale by showing that preferment depends not necessarily on merit but on connections. Second, when the cultivation of one's superiors becomes increasingly important to career advancement, yes-men are more likely to prevail due to their readiness to serve their masters, whereas the independent-minded may find themselves isolated and marginalized. Finally, the rise of cronyism reinforces the primacy of personalistic power over due institutional procedures, including traditional mechanisms of Party control, thereby undermining the CCP's prestige and governing capacity.

In sum, the problem of cronyism is an endemic by-product of a politico-military system wherein the lack of sufficient checks and balances leaves a large discretionary space for the exercise of personalistic power. According to Admiral Liu Huaqing, some PLA officers already complained in the early 1990s that promotion depended on cultivating one's superiors and seeking patronage from higher-level leaders.[26] Thus, as early as January 1993, General Zhang Zhen, another CMC vice-chairman, had proposed the following guidelines to resolve the problem:

- first, he urged strict adherence to the old principle of *dang guan ganbu* (the Party oversees all cadres), which requires that the Party committee in a working-unit make personnel decisions by consensus and not permit any individual leader to have a preponderant say;
- second, in considering promotions, higher-level leaders should be broad-minded and not promote only those whom they know personally or from prior service experiences;
- third, before promoting an officer, higher-level leaders should not only consult the Party committee of the working-unit where that officer belongs, but canvass the opinions of the rank and file of that unit who know the officer's character intimately. When a suggested promotion meets with widespread objections from below, higher-level leaders should follow the 'mass line' (*qunzhong luxian*) and trust the judgment of the rank and file;
- fourth, performance evaluation should take note of how an officer's work serves the foundational interests of the military, not how he creates temporary gains for the military; and
- fifth, those who are responsible for monitoring the cadres must do their work in a fair and upright way, to buttress the confidence of the rank and file.[27]

Later on, General Zhang put forth a three-point summary of these guidelines: first, all job candidates must show integrity of character; second, the selection/promotion process must follow the 'mass line'; and third, all leaders must respect the due procedures and not make personnel decisions arbitrarily.[28]

[24]You Ji, 'Jiang Zemin's formal and informal sources of power and Chinese elite politics after 4 June 1989', *China Information* 6(2), (1991), p. 18.
[25]See *Ibid*.; Joffe, 'The military and China's new politics'; Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*.
[26]Liu, *Liu Huaqing huiyilu*, pp. 634–635.
[27]Zhang Zhen, *Zhang Zhen huiyilu* [*The Memoirs of Zhang Zhen*], Vol. 2 (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 2003), pp. 376–377.
[28]*Ibid*., p. 382.

Liu Huaqing fully agreed with Zhang Zhen's proposals. In 1994, at an expanded meeting of the CMC, Liu stressed:

> The rank and file are the most knowledgeable about the character of a [military] cadre and their opinions must serve as an iron criterion: that is, *it is absolutely impermissible to promote a cadre who loses the confidence of the rank and file.* To prevent errors in cadre assignment, past experience suggests several important rules, namely: a higher-level Party committee should respect the opinions of a lower-level Party committee; the organizational department should respect the opinions of other departments; a leader should respect the opinions of the masses; and *no individuals should interfere with due institutional procedures*. (emphasis added)

In particular, Liu warned against the growing tendency among the officer corps to seek promotion by cultivating higher-level leaders. This phenomenon, said Liu, stemmed from some leaders' manipulation of assignments and promotions for private ends. To stop such practices, Liu exhorted the Party committees at all levels of the PLA to stand firm and perform their duty justly, and to resolutely dismiss from office anyone who obtained promotions by bribery or connections.[29]

Nonetheless, propounding formal rules and due procedures does not automatically guarantee that they will be enforced or complied with. Rather, as will be detailed in the next section, the exercise of personalistic power keeps contravening the prescribed regulations of Party control, thereby opening the gate to cronyism and military corruption.

## Cronyism and military corruption: evidence from four cases

### *The case of Wang Shouye*[30]

Wang Shouye joined the infrastructure-and-housing department of the PLA's General Logistics Department (GLD) in 1985 and was promoted to vice-director of the department in 1993. Two years later, Zhang Jinchang, then director of the infrastructure-and-housing department, began to consider retirement but declined to recommend Wang as his successor after detecting signs of dishonesty in the latter's public and private dealings. After receiving Zhang's reports on Wang's conduct, the GLD leadership made some inquiries and concurred that Wang was an unsuitable candidate for the directorship. In June or July 1995, in a meeting with Zhang, GLD director Fu Quanyou opined that Wang's reputation among the rank and file was very low, which alone would have disqualified him from getting Zhang's job. Therefore, said Fu, the GLD leadership had decided to ask the General Political Department (GPD), which was in charge of the selection of leading military personnel, to nominate some candidates from other working-units of the PLA.

Nonetheless, the GPD nominees seemed either too old for the job or lacking in necessary educational credentials. Thus, Zhang Jinchang drafted a shortlist of better-qualified candidates for GLD director Fu Quanyou. Privately, Zhang reported his concerns to CMC vice-chairman Chi Haotian too, who forwarded the shortlist to various responsible departments. On the eve of his retirement, Zhang submitted a formal letter to the CMC, putting his objections to the promotion of Wang Shouye on the official record. After receiving the letter, CMC vice-chairmen Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen requested Fu Quanyou to investigate the matter. By then, however, Fu was prepared to leave the GLD soon and become the chief of the PLA's General Staff Department (GSD). Thus, the investigation proceeded in a hasty and perfunctory manner and led nowhere. In late 1995, the GLD leadership reversed course completely: upon Zhang Jinchang's retirement, Wang Shouye was appointed acting director of the infrastructure-and-housing department. In January 1996, Wang was further promoted to director of the department, with the rank of major-general.

Why so? In his memoirs, Zhang Jinchang identifies two factors that worked to Wang's advantage. First, Wang befriended the director of the political department of the GLD, which is responsible for cadre

[29]Liu, *Liu Huaqing huiyilu*, p. 635.

[30]The following account is based on Zhang Jinchang, 'Worenshi de tanguan Wang Shouye' ['My reminiscences about the corrupt official Wang Shouye'], *Yanhuang Chunqiu* 1, (2015), pp 11–17.

assignment within the GLD. Without that director's assistance, Wang could not have prevailed over those better-qualified candidates in the first place. Second, and more importantly, Wang befriended the secretary of a CMC leader, and it was that secretary who directly phoned the GLD leadership to confirm Wang's promotion. As the phone-call was made officially and in the name of the office of that CMC leader, the GLD leadership understood it as an order. Although Zhang Jinchang avoids naming any names, it is clear that the concerned CMC leader and his secretary must be really powerful to override the due procedures that both Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen prescribed for cadre selection and promotion.

And Wang's promotion did not end there. As director of the infrastructure-and-housing department, he held significant sway over the disposal of military-owned land and construction projects and abused his authority to profiteer from graft and bribery. Presumably, he also used his illegal gains to cultivate higher-level leaders. In 2000–2001, an unidentified senior leader twice proposed the promotion of Wang to vice-director of the GLD but met with steadfast opposition from the Party committee of the GLD. Indeed, according to a survey by the GPD, which is responsible for canvassing the opinions of the rank and file before confirming the promotion of a senior officer, Wang's reputation ranked almost at the bottom among leading GLD cadres. Nevertheless, soon afterward, the aforementioned senior leader seized an opportunity to appoint Wang as deputy commander of the Navy, with the rank of vice-admiral. Given Wang's complete lack of expertise in naval affairs, the appointment stunned many in the PLA. But it again shows how easily personalistic power could outweigh due procedures, including the vaunted mechanisms of Party control.

In late 2005, Wang's good fortune finally came to an end. Despite his retirement, Zhang Jinchang kept a close eye on Wang and repeatedly wrote to the CMC about the latter's misdeeds, but never received a reply. In July 2005, however, Zhang came across a disillusioned mistress of Wang and persuaded her to report Wang's malfeasance to the Party committee of the Navy, the GPD and the CMC. Unexpectedly, this approach worked, and Wang was temporarily put under house arrest by the discipline inspection department of the GPD in October 2005. Nonetheless, due to the intervention of an unidentified 'retired bigwig', the CMC initially decided to let Wang retire in peace. Instead of lying low, Wang reemerged unrepentant and even berated his superiors for having wronged him. Offended, CMC chairman Hu Jintao then ordered the arrest of Wang, who was tried, convicted of bribery and embezzlement, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Yet, to the astonishment of Zhang Jinchang, over 40 senior officers whom Wang identified as his accomplices were left completely untouched.

### *The case of Gu Junshan*[31]

In the early 1990s, Gu Junshan was a junior officer in charge of logistical support in a local military district of Henan Province. Among his colleagues, Gu had the reputation of being a ruthless careerist who owed his promotion to bribery and believed that money could settle any problems. Before the divestiture of the PLA's commercial enterprises in 1998, Gu undertook several lucrative business projects that were charged with tax evasion by the local government. But, due to the military's executive privileges, Gu was never taken to court.

In the late 1990s, Gu came across Xu Caihou, then deputy director of the GPD. With Xu's help, Gu avoided being discharged from the military and moved up into the infrastructure-and-housing department of the GLD in 2001. For some time afterward, Gu kept a low profile and acted cautiously. However, after he was appointed director of the infrastructure-and-housing department in 2007, Gu, like his convicted predecessor Wang Shouye, made ample use of the corruption opportunities generated by his position. Within a few years, Gu is said to abuse his power to amass a huge fortune, which is estimated

[31]The following account is based on Zhong Jian, 'Gu Junshan tanfu neimu' ['The story of Gu Junshan's corruption'], *Phoenix Weekly*, (20 November 2014), available at: http://wwwbianjichubancom/info/viewnews-12479html; and Zhong Jian, 'Guo Junshan zai yuzhong pinming yaoren' ['The imprisoned Gu Junshan identifies many as his accomplices in desperation'], *Wangyi Xinwen*, (21 November 2014), available at: http://zytakungpaocom/2014/1121/173061html (both accessed 10 January 2017).

to range from 600 to 800 million RMB (approximately US$100–120 million). Yet, in 2009, he was further promoted to vice-director of the GLD, with the rank of lieutenant-general.

Why was Gu so emboldened to act that way? Available evidence shows that Gu was protected from the beginning by Xu Caihou, who became GPD director in 2002 and vice-chairman of the CMC from 2004 to 2012. As a rule, the GPD supervises the personnel dossiers of all senior PLA officers. Nonetheless, it has lately been uncovered that Gu's personnel information was falsified again and again over the years: first, he changed his education background from ninth grade to postgraduate, then changed his year of birth from 1952 to 1956, and finally added four nonexistent 'commendations' to his service experience. Without Xu Caihou's connivance and support, Gu could not have escaped the GPD's routine supervision and secured such rapid promotions. In dealing with his superiors, Gu made no secret of the fact that he was backed by powerful patrons at the top. Reportedly, he had spoken rudely to GLD director Liao Xilong: 'It matters little that you are the director of the GLD and a CMC member; if I wish to have you removed, then out you go'. To GLD political commissar Liu Yuan, Gu was even more boastful:

> My next position will be the first deputy chief of the GSD with the rank of full general, and I will also become a member of the CCP Central Committee. Therefore, don't get in my way, and so I won't get in yours.

On the other hand, patronage has a price. Xu Caihou, for example, reportedly took bribes of over 40 million RMB from Gu. To his other patrons, Gu's customary gifts took the form of luxury cars and gold bullion. In addition, Gu served as a middleman in the buying and selling of officer positions: that is, some who sought promotions would approach Gu first and pay him vast sums in bribes, and then Gu would forward part of the bribes to his connections and help arrange promotions for his 'clients'.

In late 2011, Gu finally ran into trouble after a Hong Kong businessman who had bribed him turned informer and gave details of Gu's misdeeds to the discipline inspectors of the PLA. The Party committee of the GLD, headed by Liao Xilong and Liu Yuan (both of whom, as previously mentioned, were deeply offended by Gu's arrogance and venality), quickly reported the issue to CMC chairman Hu Jintao and vice-chairman Xi Jinping, and received their support to probe Gu's activities further. In February 2012, Gu was put under house arrest by the Discipline Inspection Commission of the CMC. At first, the investigation dragged on inconclusively, due to interferences from Gu's patrons and especially Xu Caihou. In March 2014, after Xu was himself brought down in disgrace (see below), Gu was eventually brought to justice, convicted of graft, bribery, embezzlement and abuse of power, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Meanwhile, over 40 senior officers from the GLD, GSD, the General Armament Department, Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery were implicated in Gu's corruption network, and their cases are being investigated by the Discipline Inspection Commission of the CMC too.

### *The case of Xu Caihou*[32]

Xu Caihou came from a blue-collar family and graduated in 1968 from the prestigious Harbin Military Engineering College. According to his college classmate, Teng Xuyan, Xu had a modest, endearing personality and always appeared ready to obey orders and carry them out to the letter, although his academic record was totally undistinguished. After graduation, Xu served in various grass-roots military units, but without any distinction. In the early 1980s, Xu, then a mid-level functionary in the Jilin Provincial Military District, was so disenchanted with his career as to consider applying for a discharge from the PLA.

In 1982, however, a turning point occurred in Xu's life. Observing that the elder-generation commanders lacked the sophisticated skills to tackle the complexity of modern warfare, CMC chairman Deng Xiaoping and his deputy Yang Shangkun decided to endorse formal, college-level education as

[32]The following account is based, unless referenced otherwise, on Teng Xuyan, 'Junzhong dalaohu Xu Caihou qingnian wangshi' ['Reminiscences about the corrupt military chief Xu Caihou's earlier life'], *Phoenix History*, (7 July 2014), available at: http://newsifengcom/a/20140707/41048124_0shtml; and Zhong Jian, 'Guozei Xu laohu chachao neimu' ['The story of Xu Caihou's downfall'], *Phoenix Weekly*, (20 November 2014), available at: http://blogsinacomcn/s/blog_4b8bd1450102v516html (both accessed 10 January 2017).

a requirement for assignment and promotion to senior positions. Nevertheless, during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution, most Chinese military academies were dissolved and their graduates discharged from the PLA. As a result, in the entire central and regional command structures, only about 1,000 officers aged below 40 were found to hold college degrees. Of those officers, approximately 300 were graduates of the Harbin Military Engineering College, including Xu Caihou. Following the direction of Yang Shangkun, those 300 received preferential consideration from the GPD as candidates for promotion, and many of them acquired the rank of general officer in later years.

Thereafter, Xu's rise was fast and steady. In 1982, he merely held a position equivalent to a deputy regiment-commander in a provincial military district; three years later, he was promoted to a position equivalent to a full division-commander in the Shenyang Military Region. In 1990, he was appointed political commissar of the 16th Group Army and acquired the rank of major-general. Two years later, he moved up to Beijing and became the assistant director of the GPD and chief of the *PLA Daily*. In 1993, he was further promoted to deputy director of the GPD, with the rank of lieutenant-general.

Reportedly, Xu owed these rapid promotions to an unidentified senior GPD leader, who played a vital role in Xu's move to Beijing. Yet Xu seemed acutely conscious of the risks inherent in his elevation. Before leaving for Beijing, Xu told a former colleague in the Jilin Provincial Military District that he felt worried as if walking down a path of no return. As that colleague thought he was joking, Xu quoted an ancient Chinese saying, *guochu bu sheng han* (at a great height the cold is too severe to withstand), to signal his apprehensions about his ability to withstand the temptations of power. After his eventual downfall, Xu's words seemed almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In 1996, Xu was appointed political commissar of the Jinan Military Region, a position that prepared him to ascend to the CMC. In October 1997, at the CCP's 15th Party Congress, he was also elected a member of the CCP Central Committee. In September 1999, Xu became a CMC member and first deputy director of the GPD, with the rank of full general. In 2000–2002, he also served as secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission of the CMC, which was in charge of anti-corruption drives in the military. In November 2002, when the CCP convened its 16th Party Congress, Xu became a member of the CCP's Central Secretariat while retaining his CMC membership, and was appointed GPD director. Two years later, in September 2004, Xu finally rose to the position of CMC vice-chairman. In October 2007, at the CCP's 17th Party Congress, Xu became both a member of the CCP Politburo and vice-chairman of the CMC, thereby attaining the highest office in his career.

What explains Xu's speedy ascendance after 1996? Mainland Chinese sources only suggest vaguely that Xu had close links to several 'old leaders'. Alex Chopan sees Xu as a possible protégé of then CMC vice-chairmen Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian, as all three had served as political commissar of the Jinan Military Region.[33] Nevertheless, given the growing authority of then CMC chairman Jiang Zemin, it may be surmised that Jiang would not have sanctioned Xu's promotion if he considered Xu politically unreliable or not favorably disposed toward him. Indeed, James Mulvenon observes that in 2001–2002, the GPD (with Xu as first deputy director) launched a well-coordinated campaign to laud Jiang personally and extol the notion of the 'three represents' as Jiang's supreme contribution to Party ideology. The campaign also presaged the PLA's support for Jiang's retention of the CMC chairmanship at the CCP's forthcoming 16th Party Congress. Moreover, after that Congress, Xu Caihou was one of the four CMC members who made statements of personalistic fealty to Jiang.[34]

After Jiang's retirement in September 2004, however, the new CCP general secretary and CMC chairman Hu Jintao proved a weak political leader intent on currying favor and avoiding conflict with the PLA. As Nan Li observes, this probably has something to do with Hu's prior life and career experience, which evinced little executive leadership and demanded few forceful, independent decisions. As a

[33]Alex Chopan, 'A table for two: Jiang Zemin and the PLA', *Journal of Contemporary China* 11(31), (2002), pp. 287–288.
[34]James Mulvenon, 'The PLA and the "three represents": Jiang's bodyguards or party–army?', *Chinese Leadership Monitor* 4, (2002); and James Mulvenon, 'The PLA and the 16th Party congress', *Chinese Leadership Monitor* 5, (2003), available at: http://www.hoover.org/profiles/james-mulvenon (accessed 10 January 2017).

result, Hu appeared reluctant to impose his will unambiguously on the military, either by ordering it to do things it did not want to do or by stopping it from doing things it desired.[35]

Thus, under Hu, Xu Caihou and Guo Boxiong (another CMC vice-chairman) enjoyed a virtually free hand in running the day-to-day affairs of the PLA. Reportedly, the duo monopolized the power to select officers for positions at and above the division-level (*shiji*, with the rank of senior colonel), and the request for Chairman Hu's approval was a mere formality.[36] In other words, 'Party control' became more apparent than real for Guo and Xu, who actually played the roles of the PLA's top commanding officer and political commissar from 2002 to 2012. This may also account for the seeming lack of civilian oversight over certain aspects of military policy during that period. It is unclear, for instance, whether Chairman Hu was fully informed beforehand of the PLA's anti-satellite test in 2007 and/or the test flight of a stealth fighter in 2011 during US Defense Secretary Robert Gates' visit to China, both incidents triggering strong international reaction.[37]

Unchecked and unaccountable, Xu abused his power over personnel appointments flagrantly and made 'bribery for promotion' an open secret, assisted in the endeavor by his wife, daughter, secretary and even chauffeur. Apart from Gu Junshan, at least two general officers were lately found guilty of bribing Xu or his wife, including Zhang Gongxian (Xu's one-time secretary who was later promoted to director of the political department of the Jinan Military Region) and Yang Jinshan (vice-commander of the Chengdu Military Region). Regarding Xu's venality, Zhou Zhixing, founder and CEO of the *Gongshi Net*, records a telling conversation with several military acquaintances in March 2015. Unable to get a promotion for eight years during Xu's tenure, Major-General Chen Zhishu (son of General Chen Geng, a legendary military leader in the 1950s) averred that his principle was 'taking bribes from nobody and giving bribes to nobody', to which a general officer replied: 'This perhaps explains why you didn't get a promotion for eight years'.[38] Major-General Yang Chunchang, who had worked with Xu in the past, adds another colorful anecdote in a press interview. According to him, two senior officers once competed for the position of commander of a major military region, and both sought Xu's favor by bribery: one gave Xu bribes worth 20 million RMB, while the other's bribes amounted to 10 million RMB. Predictably, Xu gave the job to the higher bidder.[39]

After the CCP's 18th Party Congress in November 2012, Xu went into retirement. Two years later, he was arrested for corruption, expelled from the CCP and stripped of his general's rank. Had Xu not died of cancer in March 2015, he would have faced criminal prosecution and certain conviction. After Xu's downfall, the CMC ordered a thorough review of the credentials of all military cadres who ascended rapidly to positions at and above the vice-division-level (*fushiji*, with the rank of colonel) during Xu's tenure, to ascertain that their promotions did not violate formal regulations and due procedures. Meanwhile, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has repeatedly exhorted the PLA to purge itself of Xu's 'pernicious influences', a sign that Xu's corruption network has not been completely exposed yet.[40]



[35]Nan Li, 'Top leaders and the PLA: the different styles of Jiang, Hu, and Xi', in Saunders and Scobell, eds, *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policy-making*, pp. 120–137.

[36]Feng Cunjian, 'Qidi Guo Boxiong: qinu kao jundui liancai' ['Uncovering Guo Boxiong: how his wife and daughter profiteer from military connections'], *Wangyi Xinmeiti*, (31 July 2015), available at: http://news.163.com/15/0731/06/AVR76G0G0001124 J.html (accessed 10 January 2017).

[37]In contrast, Jiang Zemin is said to be able to restrain the military hawks and prevent a sharp downturn in Sino–American relations in April 2001, when a PLA naval pilot was killed in a collision with a US EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft. For details, see James Mulvenon, 'Rogue warriors? A puzzled look at the Chinese ASAT test', *Chinese Leadership Monitor* 20, (2007), available at: www.hoover.org/profiles/james-mulvenon (accessed 10 January 2017); and Nan Li, 'Top leaders and the PLA', pp. 126–128.

[38]Zhou Zhixing, 'Zhou shuo xinyu banyuetan zhiyi' ['Zhou Zhixing's half-monthly reflections, part I'], *Gongshi Net*, (24 March 2015), available at: http://www.21ccom.net/articles/kanlun/20150324122638.html (last accessed 28 September 2016; the website has been closed since 1 October 2016).

[39]'Shaojiang bao Xu Caihou maiguan neimu' ['Major-General exposes Xu Caihou's sales of officer positions'], *Xinhua Net*, (10 March 2015), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/local/2015-03/10/c_127562610.htm (accessed 10 January 2017).

[40]See Lin Yunshi, 'Xi Jinping shicha Xu Caihou fuyi jiudi, zaiti suqing yingxiang' ['Xi Jinping tours the place where Xu Caihou served, calls again for purging Xu's influences'], *Caixin Net*, (21 July 2015), available at: http://china.caixin.com/2015-07-21/100830946.html (accessed 10 January 2017).

### *The case of Guo Boxiong*[41]

Guo Boxiong came from a peasant family and joined the PLA in 1961 when he was 19. In the following two decades, he rose steadily through the ranks and eventually became the director of the Office of Operations and Training of the 19th Field Army in 1980, a position equivalent to a deputy division-commander. In that year, the 19th Field Army conducted the largest-scale military exercises since its inception, and Guo's ability to direct the coordination of staff and field efficiently made a deep impression on his superiors. Afterward, he was appointed chief of staff of a full division and got the opportunity to receive professional military education in an unidentified PLA academy. Completing his education in 1983, Guo returned to the 19th Field Army as its new chief of staff, and demonstrated his command abilities in a series of war games organized by the Lanzhou Military Region. Consequently, in 1985, he was promoted to deputy chief of staff of the Lanzhou Military Region, a position equivalent to a full army-commander.

In early 1990, Guo gained the favorable attention of General Fu Quanyou, then commander of the Lanzhou Military Region. In July 1990, Guo was appointed commander of the 47th Group Army, which enjoyed the distinction of being the descendant of a legendary Red Army unit in the Revolutionary era. As commander, Guo exhorted the soldiers to meet the requirements of then CMC chairman Jiang Zemin that the PLA must show 'political loyalty, military effectiveness, exemplary morals, strict discipline, and strong logistics'. Meanwhile, he stressed the importance of training as the foremost task of the military in peacetime. Indeed, at that time, Guo's emphasis on training and combat effectiveness formed a refreshing contrast to the prevalence of PLA involvement in commercial activity.

In 1992, Guo's patron Fu Quanyou moved to Beijing to become a CMC member and GLD director. Upon Fu's recommendation, Guo moved up to Beijing too and was appointed vice-commander of the Beijing Military Region in December 1993. Four years later, Guo was promoted to commander of the Lanzhou Military Region, with the rank of lieutenant-general. In October 1997, at the CCP's 15th Party Congress, he was also elected a member of the CCP Central Committee. In September 1999, Guo was further promoted to first deputy chief of the GSD, with the rank of full general. Like Xu Caihou, he also became a CMC member at that juncture and possibly owed the promotion to Jiang Zemin. In November 2002, when the CCP convened its 16th Party Congress, Guo finally rose to the apex of the politico-military command by becoming a member of the CCP Politburo and vice-chairman of the CMC. He retained these positions for a decade, until his retirement after the CCP's 18th Party Congress in November 2012.

Regrettably, high office did not enhance Guo's professional rectitude. As mentioned earlier, due to the political infirmity of then Chinese leader Hu Jintao, Xu Caihou and Guo exercised effective control over personnel shifts in the military top brass between 2004 and 2012. Like Xu, Guo appeared susceptible to the temptations of power too and became deeply mired in the practice of 'bribery for promotion'. Reportedly, his wife He Xiulian played a prominent role in that respect, acting as the middleperson between her husband and those office-seekers ready to satisfy his or her pecuniary demands. For a once highly regarded officer, such conduct is a sad testimony to the corrosive effect of unchecked power on the ethic of duty, which lies at the heart of military professionalism.

Moreover, in engineering those 'gilded promotions', Guo had sometimes to override the prescribed due procedures as well. Recall, for instance, that former CMC vice-chairmen Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen had stipulated that it was impermissible to promote an officer who was evaluated poorly by the Party committee and/or the rank and file of the unit where that officer belonged. Xu Caihou's promotion and protection of Gu Junshan doubtless violated this alleged 'iron rule' (see previous); and Guo Boxiong had done the same by promoting Dong Fuxiang, a logistics officer in the Beijing Military Region.

[41]The following account is based on: Feng, 'Qidi Guo Boxiong'; Bai Zhaodong and Yin Yue, 'Guojiajun jishi' ['Investigating the Guo family-army'], *Caijin Zazhi*, (31 July 2015), available at: http://wwwtoutiaocom/i5134994334/; Li Tianyue, 'Guo Zhenggang huojianshi shengqian lu' ['Tracing Guo Zhenggang's meteoric promotion'], *Huanqiu Renwu*, (23 March 2015), available at: http://wwwhqrwcomcn/2015/0323/20282shtml; Wang Heyan, 'Guo Boxiong chenfu' ['The rise and fall of Guo Boxiong'], *Caixin Net*, (30 July 2015), available at: http://chinacaixincom/2015-07-30/100834676html (all accessed 10 January 2017).

According to his colleagues, Dong had little capacity for work but a notable flair for cultivating his superiors. When Guo Boxiong was vice-commander of the Beijing Military Region, Dong was promoted to director of the infrastructure-and-housing department, despite objections from most members of the concerned Party committee. In 2009, Dong made a bid for the position of vice-director of the GLD, but lost it to his rival Gu Junshan, who had warmer relations with Xu Caihou. Afterward, Dong reportedly cultivated Guo Boxiong more actively and ascended to the directorship of the joint logistics department of the Beijing Military Region instead. In April 2015, however, Dong was arrested on charges of bribing his superiors to obtain promotions, which eventually implicated Guo.

Meanwhile, Guo played obvious favoritism toward some trusted associates. Fang Changmi, who once worked for Guo in the 47th Group Army and the Lanzhou Military Region, was promoted to deputy political commissar of the Lanzhou Military Region, with the rank of lieutenant-general. In December 2014, however, Fan became one of the first 16 general officers who were formally indicted for corruption. Besides, four of Guo's former secretaries had risen to senior positions: Lai Ceyi became vice-commander of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps; Liu Zhigang became vice-commander of the Beijing Military Region; Ma Chengxiao became commander of the 31st Group Army; and Zhang Fuji became political commissar of the 47th Group Army. Upon Guo's downfall, they were either dismissed from office or transferred to less important positions.

In addition, Guo apparently used his power and influence to facilitate the promotion of a few close relatives, whom mainland Chinese sources sardonically call the 'Guo family-army'. His son Guo Zhenggang is a case in point. Born in 1970, Guo Junior joined the PLA in 1989 and, after serving briefly in a grass-roots unit, moved to Beijing to join the staff of the GLD in the early 1990s. According to his colleagues, Guo Junior never displayed any outstanding qualities; yet, in 2007, he became the youngest senior-colonel of the PLA and acquired a command position in the Zhejiang Provincial Military District. While in Zhejiang, he showed little zeal for work and often absented himself during office hours. To the rank and file, he appeared haughty and aloof, uninterested in their concerns and problems. Nonetheless, in late 2011, Guo Junior was admitted into the National Defense University for advanced training, which is a usual preparatory step toward further promotion.

After completing the training, Guo Junior returned to Zhejiang and exhibited little improvement in his conduct thereafter. In the winter of 2014, however, he was appointed deputy political commissar of the Zhejiang Provincial Military District, and so became the youngest major-general of the PLA. Just 46 days later, in February 2015, Guo Junior was detained on charges of unspecified 'wrongdoing'. Five months later, his retired father Guo Boxiong was arrested for corruption and expelled from the CCP. As of this writing, the case of Guo Junior still remains in the judicial process, whereas a military court has found Guo Boxiong guilty of accepting bribes and sentenced him to life imprisonment in July 2016.

## Xi's military reforms: two cheers

Since his takeover, CCP general secretary and CMC chairman Xi Jinping has consolidated his control over the military rapidly and forcefully. In effect, the ongoing anti-corruption campaign is his foremost political weapon against the vested interests in the PLA. By destroying Xu Caihou, Guo Boxiong and their cronies, Xi not only cements his authority and deters potential opponents in the military establishment, but gains devoted adherents among the more soldierly PLA elites who have long felt bitter about military corruption but powerless to rectify the situation. To the latter, the time has come at last to separate the chaff from the wheat in the officer corps, so as to reinvigorate the PLA and prepare it for future wars.[42]

According to a commentary in the *People's Daily*, Xi once remarked bluntly: 'Military corruption means defeat in war'. Moreover, his endorsement of the 'China dream' or the 'great resurgence of the Chinese nation' requires the support of a mighty military arm. Therefore, Xi has no use for a military that

[42]See Liu Yazhou, 'Zouchu jiawu, yingjie biange, zaichuang huihuang'.

grows slack on peacetime perks and comforts.[43] In July 2014, for example, the *PLA Daily* uncovered the deficiencies in the PLA's fighting capacity with rare candor: between May and July 2014, seven crack army brigades conducted a series of war games against an adversarial 'Blue Army' in a training base of the Beijing Military Region. To their chagrin, six of the seven brigades suffered crushing defeats at the hands of the hypothetical 'enemy'.[44]

Since then, Xi has exhibited his determination to raise the PLA's morale and improve its combat proficiency. In August 2014, the CMC approved a major revision of the existing regulations on military awards and commendations, singling out the field troops as the main beneficiaries thereafter.[45] Three months later, at a conference on political work in the military, Xi reiterated the Maoist line that political work was the 'lifeline' of the PLA but emphasized that enhancing combat effectiveness was now the 'sole and fundamental criterion' for military development.[46] In January 2016, Xi unveiled an ambitious plan to revamp the command of military services. As Mulvenon observes, if successfully executed, the plan will bring the PLA much closer to the US military in administrative and operational structures.[47]

Needless to say, such sweeping, unprecedented reforms cannot succeed without installing new brains and brawn in key command and staff positions. Thus, the pivotal question reemerges: how to ensure that merit and expertise are truly valued in the (re)assignment and promotion of military cadres? Given the slowdown of the Chinese economy, this question fills many officers with uncertainties about their future.[48] In addressing the question, Xi reemphasizes the CCP's 'absolute leadership' in the PLA, as embodied in the old principle of *dang guan ganbu* (the Party oversees all cadres) and the Party committee system in military work.[49] In practice, this means a concerned Party committee should exercise collective leadership and adhere strictly to the prescribed rules and procedures in making personnel decisions.[50]

And so we return to the same problems besetting former CMC vice-chairmen Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen in the early 1990s. The difference, however, is that some leading PLA elites, after tasting the bitter fruit of cronyism and corruption in the previous period, now advocate more vehemently the primacy of formal rules and due procedures over personalistic power. General Liu Yazhou, for instance, calls for the 'rationalization' of officer evaluation and promotion, laying particular stresses on delineating clearly the educational, service and professional qualifications required for every officer position. He also urges the application of open and transparent procedures for the selection of personnel.[51] General Liu Yuan contends that the rules and regulations must be made 'steely' and 'impregnable', with a quotation from Xi Jinping that 'all are equal before the rules and no exception is permitted in enforcing the rules'.[52]



[43] See Note 5.

[44] Liang Pengfei and Li Yuming, 'Zhanbao: hongjun liufu yisheng' ['Report: the "red army" loses six battles and wins one'], *The PLA Daily*, (29 July 2014), available at: http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2014/0729/c83083-25361314.html (accessed 10 January 2017).

[45] Wang Dongming, 'Shoubu jundui jiangli he biaozhang guanli guiding jiangyu bayue yiri qi shixing' ['The first code of military awards and commendations will go into effect on August 1st'], *Xinhua Net*, (27 July 2014), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-07/27/c_1111819404.htm (accessed 10 January 2017).

[46] Cao Zhi and Li Xuanliang, 'Quanjun zhengzhi gongzuo huiyi zai gutian zhaokai, Xi Jinping chuxi huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua' ['The all-military political work conference opens in Gutian, Xi Jinping delivers keynote speech'], *Xinhua*, (1 November 2014), available at: http://military.people.com.cn/n/2014/1101/c1011-25953167.html (accessed 10 January 2017).

[47] James Mulvenon, 'China's "Goldwater-Nichols"? The long-awaited PLA reorganization has finally arrived', *Chinese Leadership Monitor* 49, (2016), available at: http://www.hoover.org/profiles/james-mulvenon (accessed 10 January 2017).

[48] See Liu Jianjun, 'Gaige zhong xu fangzhi rencai liushi' ['Beware the brain-drain during the reform'], *The PLA Daily*, (17 March 2016), available at: http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2016-03/17/content_138043.htm (accessed 10 January 2017).

[49] Cao Zhi and Li Xuanliang, 'Quanjun zhengzhi gongzuo huiyi zai gutian zhaokai'.

[50] Huang Wentao *et al.*, 'Xi zhuxi zai quanjun zhengzhi gongzuo huiyi shang de zhongyao jianghua: xin sixiang xin guandian xin lunduan xin yaoqiu jiedu' ['On Chairman Xi's keynote speech at the all-military political work conference: a summary of new ideas, new expositions, and new requirements'], *The PLA Daily*, (24 November 2014), available at: http://www.qstheory.cn/defense/2014-11/24/c_1113374313.htm (accessed 10 January 2017).

[51] Liu Yazhou, 'Zouchu jiawu, yingjie biange, zaichuang huihuang'.

[52] Liu Yuan, 'Nuli xiang renmin jiaochu youyi dajuan: shenru xuexi Xi Jinping zongshuji quanmian congyan zhidang zhanlue sixiang' ['Do our best to answer the people's questions: reflections on General Secretary Xi Jinping's comprehensive strategy of tightening the management of the Party'], *Qiushi*, (15 June 2015), available at: http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2015-06/15/c_1115588957.htm (accessed 10 January 2017).

Interestingly, the current constitution of China does allow for one exception concerning the exercise of personal power over the PLA: its Article 93 stipulates that 'the [CMC] Chairman assumes overall responsibility for the work of the Central Military Commission'.[53] In January 2015, a special commentary of the *PLA Daily* expounded the notion of the CMC chairman's 'overall responsibility' as follows:

> That the CMC is led by its chairman is a constitutionally mandated system and provides the foundation for the Party's absolute leadership in the military as well as the long-term stability in the Party and the state. … The implementation of the system requires that all armed forces submit to the unified leadership and command of the CMC chairman, all significant issues concerning national defense and military development be planned and decided by the CMC chairman, and the overall work of the CMC be directed and supervised by the Chairman.[54]

As Mulvenon remarks, this exposition implies that the leadership over the PLA is highly personalized and concentrated in the hands of the CMC chairman.[55] Yet, given the previous emphasis on the Party's 'collective leadership', this naturally raises the question of whether the personal supremacy of the CMC chairman might not weaken his accountability in the decision-making process. Ultimately, as confirmed by past experiences, only rigorous enforcement of formal rules and due procedures can prevent the abuse of personalistic power and enhance the professional development of the PLA. In this sense, current military reforms represent a step in the right direction, but more work still remains to be done.

## Conclusion

This article considers why cronyism and military corruption remained rampant in the post-Deng Xiaoping era, despite the PLA's progress toward modernization and professionalization. In theory, the bifurcation of civilian and military elites and the demise of 'supreme leaders' provided the PLA with greater autonomy vis-à-vis the Party, whereas the persistence of personalistic power in decision-making created opportunities for upper-level leaders to place trusted associates in key posts. The lack of effective checks and balances thus facilitated the misuse of power for private ends and gave rise to cronyism and corruption. Relatedly, the Party's command of the gun is at risk if and when the promotion of military officers conforms more to the exercise of personalistic power than to the prescribed procedures of Party control. Moreover, several major cases of military corruption reveal that the weakening of Party oversight may be a remedy worse than the disease.

Implicitly, this article also underlines the difficulties of implementing political reform in China. In August 1980, Deng Xiaoping made a historic speech entitled 'Reforming the Leadership System of the Party and the State', in which he warned against the danger of personalistic politics. When power becomes highly personalized, said Deng, individual leaders would place themselves above the Party and ignore the due procedures of inner-Party democracy, which require that all important decisions be made by consensus, not by individual fiat. Furthermore, as individual leaders hold unlimited authority over their domains, patron–client networks and political factions would inevitably emerge.[56] Thirty-five years after Deng's speech, it is a sobering reminder that China has still not devised an effective solution to this problem.

As far as civil–military relations are concerned, it is doubtful whether the problem could be resolved by simply putting the PLA under state control with the attendant elimination of Party control. As has been seen, ceding greater institutional autonomy to the military does not necessarily guarantee the victory of professionalism; rather, without credible checks on their power, the military leaders' first loyalty may not lie with either the Party or the state, but with themselves. More significantly, as Susan Shirk points out, '[a] politically powerful and independent military is a danger sign in a rising power'.[57]

[53]Text available at: http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372968.htm (accessed 10 January 2017).
[54]'Gongzuo zhidu yao jinyibu yanqilai shiqilai' ['The implementation of our work system must be further strengthened'], *The PLA Daily*, (28 January 2015), available at: http://military.people.com.cn/GB/n/2015/0128/c172467-26461935.html (accessed 10 January 2017).
[55]James Mulvenon, 'The yuan stops here: Xi Jinping and the "CMC chairman responsibility system"', *Chinese Leadership Monitor* 47, (2015), available at: http://www.hoover.org/profiles/james-mulvenon (accessed 10 January 2017).
[56]Deng Xiaoping, *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan*, Vol. 2 (Beijing: Renmin Press, 1994), pp. 329–331.
[57]Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 70.

If the prevailing mechanisms of Party control could still fall short of assuring civilian supremacy over the military, it is doubly questionable whether a 'state control' apparatus, which is hitherto nonexistent and so has to be constructed from scratch, would prove more effective in doing the work. At present, therefore, the reassertion of the CCP's leadership in military affairs might actually help to stabilize China's political future. For, if the Party stops functioning as supreme arbiter in the political system, the military hawks could easily exploit the ever-growing popular nationalism at home and turn China against real or imagined adversaries abroad with terrible force, with no constitutional roadblocks to stand in the way.

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## Notes on contributor

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