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## 2. PLA STUDIES TODAY: A MATURING FIELD

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It is useful in all areas of scholarly endeavor to periodically stand back and reflect upon the state of a field. This essay was inspired by listening to the discussion of the other contributions to this volume as they were presented at the San Diego conference. What follows is *not* intended as either a critical survey of the existing secondary literature or a comprehensive assessment of the issues that intellectually occupy the field (as previously undertaken by Jonathan Pollack, Harlan Jencks, and June Teufel Dreyer<sup>2</sup>), nor is it an effort in primary research. With these caveats in mind, let me address several themes.

### PRODUCERS AND CONSUMERS

Who are the contributors to PLA studies today, how do they differ from previous generations, and what are the distinguishing features of this community? This discussion also assesses the changing “consumers” of the research published by the PLA studies community.

There is little doubt that the field has increased in both quantity and quality in recent years. However, it is not easy to calculate the field’s parameters and size. Unlike a country club, with a roll and dues-paying membership, inclusion in the field of PLA studies is not so easily counted. One simple criterion—publication—may reveal only a partial list. For example, some of the keenest analysts—like the legendary Ellis Melvin of Tamaroa, Illinois—labor away in obscurity and never publish or attend conferences. This can, of course, also be said of the large cadre of government and

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<sup>2</sup>Jonathan D. Pollack, “The Study of Chinese Military Politics: Toward a Framework for Analysis,” in Catherine M. Kelleher (ed.), *Political-Military Systems: Comparative Perspectives*, Beverly Hills: Sage, 1974; June Teufel Dreyer, “State of the Field Report: Research on the Chinese Military,” *AccessAsia Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Summer 1997, pp. 5–30; and Harlan W. Jencks, “Watching China’s Military: A Personal View,” *Problems of Communism*, May–June 1986, pp. 71–78.

intelligence analysts whose work never sees the light of day. Some, like John Lewis, publish a lot and have been major contributors to the field over a number of years, but elect not to attend conferences and have limited interaction with others in the field. Others, like Mel Gurtov, suddenly reemerge after years of silence to publish significant books and articles.<sup>3</sup> Another subgroup, which includes William Whitson, Doug Lovejoy, Tom Roberts, Eden Woon, Michael T. Byrnes, and Richard Latham, have left for other professional endeavors.<sup>4</sup> Some, like Al Wilhelm or Chas Freeman, are fountains of knowledge about, and frequently interact with, the PLA, yet they rarely publish in the field. Some academics who contributed in the 1970s—Harvey Nelsen, Harry Gelber, and Tom Robinson come to mind—remain intellectually engaged in the issues but have stopped publishing in the field.<sup>5</sup> Some who contributed major studies of the PLA prior to and during the Cultural Revolution—like Alexander George and John Gittings—remained active authors but no longer wrote about the PLA.<sup>6</sup> Others—like Benjamin Ostrov, Paul Folta, Mark Ryan, and Cheng Hsiao-shih—contributed important monographs, never to be heard from again.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars of domestic Chinese politics occasionally venture into the field and publish noteworthy articles but tend not to be regularly engaged in research on the PLA. Examples include Wang Shaoguang, Wei Li, Jeremy Paltiel, and Avery Goldstein.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, there are well-known scholars of Chinese foreign policy—Allen Whiting, Richard Solomon, Harry Harding, John Garver, Robert Ross, Gerald Segal, Tom Christiansen, A. Doak Barnett, and others—who have contributed major case studies in the national security sphere and on China’s crisis behavior, but who are not generally thought of as active PLA watchers.

Thus, it is not a simple task to determine the composition of the PLA studies community today. One cannot judge membership based on publications alone. This

<sup>3</sup>Mel Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China’s Security: The New Roles of the Military*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998; and Mel Gurtov, “Swords into Market Shares: China’s Conversion of Military Industry to Civilian Production,” *The China Quarterly*, June 1993, pp. 231–241. Twenty-seven years ago, Gurtov and Hwang published *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, William Whitson, *The Chinese High Command*, New York: Praeger, 1973; Charles D. Lovejoy, Jr. and Bruce W. Watson (eds.), *China’s Military Reforms*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1986; and Thomas C. Roberts, *The Chinese People’s Militia and the Doctrine of People’s War*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1983. Richard Latham’s contributions over the years are too numerous to list.

<sup>5</sup>See Harvey Nelsen, *The Chinese Military System*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1977, 1981; Harry G. Gelber, *Technology, Defense, and External Relations in China, 1975–1978*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979.

<sup>6</sup>Alexander George, *The Chinese Communist Army in Action*, New York: Columbia, 1967; John Gittings, *The Role of the Chinese Army*, London: Oxford University Press, 1967; and Gerald Corr, *The Chinese Red Army*, London: Osprey Publishers, 1974.

<sup>7</sup>See Benjamin C. Ostrov, *Conquering Resources: The Growth and Decline of the PLA’s Science and Technology Commission for National Defense*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991; Paul Humes Folta, *From Swords to Plowshares: Defense Industry Reform in the PRC*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992; Mark A. Ryan, *Chinese Attitudes Towards Nuclear Weapons*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1991; and Cheng Hsiao-shih, *Party-Military Relations in the PRC and Taiwan*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990.

<sup>8</sup>Wang Shaoguang, “Estimating China’s Defense Expenditure: Some Evidence From Chinese Sources,” *The China Quarterly*, September 1996, pp. 889–911; Wei Li, “The Security Service for Chinese Central Leaders,” *The China Quarterly*, September 1995, pp. 814–827; Jeremy Paltiel, “PLA Allegiance on Parade: Civil-Military Relations in Transition,” *ibid.*, pp. 784–800; Avery Goldstein, “Great Expectations: Interpreting China’s Arrival,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Winter 1997–1998, pp. 36–73.

is certainly the case with the large cohort of PLA specialists in the United States and foreign governments and militaries. Inside the U.S. government and military, for example, there may be as many as 100 analysts devoted full-time to studying the PLA in the Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, National Reconnaissance Office, U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), and other offices. On rare occasion these individuals participate in academic conferences, but they never contribute papers or publish in academic journals (even under pseudonyms). Their participation in conferences is to be welcomed, and they make important contributions on these occasions, yet their failure to publish in the unclassified world is regrettable. Apparently, the Byzantine bureaucratic procedures necessary to gain clearance to publish serve as a significant deterrent, although it is not necessarily the case that these individuals would be so inclined if the bureaucratic strictures were not such an impediment. This has not always been the case; in years past such analysts were regular contributors to journals such as *The China Quarterly*. William Whitson's landmark edited volume *The Military and Political Power in China in the 1970s* contained a large number of chapters written by intelligence analysts.<sup>9</sup> The recent contributions by several DIA analysts to the 1997 Staunton Hill conference volume may be suggestive of renewed contributions to public discourse.<sup>10</sup>

Overseas, not surprisingly, the government and military on Taiwan devote substantial human resources to analyzing the PLA. This information does not tend to reach the public domain, in either English or Chinese, but fruitful discussions can be had with such experts on the island. The governments and militaries in Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and Russia also contain small cohorts of PLA watchers, and there is a smattering of academic and private-sector PLA experts in these countries. In Europe, PLA specialists in government are minimal and outside of government they are virtually non-existent (three come to mind in Germany, two in France, none in Britain, one in Scandinavia, and none in the Mediterranean countries or Central Europe). Special mention should be made of Israel, where two leading members of the field reside: Ellis Joffe and Yitzhak Shichor.

So who comprises the PLA studies community today? Institutionally, the community of active Western PLA specialists resident in academe in the United States and abroad remains woefully small: Ellis Joffe, Yitzhak Shichor, June Dreyer, John Frankenstein, Iain Johnston, myself, and the group of younger scholars mentioned below. The dearth of university-based PLA specialists is abundantly evident when one examines the list of contributors to this or other conference volumes in the field. This is lamentable, but is unlikely to change for the simple fact that there are few incentives for a China scholar to take up the PLA as a subject area of primary research: there are no university jobs in comparative politics, international relations, or security studies that are specifically designated for a PLA specialist; there are few knowledgeable professors to train such students; there exist extremely limited fieldwork opportunities in China; and few academic journals welcome article

<sup>9</sup>William Whitson (ed.), *The Military and Political Power in the 1990s*, NY: Praeger, 1972.

<sup>10</sup>See special issue of the *China Strategic Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 1998.

submissions in this field (although this is improving in recent years with *Survival*, *International Security*, *Security Studies*, *Asian Survey*, *The China Quarterly*, and *The China Journal* all publishing increasing numbers of articles on Chinese security and defense matters<sup>11</sup>). These are all real disincentives to write a doctoral dissertation on the PLA or work in the field. Indeed, it is a field without a comfortable home in the social sciences. In political science, it does not comfortably fit into either comparative politics or international relations (IR); its closest “home” is in the tenuous subfield in IR of security studies (a field which itself suffers from a chronic identity crisis). As is discussed further below, China political scientists have long shunned PLA studies—a bizarre peculiarity considering the pivotal role the military has played in the political life of the PRC.<sup>12</sup> Yet, those in academe who have ventured into the PLA studies field have largely done so by way of the study of Chinese domestic politics.

Of late, there are encouraging signs of a new generation of young scholars entering the field who have received their doctorates in recent years: James Mulvenon from UCLA, Thomas Bickford from California-Berkeley, Evan Feigenbaum from Stanford; Andrew Scobell and Fang Zhu from Columbia, Huang Jing from Harvard, Nan Li from Johns Hopkins, and You Ji from the Australian National University.<sup>13</sup> Although Mulvenon has opted for a career outside the Academy, it is hoped the others will continue to research and write on the PLA in the post-doctoral period. This new generation is armed with solid social science training, a sound base in China area studies, and good Chinese language skills. Several of these individuals come from China, and bring obvious linguistic and research assets with them. Some are children of PLA officers. It can be hoped that these individuals will invigorate PLA studies as PRC émigrés have done for the study of Chinese politics, political economy, foreign policy, and diplomatic history. They are to be welcomed into our ranks, although, as foreign nationals, their presence at conferences poses distinct problems for the participation of government experts.

If the PLA academic studies community remains small, who comprise the majority? As the contributors to this volume make clear, the bulk of PLA specialists today work

<sup>11</sup>Submissions of manuscripts to these journals have increased severalfold in recent years.

<sup>12</sup>One can survey many of the major monographs on Chinese politics over the years— from Franz Schurmann’s *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* to Roderick MacFarquhar’s edited *Chinese Politics*—and find scant attention paid to the PLA either as an actor in the political process or as an institution worthy of attention in its own right. I encourage colleagues in comparative politics and foreign policy studies to integrate the military into their work. Whether at a central, regional, or local level, the military is an important actor in politics, commerce, security, and governance. I have attempted elsewhere to “bring the soldier back in” to our understanding of the pre-Cultural Revolution period. See David Shambaugh, “The Building of the Civil-Military State in China 1949–1965: Bringing the Soldier Back In,” in Timothy Cheek and Tony Saich, (eds.), *The Construction of State Socialism in China, 1949–1965*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997.

<sup>13</sup>James Mulvenon, “Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise of the Military-Business Complex in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, 1978–98,” Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1998; Nan Li, “Bureaucratic Behavior, Praetorian Behavior, and Civil-Military Relations: Deng Xiaoping’s China (1978–89) and Gorbachev’s Soviet Union,” Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 1994; Fang Zhu, *Gun Barrel Politics: Party-Army Relations in Mao’s China*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998; Thomas J. Bickford, “Marching into the Abyss: The Changing Role of the People’s Liberation Army in Chinese Politics,” Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1995; Andrew Scobell, “Civil-Military Relations in the People’s Republic of China in Comparative Perspective,” Dissertation, Columbia University, 1995.

in private sector research institutes, corporations, and consultancies—e.g.: Jonathan Pollack, Michael Swaine, and James Mulvenon of RAND; Bates Gill of The Brookings Institution; Rick Fisher of The Heritage Foundation; James Lilley and Arthur Waldron of the American Enterprise Institute; Michael McDevitt and David Finkelstein of the Center for Naval Analysis; Monte Bullard of the Center for Non-Proliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies; Dennis Blasko of International Trade and Technology Associates; Wendy Frieman of Science Applications International Corporation; Ken Allen of The Stimson Center; and Tai Ming Cheung of Kroll Associates. These individuals spend much of their time, but by no means all, researching the PLA, but their research agendas are largely driven by the needs of their corporate or government sponsors and clients. They do not generally have the freedom or the time to structure their own research agendas, and their output takes different forms from traditional academic work, i.e., generally shorter, policy-oriented studies instead of books or detailed case studies (RAND reports being the notable exception to this rule). Other members of the field, such as Paul Godwin, Bud Cole, Ron Montaperto, Larry Wortzel, Harlan Jencks, and Shirley Kan, work in U.S. government institutions. Their publications do not appear to be influenced by their employers, and each has made significant contributions to the field over the years, but inevitably their research agendas are somewhat influenced by the needs of their sponsors. Others, like John Corbett, Karl Eikenberry, Mark Stokes, Roy Kamphausen, and others, are currently in active military or government service. Others, like John Caldwell and Ed O’Dowd, are on assignments that have temporarily taken them out of the field. Some, such as Eric McVadon, have retired from active service and continue as active members of the field as individual consultants. Finally, there are some, like Michael Pillsbury, who straddle the worlds of government and think tanks.

Many of these individuals have previously served as either military attachés in China and/or in the Department of Defense. Several were Foreign Area Officers (FAOs) in the U.S. Army or other services. This distinguished group has made an important mark on the field of PLA studies. They have brought obvious expertise and a “feel” for understanding the PLA that most academics lack. They have benefited from first-hand exposure to the highest reaches of the PLA command structure down to basic units and training facilities. There is just no replacement for this experience. But the real value-added of this group is that they have spent their entire adult lives as military officers, and concomitantly bring a comprehension of the weapons systems, technologies, training regimens, and operations and maintenance routines for militaries that academics are hard-pressed to understand. The addition of this cohort to the PLA studies community is relatively recent (although there have always been some in the field), and it has provided an incredible boost to the field. Curiously, though, to date the field has not benefited from the addition of former PLA officers, soldiers, or defectors.

Before leaving the subject of producers for the consumers of the PLA studies field, mention must be made of the sense of “community” and collegiality that is shared among many members in the field. Fortunately, this is not a field beset by backbiting, factionalism, enlarged egos, petty jealousies, or the like. This is not to suggest that there are never heated debates or sharp differences of opinion, as there are. A year or so ago the field seemed sharply divided over the “China threat”

question, while a few years earlier the nature of civil-military relations was a point of contention. But, overall, it is a remarkably congenial community, both personally and intellectually. This compatibility is forged annually at one or more of the annual conferences that have become staples for the field: those sponsored by the Council on Advanced Policy Studies (Taipei) and its foreign partners (RAND since 1996), the American Enterprise Institute, Army War College, and the Staunton Hill gatherings. These venues have done much not only to forge a sense of community, but, perhaps more important, they have advanced the field intellectually by commissioning carefully considered sets of papers and engaging in frank discussion. Each conference has resulted in a published volume, which has pushed the field forward. Given the dearth of individual books in the field (Ellis Joffe's 1987 *The Chinese Army After Mao* was one of the last), these collective volumes have served an instrumental purpose in advancing the field. Many fields advance in a more indirect way—through publication of journal articles, scholarly monographs, and paper or poster presentations at annual meetings of the discipline. Our field is most fortunate to have had these three venues in recent years to push the study of the field forward, and to forge friendships and conviviality. The thematic nature and planning that go into these conferences have provided analytical coherence to the field, have filled in many important gaps in our knowledge, and have focused the discourse in the field.

Thus, the PLA studies field has enjoyed substantial growth over the years, as compared with either the pre-Cultural Revolution period, when the community could be counted on two hands (e.g., Ralph Powell, Hal Ford, William Whitson, Alice Langley Hsieh, Samuel Griffith, Ray Bradbury, Ellis Joffe, John Gittings), or the 1970s and 1980s. As is discussed below, the research foci have evolved, as have the available data. Also, the field is no longer as insular as in the past, as there is a much more diverse “market” for the field’s scholarship.

If the “producers” in the field have changed over the years, so too have the “consumers.” For much of its history the PLA studies field was very insular. Those in the field would basically write for and talk only with each other. The field was cut off from mainstream contemporary China studies, from East Asian security studies, and from international security studies more broadly. Moreover, there was little public interest in the subject and only a few journalists (such as Drew Middleton of *The New York Times*) paid it heed. Those who followed the PLA in the government and intelligence communities had little interaction with those outside.

All of this has changed in recent years. During the last decade, those in other subfields of contemporary China studies have begun to show greater interest in the PLA, as the PLA has become recognized as an increasingly important actor in domestic politics, the economy, and foreign affairs. As the PLA began to modernize its forces and flex its muscles in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea, the East Asian security studies community began to pay greater heed to our work. International nongovernment organizations (NGOs) such as the International Institute of Strategic Studies and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute all began to pay increasing attention to the PLA, and this has been reflected in their publications. Government-affiliated research institutes, such as the National Institute for Defense Studies in Japan, the Stiftung für Wissenschaft und Politik in

Germany, the Institute for Defense and Security Analysis in India, the Institute for Defense Studies in Singapore, the Korea Institute of Defense Analyses, and others, have also begun to devote greater resources and staff to studying the PLA. The international media has definitely increased the attention paid to the PLA, although articles in the mainstream press are still few and far between. In fact, one should not overstate the attention paid to the PLA or writings by PLA experts, as our field still remains a remarkably insular one. When events thrust the PLA into the public spotlight, then we are suddenly called upon for instant analysis. Unfortunately, when this occurs, we are often forced to oversimplify complex issues, organizations, doctrines, weapons, and so on for journalists who only wish to give their readers bare-bones analysis. Of course, journalists from magazines such as *Jane's Defense Weekly*, *Defense News*, and *Aviation Week and Space Technology* are of a different nature, as their questions are far more nuanced, their articles are considerably more detailed, and their readership is far more knowledgeable.

Other new consumers are to be found in the U.S. Congress and foreign parliaments, multinational corporations, and foreign policy élites. As China's arms sales and commercial activities abroad have gained notoriety, legislative attention has increased. As China has recovered from its post-Tiananmen isolation and renormalized its foreign relations, military-to-military exchanges with the PLA have been added to the diplomatic agenda, and there has been a concomitant need among diplomats and foreign policy élites outside of government to know more about the PLA. "Track II" exchanges with the PLA are becoming an increasingly important channel of contact and information for government and nongovernmental specialists.

With this increased consumer base, it is not surprising that some producers try to tailor their analyses to certain consumers. There is little doubt that certain think tank researchers, independent analysts, and congressional staff allow ideological, partisan, and political incentives to color their analyses and policy prescriptions. Certain consumers are also selective in what they "hear" and wish to hear from analysts, frequently ignoring important details, nuance, or simply distorting empirical facts. Rumor generation and embellishment are not uncommon among some PLA watchers. In a field where hard data are relatively scarce and PLA transparency is low, there are often incentives to speculate, create a "fact" out of a report or rumor, not look for independent confirmation of evidence, or otherwise be less than rigorous in analysis. These tendencies are definitely the exception rather than the rule in our field, but we all need to be as empirical as possible in our work.

## **DATA**

All fields are prisoners of their data. To a certain extent, the PLA studies field has mirrored other parts of contemporary China studies. A perusal of footnotes in the first generation of PLA studies during the 1950s and 1960s reveals an almost singular reliance on *Liberation Army Daily* and other print and broadcast media, often reported in the survey of China mainland press. On rare occasion, original documentation was made available to the scholarly community, often as the result of

intelligence operations by the nationalists on Taiwan, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), or British secret service. Such was the case with the so-called “secret military papers” captured in 1961 in Tibet.<sup>14</sup> Human subject interviews did not figure prominently for PLA scholars of the first generation, and they were certainly not as important as for specialists in domestic Chinese politics, who based many books on interviewing refugees in Hong Kong. Alexander George was one to take advantage, by systematically interviewing nonrepatriated prisoners of war (POWs) from the Korean War.<sup>15</sup> Like other subject areas, the Cultural Revolution produced a flood of new data for PLA watchers. Important insights were gained into party-army relations, commanders and commissars, the defense industrial sector, force structure, and individual units. More recently, largely as a result of the publication of the phenomenal volume, *The PLA in the Cultural Revolution (Wenhua da geming de renmin jiefangjun)*, have we become more fully aware of how the armed forces were affected during these tortuous years.<sup>16</sup> The 1970s yielded little new by way of documentary data for PLA studies, but for the first time it became possible to interact with the Chinese military. This came as a result of two processes: the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Western countries and China’s shopping for arms and defense technology in the West. Then strategic cooperation against the former Soviet Union also brought the PLA in closer contact with Western political and military leaders.

The great boom in documentary data for PLA studies did not come until the 1980s and 1990s. As in other areas of Chinese studies, there has been a publishing explosion in materials on the PLA in the last two decades. Certain events, such as the 70th anniversary of the PLA in 1997, stimulate outpourings of materials, but there has been a marked increase in many spheres in recent years. Several thousand volumes have been published in this decade alone, the vast majority of which are not “restricted internal circulation” (*neibu* or *junnei faxing*) and are available for purchase by foreign researchers. Visits to the PLA publishing house outlets in Beijing and Nanjing, and the Academy of Military Sciences press outlet (the NDU press is on campus and generally inaccessible), should be regular stops for all in the field. I will not attempt to catalogue or discuss such materials here, as I have done so in a preliminary way elsewhere<sup>17</sup> and it lies beyond the purpose of this essay, but suffice it to say that there is hardly an area of Chinese military affairs that is not covered in these books: doctrine, logistics, political work, battle and campaign histories, force

<sup>14</sup>The “secret papers” were, in fact, the low-classification PLA *Work Bulletin (Gongzuo Tongxun)*, although at the time they were a treasure trove of primary data. Twenty-nine issues from 1961 were released by the Department of State to the public in 1963. The translated texts were subsequently published as J. Chester Cheng (ed.), *The Politics of the Chinese Red Army*, Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1966. Also see the special issue of *The China Quarterly*, No. 18, 1964.

<sup>15</sup>Alexander L. George, *The Chinese Communist Army in Action*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup>Li Ke and Chi Shengzhang, ‘*Wenhua da geming’ zhong de renmin jiefangjun*, Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1989. This book was subsequently banned and the authors (researchers at the Academy of Military Sciences and National Defense University) were arrested.

<sup>17</sup>David Shambaugh, “A Bibliographical Essay on New Sources for the Study of China’s Foreign Relations and National Security,” in Thomas W. Robinson and David Shambaugh (eds.), *Chinese Foreign Policy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

structure and management, command and control, each of the services, high-tech warfare, regional and international security, foreign militaries, and so on. In addition, there are over 100 military journals published—although the vast majority of these are *neibu*. Michael Pillsbury's edited Chinese views of future warfare is a good illustration, albeit a small sampling, of what is discussed these days in the pages of Chinese military journals.<sup>18</sup>

The problem in PLA studies today is not that we lack data, but rather three interrelated problems:

- Gaining access to the data
- Insufficient exploitation
- Poor bibliographic control.

Unfortunately, woefully few members of the field collect and use primary data from China. Data are not that hard to get hold of if one only visits the publishing outlets noted above, as well as the *Xinhua Shudian* network of bookstores. Journals are another story, as generally one must have access to a library on a residential basis. Even open (*gongkai*) journals such as *China Military Science* (*Zhongguo junshi kexue*) and *National Defense University Journal* (*Guofang daxue xuebao*) are hard to come by.<sup>19</sup> Finding complete runs of back issues is even more difficult. As there is just a handful of PLA journals that can be subscribed to outside of China, one really must trawl for materials in the PRC. The Universities Services Center (USC) on the campus of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Taiwan's Institute of International Relations (IIR) libraries also house substantial collections of materials on the PLA. The latter includes comprehensive press clippings files from PRC and PLA media and specialized publications. The IISS in London and SIPRI in Stockholm contain similar clippings files drawn from English language publications. Our major Chinese studies library collections in the United States and other countries are doing a poor job of collecting these materials. Surveys of the best—the Fairbank Center Library at Harvard and the Sinological Institutes in Heidelberg and Leiden, respectively—reveal that these facilities are acquiring only a fraction of what is possible.<sup>20</sup> The Library of Congress is even worse.<sup>21</sup> The exception appears to be the Center for Chinese Studies library at the University of California-Berkeley, which appears to have the best collection of PLA materials outside of China, the USC in Hong Kong, or the IIR in Taipei.

Second, even if one gains access to these materials, having the time to carefully read, digest, and use them in research is no small challenge for nonnatives. While the total

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<sup>18</sup>Michael Pillsbury (ed.), *Chinese Views of Future Warfare*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1997.

<sup>19</sup>I have been able to secure nearly complete runs of these journals for the last decade.

<sup>20</sup>The Sinological Seminar library at the University of Heidelberg has the only continuous paper run of *Jiefangjun bao* (*Liberation Army Daily*) in the Western world.

<sup>21</sup>I am presently undertaking a survey of the contemporary China collection in the Library of Congress, commissioned by the Librarian of Congress, with the intention of devoting greater resources and attention to building this into an unrivaled collection.

volume is but a fraction of what our colleagues in Chinese economic or political studies must cope with, it is still a daunting task to digest dozens of books in Chinese. The U.S. government (Foreign Broadcast Information Service [FBIS]) could make a tremendous contribution not only to our field but also to U.S. national security through the sustained translation of such materials. An investment of \$500,000 in translating carefully selected books and articles would result in a tremendous “multiplier effect” for analysts inside and outside of government. Obviously, one must possess very good Chinese language skills and knowledge of the specialized vocabulary to exploit the available materials (presuming they are accessible). Unfortunately, only a handful of scholars in the field (including government) possess such linguistic prowess. Thus, both lack of access and poor exploitation have hampered the field to date.

Finally, those who do delve into the primary materials face the task of gaining bibliographic control. Do we cross-check our data from one source to the next? How is one to know which is more authoritative? Indeed, in many cases, how is one to know the identity or institutional location of the author? Only a careful monitoring of materials can distinguish new information. For example, just in the last year or so, PLA publishing sources have begun to publish books and articles detailing the weapons capabilities in the military’s arsenal and several volumes on command and control issues. How do we know what is truly new information (a proper approach would entail cross-checking with a wide variety of Western sources)? It is important that analysts and scholars be careful not to confuse ambition with capability, as much PLA writing explores doctrines and technologies that the PLA aspires to, but does not currently possess.

Aside from published sources, mention should be made of human sources. Unfortunately, our field has not benefited very much from defectors or émigrés, a category that had provided much information on the Soviet and East European militaries.<sup>22</sup> As in other areas of Chinese studies, interviews have come to play an important role in scholarly research since the 1980s. These have been particularly significant in discussions of the PLA’s perspectives on regional security, but also on a wide variety of aspects of the PLA: doctrine,<sup>23</sup> political work,<sup>24</sup> party-army

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<sup>22</sup>Xue Litai’s and Hua Di’s collaborations with John Lewis are an exception (and the latter case resulted, in part, in Hua Di’s arrest upon his return to China).

<sup>23</sup>David Shambaugh, “The Insecurity of Security: The PLA’s Evolving Doctrine and Threat Perceptions Towards 2000,” *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Spring 1994.

<sup>24</sup>David Shambaugh, “The Soldier and the State in China: The Political Work System in People’s Liberation Army,” *The China Quarterly*, September 1991.

relations,<sup>25</sup> national security policymaking,<sup>26</sup> logistics,<sup>27</sup> the budget,<sup>28</sup> commercial activity,<sup>29</sup> and other areas.

As in other aspects of contemporary China studies, PLA specialists need to utilize multiple sources of data and research strategies. Simply scouring the English language press and publications in defense publications is far from sufficient. Nor is use of FBIS and BBC/SWB translations adequate, as they fail to pick up books altogether and capture only a fraction of the periodical and newspaper literature published in China. The Hong Kong press can often provide important information but must be treated with great care. These three sources need to be used in tandem with a wide range of primary source Chinese language material and, where possible, interviews. Getting interviews with the PLA is, however, much easier said than done. We must admit that we have very little contact with real “operators,” officers, and soldiers. If one has the chance to visit bases, they are always showcase units. When one does have the opportunity for discussions on bases, they are usually carefully scripted. The cohort with whom interaction is most frequent are the “barbarian handlers” and intelligence collectors from the Second Department of the General Staff, military attachés posted abroad, and specialists in international security at the Institute of Strategic Studies of the National Defense University and the Foreign Military Studies division of the Academy of Military Sciences. One is often left with the impression that these individuals know more about foreign militaries than they do about their own! There is a resulting disconnect as our PLA specialists are meeting with their American specialists. Nonetheless, meetings can be arranged with strategists and other experts in these institutions for serious discussion of PLA issues. Of course, military attachés have the best access, but even that is carefully controlled and scripted.<sup>30</sup> Slowly, officers are beginning to go abroad as visiting scholars or for conferences, thus opening further channels of information. Track II dialogues with the PLA are also beginning to yield important insights. Gradually, the PLA’s door is being pried open, access is improving, and transparency is growing. There is a variety of reasons why it will continue to open very slowly and it will be a painstaking and frequently frustrating endeavor to “engage” the PLA, but the trendline is in the right direction.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup>Michael D. Swaine, *The Military and Political Succession in China*, RAND, R-4254-AF, 1992.

<sup>26</sup>Michael D. Swaine, *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policymaking*, RAND, MR-782-OSD, 1998.

<sup>27</sup>Tai Ming Cheung, “Reforming the Dragon’s Tail: Military Logistics in the Era of High-Technology Warfare and Market Economics,” in James Lilley and David Shambaugh (eds.), *China’s Military Faces the Future*, Armonk, NY and Washington, DC: M. E. Sharpe and AEI Press, 1999.

<sup>28</sup>David Shambaugh, “World Military Expenditure: China,” *SIPRI Yearbook*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; and David Shambaugh, “Wealth in Search of Power: The Chinese Defense Budget and Budgeting Process,” paper presented at IISS/CAPS conference, Hong Kong, 1996.

<sup>29</sup>Tai Ming Cheung has a forthcoming book.

<sup>30</sup>See the observations in Larry M. Wortzel, “The U.S.-China Military Relationship in the 21st Century,” paper presented at the Eighth Annual Conference on the PLA, Wye Plantation, Maryland, 1998.

<sup>31</sup>See the discussion in David Shambaugh, *Enhancing Sino-American Military Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Sigur Center for Asian Studies, 1998.

## WHAT DO AND DON'T WE KNOW?

We should be modest in our self-assessments as a field, as there is still a lot that remains unknown and many sources that remain untapped. Yet there is also much to be satisfied with, as the general knowledge and information base among specialists on the PLA are impressive. The contributions to this volume are indicative of the state of the field today, and it must be judged to be quite informed and sophisticated. Other conference volumes and published monographs sustain this judgment. The current crop of doctoral dissertations, notably those by Mulvenon and Feigenbaum, are of excellent quality and show what can be done with newly available sources. The field has progressed substantially in recent years, and it can truly be said to have matured.

In the last decade, the field has produced extensive and informed studies of all services (ground, air, naval, and nuclear), civil-military relations, the officer corps, doctrine and strategy, defense policy decisionmaking, the national security environment and threat perceptions, military finance and budgeting, the military-industrial complex, arms sales and purchases, a wide variety of weapons systems and capabilities, as well as “software” issues (such as those contained in this volume). Even the People’s Armed Police and the PLA’s role in arms control have been examined. The field has matured through hard work by individuals with a passion for their subject and a strong will to know more. We actually know quite a lot about the PLA, far more, I would submit, than the PLA is aware of. If the PLA had a better sense of what is known *in the public domain and based on unclassified sources*, and if they read our publications, they may have less incentive to try to hide that which is already common knowledge among specialists abroad.

Of course, our knowledge base is far from sufficient and there is much more work to be done. Moreover, we are “shooting at a moving target” that is evolving and changing rapidly. What needs to be done? In my view, a careful “institutional mapping” of key organizations is still needed. We really do not have a clear sense of how the general departments, group armies, and regional commands are organized and function. We need to know more about how training and tactics are evolving, and how the services are adapting to the new doctrine of “limited war under high-technology conditions.” Despite being the most heavily studied subject in the field, civil-military relations still remains a black hole, with woefully inadequate data, which forces us to speculate often beyond what hard evidence can sustain. Nascent signs of increased state control over the armed forces, with concomitant autonomy from the party, need to be monitored carefully. With wholesale turnover in the officer corps and in the High Command taking place in recent years, we are confronted with a completely new generation about whom we are poorly informed. Much more information needs to be gained about the socialization, training, and interrelationships in the upper echelons of this new generation of officers and military leaders. We may have a relatively clear understanding of the PLA’s perceptual worldview and strategic outlook, but that is not the same as understanding intentions and how a military will act in a given crisis. Hence, we need to know how the PLA prepares for certain contingencies involving Korea, Japan, Taiwan, India, the United States, and possible conflict in the South China Sea. We

know that the military-industrial complex is in dire straits on the whole, but we have a poor sense of the linkage between research and development, exactly why certain systems never make it to or past the prototype stage, and a whole range of issues related to systems integration and assimilation of technology. Indeed, we need to gain a clearer sense of the interaction of technology, procurement, doctrine, and strategy. Does doctrine drive procurement decisions, or do technological impediments constrain doctrine and strategy? How are decisions made on what to buy abroad, and what problems of assimilation is the PLA experiencing in the systems it has bought from Russia and other sources? Is strategy driven by threat perception and possible contingencies, or does a wider set of variables affect the calculus? How does doctrine affect strategy, and vice versa? What is the PLA's "calculus of deterrence" (to borrow Allen Whiting's original phrase), and what is its warfighting doctrine? What role, if any, do tactical nuclear weapons and other forms of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) play in warfighting doctrine and exercises? What will the force structure look like in five years' time, after the downsizing, equipment retirements, and demobilizations? Is there a clear vision on where the PLA seeks to be five, ten, fifteen, and twenty years into the future? These questions are just the tip of the iceberg. There is much that we need to know.

### **WHAT ELSE IS NEEDED?**

The following are some random suggestions of needs in the field:

- More input from the government intelligence and military communities and cross-fertilization with nongovernment scholars and analysts
- More and continued input from retired military, particularly those with first-hand experience in China
- More input from, and interaction with, PLA "scholars" and officers in China
- More Chinese émigrés to enter the field
- More doctoral dissertations and young scholars encouraged into the field
- More comprehensive assessments of the PLA that begin to put back together the pieces of the puzzle that have been disaggregated in recent years
- More attempts to theorize about developments
- More thought on how to "engage" the PLA and shape a coherent long-term strategy for coexisting with the PLA.

As noted above, the PLA studies field also tends to operate in a vacuum. It needs to be much better integrated with other subfields:

- Wed PLA studies to the broader study of Chinese bureaucratic politics and institutional culture
- Wed PLA studies to broader theories of technological innovation, change, and diffusion

- Wed PLA studies to the study of the military during the republican period (1911–1949) and in some areas to the imperial period, and engage in dialogue with historians of these periods
- Wed PLA studies to comparative military studies and the study of civil-military relations, particularly in East Asian and communist systems, where there are multiple instructive comparisons to be made
- Wed PLA studies better to debates in post–Cold War strategic studies, e.g., the impact of globalization, technology and information diffusion, economic security, and a variety of aspects of non-conventional security
- Wed PLA studies to development theory, particularly in the area of technology absorption, specialization, and role differentiation.

I stress that these are just some random suggestions, but their thrust is that the field is too insular and can benefit from some comparative perspectives.

## CONCLUSION

The contributions to this volume are testimony to the maturation of our field. Each is significant empirical contribution in its own right, but collectively they illustrate many of the themes noted above. Notwithstanding the areas for improvement noted above, the field of PLA studies has grown and matured well in recent years. It is also like an extended family with its share of eminent grandfather figures, overworked middle-aged professionals, and young up-and-comers. But it is a dynamic field, growing rapidly intellectually and analytically. We may complain about the lack of PLA transparency (rightfully so), but we can no longer grumble about insufficient data and research materials. But we need to learn how to better exploit these new materials and gain bibliographic control over them. We also need to collectively reflect on our past scholarship and analysis, to ascertain where we were right and where we were wrong and why. This, appropriately, will be the theme of next year's conference.

In closing, it may be worth recalling the note on which Harlan Jencks concluded a similar stock-taking a dozen years ago.<sup>32</sup> Citing Harvey Nelsen, Jencks recalls that the field had consensus and a good grasp of civil-military relations, PLA hardware, the PLA's strategic priorities, resource allocation, and long-term modernization policy. I would estimate that these are still the areas where the field has the greatest confidence and consensus (albeit not absolute). Nelsen further observed that the field was still obsessed with structure and function, as it has been since the 1960s, with spartan understanding of decisionmaking and policy implementation methods. I would submit that institutional mapping is always necessary, as organizations must be thought of as evolving organisms that need to be carefully tracked. PLA decisionmaking and implementation are, by necessity, exercises in educated guesswork. The "black box" remains black in the case of the PLA. But these are two

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<sup>32</sup>Harlan W. Jencks, "Watching China's Military: A Personal View," *op. cit.*, p. 78.

areas where we have learned a great deal in political science over the last decade, and it might be instructive to more carefully study the possible adaptation of what we have learned on the civilian side to the study of Chinese military policymaking and implementation. Nelsen concluded with two other observations that are still worthy of contemplation: that, ultimately, PLA modernization would be adverse to U.S. strategic interests and that, second, there was little that any country can do to affect PLA modernization as China had built up a plethora of defense contacts and access to international resources. The former may still be true (although the jury is still out), although the latter definitely changed as a result of Tiananmen. The PLA remains under a near-total Western embargo on defense technology, weaponry, and spare parts, and there is little sign this will change in the foreseeable future. This makes our analytical task easier, although it may not make it any easier to deal with the PLA.