Survey of English-Language Books on the PLA

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Introduction

Over the past 15 years, there has been a proliferation of information available in English about China's military—the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The information is available from news agencies, newspapers, magazines, periodicals, scholarly journals, monographs, books, and the Internet.[1]

For someone who wants to purchase an English-language book on the PLA, a search of Amazon.com using "China" and "PLA" shows about 10,000 books with some type of information on the subject. A quick glance at these entries, however, shows that only a few of the books actually provide information devoted to China's military. In fact, probably less than 100 English-language books about the PLA have been published.[2]

Even for someone familiar with the subject matter, the task of narrowing the available information on the PLA can be somewhat overwhelming. Therefore, this article provides some background information on a representative sample of about 60 books published in English about the PLA over a 30-year period, including the types of books, authors, content, and sources of research information. Although some excellent analytical pieces are available in scholarly journals, covering them is beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, several good sources of information are available in other languages, but they may not be readily available to authors of English-language books on the PLA.

Book Types

Most books can be categorized by type as (1) written by a single author; (2) written by multiple authors who each draw on their strengths for a collaborative work; (3) a summary report written by an organization or single author who organized a series of meetings on a specific topic, or (4) an edited volume of papers presented at a conference.

Single Author Books

While some single-author books examine a specific subject, others provide a broad overview of the PLA. Examples of some single-author books by publication date include Angus Fraser's *The People's Liberation Army: Communist China's Armed Forces* (1973), Gerard Corr's *The Chinese Red Army* (1974), Harvey Nelson's *The Chinese Military System: An Organizational Study of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (1977), Harlan Jencks' *From Muskets to Missiles* (1982), Thomas Roberts' *The Chinese Militia and the Doctrine of People's War* (1983), Gerald Segal's *Defending China* (1984), Monte Bullard's *China's Political-Military Evolution* (1985), Ellis Joffe's *The Chinese Army After Mao* (1987), Paul Godwin's *Development of the Chinese Armed Forces* (1988), Cheng Hsiao-shih's *Party-Military Relations in the PRC and Taiwan* (1990), Bates Gills'

Chinese Arms Transfers (1992), Paul Folta's *From Swords to Ploughshares: Defense Industry Reforms in the PRC* (1992), John Caldwell's *China's Conventional Military Capabilities: 1994-2004* (1994), Lonnie Henley's *China's Capacity for Achieving a Revolution in Military Affairs* (1996), Michael Swaine's *The Role of the Chinese Military in National Security Policy Making* (1998), Mark Stokes' *China's Strategic Modernization* (1999), You Ji's *The Armed Forces of China* (1999), Solomon Karmel's *China and the People's Liberation Army* (2000), James Mulvenon's *Soldiers of Fortune* (2001), Bernard Cole's *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-First Century* (2001), Bruce Elleman's *Modern Chinese Warfare* 1795-1989 (2001), Zhang Xiaoming's *Red Wings Over the Yalu* (2002), Tai Ming Cheung's *China's Entrepreneurial Army* (2002), David Shambaugh's *Modernizing China's Military* (2002), and Andrew Scobell's *China's Use of Military Force* (2003).

Multiple Author Books

Some representative books by multiple authors include William Whitson and Chen-hsia Huang's *The Chinese High Command* (1973), John Lewis and Xue Litai's *China Builds the Bomb* (1988) and *China's Strategic Seapower* (1994), Kenneth Allen, Glenn Krummel, and Jonathan Pollack's *China's Air Force Enters the 21st Century* (1995), Bates Gill and Taeho Kim's *China's Arms Acquisitions from Abroad* (1996), Mel Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang's *China Under Threat* (1981) and *China's Security* (1998), Edward Timperlake and William Triplett's *Red Dragon Rising* (1999), Kenneth Allen and Eric McVadon's *China's Foreign Military Relations* (1999), and David Shlapak, David Orletsky, and Barry Wilson's *Dire Strait? Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Confrontation and Options for U.S. Policy* (2000).

Conference Summary Reports

Two recent examples of a summary report written by a single author based on a series of roundtables on a specific topic include *China, Nuclear Weapons, and Arms Control* (2000), which is the summary report of a series of roundtables jointly sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, the National Defense University, and the Institute for Defense Analyses, and jointly authored by Robert A. Manning, Ronald Montaperto, and Brad Roberts; and *Chinese Military Power* (2003), which was written by Adam Segal and based on a year-long series of monthly roundtables hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations.

Edited Conference Volumes

Unlike the scholarly attention paid to other issues dealing with China, there is an absence of scholarly journals that focus exclusively on the PLA. To fill this void, various organizations began to hold conferences on the PLA in the 1970s and 1980s which resulted in edited volumes. The first volumes included *The Military and Political Power in China in the 1970s* (1972) edited by William Whitson, *The Chinese Defense Establishment* (1983) edited by Paul Godwin, *China's Defense Policy* (1984) edited by Gerald Segal and William Tow, *Chinese Defense and Foreign Policy* (1988) edited by June Teufel Dreyer and Ilpyong Kim.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the number of conferences on the PLA grew exponentially, and by the mid-1990s, several edited volumes of the papers were being published. For example, C. Dennison Lane, Mark Weisenbloom, and Dimon Liu edited *Chinese Military Modernization* (1996), Hans Binnendijk and Ronald Montaperto from the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies (NDU INSS) edited *Strategic Trends in China* (1998), Mark Ryan, David Finkelstein, and Michael McDevitt from the CNA Corporation edited *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience since 1949* (2003), and Stephen Flanagan and Michael Marti from NDU INSS edited *The Chinese People's Liberation Army and China in Transition* (2003).

One series of conferences held since 1996 has been co-sponsored by RAND and the Chinese Council for Advanced Policy Studies (CAPS) in Taipei. This series of books, which is the most detailed examination of the nuts and bolts of the PLA, includes *In China's Shadow* (1998), *The PLA in the Information Age* (1999), *Seeking Truth from Facts: A Retrospective on Chinese Military Studies in the Post-Mao Era* (2001), *The PLA as Organization* (2002), and *A Poverty of Riches: New Challenges and Opportunities for PLA Research* (2003).

Another series of conferences held since the early 1990s has been sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute (AEI). In recent years, these conferences have been co-sponsored with the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and the Heritage Foundation. Some of the edited books resulting from these conferences include *China's Military Faces the Future* (1999), *Crisis in the Taiwan Strait* (1997), *The Chinese Armed Forces in the 21st Century* (1999), *People's Liberation Army After Next* (2000), *The Costs of Conflict: The Impact on China of a Future War* (2001), *China's Growing Military Power: Perspectives on Security, Ballistic Missiles, and Conventional Capabilities* (2002), *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75* (2003).

A fairly new organization, The Center for Taiwan Defense and Strategic Studies, began publishing a quarterly journal (*Taiwan Defense Affairs*) in 2002, which covers cross-Strait military issues. One nice feature is that each issue has the article in English and Chinese. The Center has also sponsored annual conferences on the defense of Taiwan since 2001 with an edited book published from each conference, including *Defending Taiwan: The Future Vision of Taiwan's Defence Policy and Military Strategy* (2003), *Taiwan's Maritime Security* (2003), and *Taiwan Security and Air Power* (2003).

Other Edited Books on the PLA

Occasionally, an organization, publisher, or individual does not hold a conference but requests authors to write papers for an edited book. For example, Ray Bonds had several authors contribute to *The Chinese War Machine* (1979). An example of a scholarly journal focusing on the PLA includes *The China Quarterly*, which published a special edition in June 1996 (Issue 146) on "China's Military in Transition."[3] An example of two authors who requested other authors to write articles for an edited volume is David A. Graff and Robin Higham's *A Military History of China* (2002).

Another type of book draws on Chinese-language papers that have been translated into English. For example, Michael Pillsbury has authored two books containing papers he translated from articles written by authoritative PLA officers—*Chinese Views of Future Warfare* (1997) and *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (2000).

Authors

Who are the authors who either write their own book or present papers in English at conferences for edited volumes? The authors can be placed into four basic categories—government, former government, academic, and non-profit think tank—with some authors coming from more than one category.

The majority of the authors contributing to English-language books on the PLA live in the United States. Most, but not all, of them have a Chinese-language capability. Only a handful of authors living outside the United States have published their works on the PLA in English. For example, Srikanth Kondapalli from India has already written books on *China's Military* (1999) and *China's Naval Power* (2001) and is currently working on a book about the PLA Air Force. You Ji from Australia has written a book on *The Armed Forces of China* (1999) and has produced various papers for edited conference volumes. Taeho Kim from South Korea, Andrew N.D. Yang from Taiwan, and Tai Ming Cheung from Great Britain have written books on their own and are regular contributors to edited volumes. For over four decades, Ellis Joffe from Israel has written books on the PLA and is a regular contributor to edited volumes.

One group of American authors consists of serving, retired, or former government employees, including the military services. Many of the personnel who are no longer in government are now affiliated with think tanks or other organizations.

A second group of authors consists of about 20 former U.S. Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marine Corps military attachés who have previously served in Beijing and/or Hong Kong. Although some of these officers have written articles while they were still on active duty, most of them have retired from the military but continue to follow PLA issues.

Although the U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps have a small contingent of Chinese linguists, the largest group of retired and active duty U.S. military personnel who deal with PLA issues come from the U.S. Army, which has had a formal foreign area officer (FAO) program for decades. These officers receive Chinese language training for 1-2 years, a master's degree, and at least a year of in-country training. They come from all branches of the Army, including Infantry, Artillery, Armor, Military Police, Signal Corps, Aviation Corps, Quartermaster Corps, and Military Intelligence. Some, but not all, FAOs have the opportunity to serve as attachés.

A third group of authors includes professors and students in various civilian academic institutions. One of the biggest problems for this group is that most civilian academic institutions do not have courses dealing specifically with PLA studies or faculty members with an in-depth knowledge of the PLA. Most of the people in these institutions tend to focus on China's national security or strategic issues, not on PLA operational, tactical, or

organizational issues. Therefore, it is difficult for graduate students to write research papers or dissertations on non-strategic PLA issues.

A fourth group consists professors and students from various institutions of military professional military education (PME) which have dedicated instructors for Asian military affairs, including the PLA.[4] Some of the institutions also have research institutes, such as the Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute (AWC SSI) and the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies (NDU INSS), which sponsor projects on the PLA. Both faculty and students in these institutions have the opportunity to write about the PLA.

A fifth group of authors who write about the PLA includes researchers and visiting fellows in non-profit think tanks. Although several such institutions have analysts who write about China's national security issues, only a few, such as the CNA Corporation, RAND Corporation, Heritage Foundation, Center for Strategic and International Security (CSIS), and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), have people who write about the PLA on a consistent basis. Most of the people in these institutions who deal with the PLA come from a mix of government and academic backgrounds.

Content

For the PLA, warfare consists of three levels of armed conflict and combat: war (*zhanzheng* 战争), campaigns (*zhanyi* 战役), and battles (*zhandou* 战斗). Campaigns serve as the operational link between the conduct of battles, which are tactical engagements, and the achievement of the nation's overall objectives in a war. Each of the three levels of conflict is "informed" by a different level of "basic" military theory. Wars are guided by strategy (*zhanlue* 战略); campaigns or the "operational level of war" are guided by "campaign methods" (*zhanyi fa* 战役法); and battles are informed and guided by tactics (*zhanshu* 战术).

The glue that holds the three levels of combat and theory together consists of the "software" and "hardware" aspects of the military. The "software" side, which the PLA calls "regularization" (*zhengguihua* 正规化), includes leadership, military culture, military history, military political works, arms control, command and control, doctrine, personnel, education, training, organizational structure, funding, military enterprises, logistics support, research and development, foreign military relations, and maintenance. The "hardware" side, which the PLA calls "modernization" (*xiandaihua* 现代化), includes arms sales and acquisitions, nuclear and conventional weapon systems, and equipment.

Therefore, almost everything written about the PLA fits into one of the three levels of combat and corresponding theory, and/or the "software" and "hardware" components that bind them together. While some books deal with a single issue, such as arms control or a specific service, others cover a wide range of PLA issues, such as military reforms and modernization or organizational structure for the greater PLA. Some books address larger national security or strategic issues such as the Taiwan Strait military situation.

Sources of Information

Where and how do authors get the information for their books? Most, but not all, of the long-time PLA watchers have a Chinese-language capability and do much of their own research from Chinese-language open-source material. All of the authors supplement their own research with information from a wide variety of English-language source materials. These sources can basically be divided into U.S. Government (USG) reports and testimony, Chinese government reports, journals, media, and the Internet.

USG Information

Since the mid-1990s, the USG has produced several unclassified reports on the PLA that have provided the most authoritative USG assessments available to researchers. These include periodic reports on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation and counterproliferation, and reports on selected PLA capabilities. The unclassified versions are available on-line. Some specific examples of USG information available are shown below:

- The U.S. General Accounting Office published *Impact of China's Military Modernization in the Pacific Region* in 1995.

- In April 1997, Congress passed Section 1305 of the Fiscal Year 1997 National Defense Authorization Act, which requires the U.S. Department of Defense to produce an annual unclassified report on "Selected Military Capabilities of the People's Republic of China." Reports were submitted to Congress in 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002, and 2003.

- The Department of Defense has also produced periodic reports entitled "Proliferation: Threat and Response" that deal with worldwide WMD proliferation.

- The Congressional Research Service (CRS) provides excellent reports for Congress on specific PLA issues. Some examples include "China: Ballistic and Cruise Missiles," "China's Foreign Conventional Arms Acquisitions," and "Conventional Arms Transfers." CRS also sponsors occasional conferences on specific subjects and produces a summary report for Congress.

- A final source for USG information is unclassified testimony before Congressional hearings by senior officials in the Department of Defense and the intelligence community. This testimony is usually available on-line.

Chinese Government Information

Since the late 1980s, China's government has gradually provided more information in the public realm about the PLA. This includes biannual defense white papers, military yearbooks, encyclopedias, dictionaries, newspapers, and periodicals. Some, but not all, of them are available on-line in English and Chinese.

In 1985, the PLA began publishing the *World Military Yearbook*, which provided an overview of militaries around the world. The section on the PLA was only seventeen pages and provided almost no useful information. Each subsequent yearbook, published about every two years, has provided greater amounts of detail on matters like organization and training.

As tensions mounted in the Taiwan Strait in late 1995, Beijing issued its first *White Paper on Arms Control and Disarmament*. The 20-page paper, released during the negotiating endgame of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and while China was conducting nuclear tests, attempted to defuse concerns about a "China Threat" and accusations that Beijing was supplying weapons of mass destruction or related technologies to friendly neighbors (i.e., Pakistan and Iran). A follow-up, entitled *China's Non-Proliferation Policy and Measures*, was issued in December 2003.

In July 1998, Beijing published its first comprehensive defense white paper, *China's National Defense.* Follow-up white papers were published in 2000 and 2002 in hard copy and on-line in Chinese and English.[5]

Over the past few years, the PLA published a series of encyclopedias and dictionaries that provide a wealth of information about military issues. These books include an 11-volume *Chinese Military Encyclopedia* (1997), a 2-volume *China Navy Encyclopedia* (1998), and a 1050-page *Air Force Dictionary* (1996).

During the late-1990s, the PLA began to publish its official newspaper Liberation Army Daily (*Jiefangjun Bao* 解放军报) on-line. Other PLA publications such as *PLA Pictorial* are also available on-line. Both the PLA Air Force and PLA Navy publish monthly magazines on their services.

The PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS) and National Defense University (NDU) have published journals, papers, and student dissertations in English and Chinese with numerous papers on military trends and how they affect the PLA.

Media Information

PLA-watchers receive information, both reliable and not reliable, from a wide range of the international media. This includes China's official news agency *Xinhua*, Taiwan's news agencies and newspapers, Hong Kong newspapers, and American and British newspapers and defense journals.

Internet

Although the Internet allows researchers to do global searches for PLA-related issues, one must be careful about using information from websites on the PLA. The reason is that most websites do not provide any source data for the information they post, and it is oftentimes difficult to verify data or even tell who runs the website.

A good source of information for researching the PLA on the Internet is Taylor Fravel's article entitled "The Revolution in Research Affairs: On-line Sources and the Study of

the PLA" in *A Poverty of Riches: New Challenges and Opportunities in PLA Research* (2003), published by Rand.

Conclusions

It is clear that the amount of information about the PLA available in English-language books has grown appreciably over the past 15 years. The primary reasons for this are that more information is available from Chinese-language sources on the PLA, more foreigners are studying China and the Chinese language during their undergraduate and graduate studies, the interaction between Chinese and foreign research institutes has grown, and the number of conferences devoted to examining the PLA has increased. In addition, a number of former U.S. military attachés are building on their own military experience and their interaction with the PLA to write on issues beyond the national security and strategic level. All of these factors have led to a better understanding of the PLA at multiple levels.

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* The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author.

[1] For example, a quick search of *Google* in English for "China" and "PLA" resulted in about 136,000 hits. A search on *Google* using Chinese characters for the PLA (中国人民解放军) resulted in 171,000 hits.

[2] For purposes of this article, books refers to books, monographs, and pamphlets. Some of these documents are available in PDF format on-line.

[3] *The China Quarterly* is also a valuable resource for reviews on books about the PLA.

[4] This includes the service academies, intermediate-level and senior-level colleges, and National Defense University. The three service academies include West Point, Naval Academy, and Air Force Academy. The intermediate-level institutions include the Army Command and General Staff College, the Air Command and Staff College, and the Naval Command and Staff College. The senior-level war colleges include the Army War College, Naval War College, Air War College, National War College, and Armed Forces Staff College.

[5] The 1998 publication was printed in black and white and had 55 pages, the 2000 issue was in black and white with about 50 pages, and the 2002 version was printed in color with 108 pages.