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*Admiral Wu Shengli (left) with Andrew S. Erickson (right) at Wadsworth House during the former's September 2014 trip to Harvard.*

# When China's Navy Chief Came to Harvard: In Another Time, Admiral Wu Shengli Sought the Academic Gold Standard



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**Topics:** [International Relations](#)

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One brisk morning in September 2014, People's Liberation Army Navy Commander Admiral Wu Shengli was led on a walking tour of Harvard Yard. The People's Republic of China's naval head peppered administrators with detailed questions about manifold practical aspects of how Harvard was run, including its finances, the size and nature of its endowment, its annual budgeting, and its financial aid for students. Consummately no-nonsense and forthright in his approach, Wu was clearly eager to absorb as many insights as possible.

The visit was unusual—it was the first time such a senior PLA official had visited Harvard. China's Embassy in Washington had been coordinating details for weeks, and Admiral Wu led a ten-man delegation of distinguished, capable officers. Nearly a decade later, I want to share my personal observations and suggest why such a visit, while unlikely to be repeated anytime soon, still matters today.

Admiral Wu is now long retired, but it's well worth reflecting on him: Probably the PLA Navy's last larger-than-life leader, he wielded tremendous power and influence, not only over decisions about crewing, training, and equipping the service, but also about its fast-growing operations. Since the 2016 reforms, PLA service leaders no longer have that power. Wu's successors are impressive in their own ways, but none will be able to have his legacy. The PLA Navy will probably never again be invited to an event in the United States that offers a springboard to visiting Harvard. It is unimaginable that Harvard, for its part, would be able to

enroll Chinese naval officers, as Wu so dearly hoped. All told, revisiting Wu's visit helps reveal how far things have come in the direction of Sino-American strategic competition, and why there's no going back now.

## Naval Education Reform: Wu's Capstone Quest



*Admiral Wu Shengli (front, center) strolls through Harvard Yard flanked by Major General Xu Nanfeng (right, front) and Captain Yu Dayong (left, back) with Andrew S. Erickson (back, right).*

The PLA Navy's seventh Commander (August 2006-January 2017), Admiral Wu Shengli (吴胜利) systematically transformed the service into a fighting force with comprehensive capabilities. He oversaw considerable expansion and strengthening of navy strategy, capabilities, and operations. In a conservative service that prizes conformity, Wu did so as a forthright, vision-driven disciplinarian.

Wu's forceful personality was both noteworthy and well suited for this demanding task. Rather than cloistering himself within the navy's hierarchy, Wu injected



himself directly in virtually every conceivable aspect of its development, including a growing interaction with foreign navies. Similar in the degree to which the larger-than-life Admiral Hyman Rickover fundamentally transformed the U.S. Navy in the domain of nuclear propulsion, Admiral Wu has transformed the PLA Navy overall.

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While Admiral Wu transformed China's navy tremendously during his historic decade at its helm, one of his greatest ambitions remains only partially realized. As a key element of the sweeping military reforms that Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping directed, he sought major improvements in what the United States and its allies and partners term professional military education.

Accordingly, toward the end of his modernization drive, Wu strove to consolidate the PLA Navy's eight far-flung schools into a comprehensive, improved system. Early navy leaders could only access Soviet military education, and hence adopted and adapted Moscow's rigidly hierarchical, technocratic, service- and service community-specific, narrowly-specialized, fragmented model. Wu instead sought the ultimate gold standard: the joint, integrative, interdisciplinary, interactive U.S. Navy military education system, which draws in part on more flexible, creative, intellectually-rigorous and transparent civilian academic faculty and practices.

In fall 2014, after participating in the 21<sup>st</sup> International Seapower Symposium at the U.S. Naval War College, Wu led a large delegation to MIT and Harvard to probe the civilian side of what he regarded as the world's leading educational institutions.

At Harvard, throughout the sunny autumn morning of Saturday, September 20, 2014, there could be no mistaking Wu's imposing figure, stern visage, and attentive entourage. He viewed earlier guestbook inscriptions by paramount leader Jiang Zemin<sup>[2]</sup> and Premier Wen Jiabao<sup>[3]</sup> at Wadsworth House, Harvard's second-oldest

building,<sup>[4]</sup> and received a tour of Harvard Yard. But Wu was not there for prestige or pleasantries—not in the least.

Instead, as a member of the group supporting his visit, I witnessed firsthand that Wu was all business as he bombarded interlocutors with specific queries on subjects from organization to budgeting, revealing intensive focus on integrating and advancing the PLA Navy. Wu was explicit: he wanted to send his navy's best and brightest to learn from the best through in-person instruction. To Wu's great frustration, however, U.S. policy under the FY2000 Defense Authorization Act effectively prohibited PLA officers from studying at U.S. institutions under officially sanctioned exchanges, an obstacle which proved insurmountable. Wu's visit to Harvard would end up being the closest the PLA Navy could get.

## Seeking the Academic Holy Grail



*During his visit to Harvard, Admiral Wu viewed Wadsworth House guestbook inscriptions by paramount leader Jiang Zemin and Premier Wen Jiabao.*

Admiral Wu came to Harvard with very specific goals in mind and pursued them purposefully, through hands-on observation and intensive questioning of leaders and specialists there.<sup>[5]</sup> Wu explained that he was seeking ideas to inform the “reform” and impending consolidation of China’s eight Navy military education schools into a more integrated, comprehensive whole. This vision more closely resembled the U.S. Navy’s military education trio: the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland; the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterrey, California, and the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.<sup>[6]</sup>

After Admiral Wu’s arrival and welcome at 9:00 a.m., during an initial discussion at Wadsworth House, he clearly appreciated Harvard’s multifaceted, incorporative approach and infusion of liberal arts disciplines. He explained that, as he had been to Annapolis “many times” and to Newport for the 21<sup>st</sup> Seapower Symposium (with which he seemed satisfied), he could learn more new things by visiting top U.S. civilian universities. Wu elaborated that he had wanted more time in Cambridge, particularly during the week, but that he had been unable to secure a hotel room at a competitive rate prior to the Symposium, making the night of September 19 the only one that he could spend in town.

Wu politely demurred when invited to sign his name in the books that Jiang and Wen had inscribed on their earlier visits to Harvard, but precisely and exquisitely signed the regular Harvard guestbook. Senior Captain Shen Yaping, the Naval Attaché from the PRC Embassy in Washington, commented to me, “I think he has practiced very carefully for such occasions.”

Throughout the subsequent, 9:45 a.m. walking tour of Harvard Yard, Admiral Wu continually asked administrators detailed questions about how they and their colleagues ran Harvard. He raised all manner of fiscal issues, including alumni



contributions, and how they compared with other leading institutions such as MIT. Having apparently made sufficient progress with his inquiries, in a departure from his typically stern glare, Admiral Wu posed enthusiastically with the statue of John Harvard. He stated that he had a twelve-year-old grandchild, implying that he would be delighted if they were to attend Harvard in the future. Most of the other delegation members also took photos with the statue.

We cannot know what Admiral Wu was thinking when photographed with Harvard's legendary founder, but if it included reflection on his own education, it would have been a history-infused experience that likely both informed and drove his PLA Navy education quest. Having joined China's military in 1964, Wu began his studies at the PLA Surveying and Mapping College in Xi'an, earning an oceanography degree in 1968. China's military and its educational system then offered some of the best protection from Maoist chaos, rustication, or worse. "However, given what we know about the Cultural Revolution's impact on the nation's academic institutions, the quality of training he received in Xi'an was highly questionable," leading PLA Navy leadership analyst Jeffrey Becker underscores. "Wu would not receive formal training again until 1972, when he attended the captain's course at the Dalian Naval Vessel Academy."<sup>[7]</sup> This certainly accords with who Admiral Wu seemed to me to be that September day at Harvard: a leader who



*Admiral Wu signing the Wadsworth House guestbook.*

deeply appreciated the value of education, striving to make up for lost time, on behalf of a nation that had lost so much to earlier policies.

Back at Wadsworth House, at around 10:45 a.m., Admiral Wu enjoyed a spirited roundtable discussion. He stated bluntly, “If we didn’t have respect for each other, we wouldn’t be having this discussion.” Here Wu showed his forceful nature and body language, while maintaining unfailing composure and professional comportment. He mentioned that, in Qingdao, three weeks before, he had presented at the PLA Academy of Military Science’s biannual Sun Zi Conference, which had foreign participants. Wu added that there had also been a symposium aboard a PLA Navy vessel, and a maritime ceremony to commemorate Chinese naval sacrifices during the Qing Dynasty.

For much of the dialogue, Wu focused relentlessly on military education, his efforts to improve it for PLA Navy officers, and the obstacles he perceived to his doing so. He would not be diverted by pleasantries or flattery that might have preoccupied other officials; he spent considerable time lambasting the FY2000 Defense Authorization Act and its effective prohibition on PLA officers studying at U.S. institutions under officially sanctioned exchanges. Wu’s body language indicated very strong feelings on this issue—while his face remained composed, save for a piercing gaze that he directed for several seconds at whomever he was addressing, his arms pushed against the table as if he were prepared to bench press it away in frustration, like an oppressive barrier requiring immediate removal.

Admiral Wu asked me specifically why, at the Naval War College—which he said had educated more than 400 heads of navies from all around the world—China was the only significant navy not represented. When an interlocutor opined at length that much could be accomplished with conferences and other professional exchanges, Wu muttered to the second-ranking delegation member at his left,



Major General Xu Nanfeng, the PRC Embassy's Defense Attaché, "That's not the same thing [at all]" (不是一回事). This was one of the few sentences that Wu's secretary Captain Yu Dayong, a friendly extrovert with highly responsive and serviceable English, did not translate. Admiral Wu continued to criticize Washington's "foolish decision," asking "Why does the U.S. fear China, just as China used to fear the U.S. thirty years ago? Are you afraid that our students will steal valuable intelligence at your Naval War College?" He implied that these were silly concerns.

Having ultimately acknowledged that the FY2000 Defense Authorization Act was a decision of Congress and not the U.S. Navy, Wu proceeded to underscore more limited objectives. He stated, with no hint of a caveat, that his term as PLA Navy Commander would last three more years. This would be through the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2016, giving him just over ten years in the position, making him the longest-serving PLA Navy Commander post-Mao. That ultimately proved to be the case, and Wu is likely to retain the record.

Admiral Wu asked if Harvard currently had any one-year PLA students and was informed that there were not any at present. In his remaining three years as PLA Navy Commander, Wu declared that he would "take a very active attitude" in trying to send "young PLA Navy officers" to Harvard "for graduate and postgraduate studies," "and even better, to the Naval War College, in the future." He stated that PLA Navy officers currently had "no door to enter Harvard, but Harvard should open a small door for us."

Admiral Wu then solicited questions for himself, and I was the only one who asked one: given the dramatic reduction of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the high costs of supporting PRC naval task forces there, and an increase in piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, what was the future of PLA Navy operations around the Horn of Africa? Wu



*Admiral Wu poses next to John Harvard's statue.*

seemed quite pleased. He described this as “a very good question,” which the PLA Navy and other navies had to consider constantly. I had clearly raised an issue near and dear to his professional heart. In retrospect, the high-water mark of PRC naval leadership engagement with the United States and Harvard that day coincided with a high-water mark of hopes that China’s navy would be a force for global good.

Well before Xi became his Commander-in-Chief and formally expanded PLA Navy strategy, Wu had led China’s

navy through its utterly unprecedented anti-piracy escort mission. Nearly six years before Wu led a delegation to Harvard, under U.N. authorization, China began to dispatch antipiracy taskforces to the Gulf of Aden. The first three-ship group departed Sanya on December 26, 2008;<sup>[8]</sup> but there had been tremendous preparations beforehand, and learning by doing extended across many half-year missions.<sup>[9]</sup>

In response to my question, Wu explained that, at the beginning, China only planned for one year of antipiracy operations. This was then extended for another

year, and another, and so on. He proudly recounted that, as of September 2014, eighteen PLA Navy task forces of 3-4 ships each had escorted 6,000 ships, more than 50% of them non-Chinese. The missions achieved what Wu termed “Two 100%s (两个百分之百): providing 100% security to all ships under escort and ensuring their own security 100%.” This arduous accomplishment, he stressed, entailed “major costs in forces, human resources, and money.” Largely thanks to the contributions of China and other leading naval nations, piratical activity had plummeted. In 2007-08, there had been ~100 pirate attacks annually, of which 50-60 piratings (“hijackings”) were successful, Wu stated. In 2014, by contrast, there were only 17 attacks—none successful, I believe. This was real progress, with widespread benefits.

“As long as Gulf of Aden pirate activities continue,” Wu maintained, “so too will the escort missions of international navies.” “So far,” he concluded, “there is no end in sight for the mission.” Meanwhile, Wu continued, the emergence of new piracy challenges on the other side of Africa, in the Gulf of Guinea, represented “a concerning trend for all world navies.”

Admiral Wu then asked me point blank: “Do you prefer that the PLA Navy continues its anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden or not?” I said that I regarded it as a positive contribution that should indeed continue but stressed that this was solely my personal view and that I could not possibly represent the U.S. Navy or any other organization of the U.S. Government. Admiral Wu replied, “I too am speaking for myself, not on behalf of the Navy.” He then declared, as if it was obvious to everyone, “This is not only your personal view, it’s also your Navy’s view! The U.S. Navy and other top level U.S. leaders are very happy that this is continuing. They are satisfied that China expends significant resources to make a contribution [thereby reducing the resource burden on the United States]. There are just some members of Congress who remain opposed to the missions.” Wu



added that he wanted to invite U.S. Senators and Representatives from Congress to visit PLA Navy ships in the Gulf of Aden.

While Wu's vision of hosting members of Congress never materialized, and optimism that China would cooperate effusively as a "responsible stakeholder" on sea and land has ebbed, his service's mission continues to this day. The PLA Navy's 45<sup>th</sup> escort task force left Qingdao on September 12, 2023 and relieved the 44<sup>th</sup> task force in the Gulf of Aden. By early December 2023, the PLA Navy logged its 1,600<sup>th</sup> escort mission, having escorted more than 7,200 vessels, more than half of which were "foreign."<sup>[10]</sup> With recent Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and other security threats, Beijing seems poised to retain rationale for escort operations, on its own terms, as far as the eye can see.



*Admiral Wu meets with Jackie O'Neill, Harvard University Marshall for over 40 years, at Wadsworth House.*

Back at Harvard, Admiral Wu was interested not only in the institution's management and administration, but also in its educational practices and philosophy. For his final question of the visit, he asked, "What is the key to the Harvard spirit?" (哈佛精神的关键是什么). He was told that Harvard's extremely rigorous process of student and faculty selection, the latter of which includes extensive peer review, is at the center. Wu seemed to accept this explanation. It did not directly address how Harvard would help students enrolled there achieve academic ideals, but the highly-selective gatekeeping aspect probably spoke to the sweeping human capital improvements Wu sought in the PLA Navy, while sidestepping the issue of intrinsic core values. In China, the values informing the activities of academia, military services, and all other societal institutions are the exclusive domain of the Party itself, and therefore far above Wu's pay grade. In any case, we had come to the end of our schedule, and Wu was not a man to waste time.

Admiral Wu seemed fully satisfied with his visit, and was happy to pose for group and individual photos at Wadsworth House before departing at 11:30 a.m. As he was chauffeured away in the back seat of a top-of-the-line black Cadillac Escalade, Wu complimented me on my Chinese. His countenance was serious, but more relaxed than before. He appeared the very picture of a PRC official—one who exercised great power comfortably, matter-of-factly, and without hesitation. I was left with the deep impression that I had finally witnessed the driving force behind the PLA Navy's meteoric development.

## **Conclusion: Gold Standard Denied, Improvising at Home**

So much has changed in the decade since Wu's Harvard visit. China's navy is unlikely to return to Newport for an International Seapower Symposium. Harvard remains unable to "open the door" for PLA Navy officers. Denied then, and subsequently, the opportunity to directly access its preferred military education

model, the PLA Navy has nevertheless improved itself. In 2014, the service implemented “flipped classrooms,” with more interactive teaching methods and direct student engagement than previous rote lecturing could offer. 2017 witnessed major reforms and schoolhouse consolidation along the lines Wu had discussed on campus in Cambridge.<sup>[11]</sup>

Thanks to thoroughgoing efforts, it can truly be said that, when Wu left the PLA Navy in 2017, it was a fundamentally different service from the one he inherited in 2006. The massive expansion and improvement to the service, unmistakable today, results in large part from programs laid down under the man whom history may well regard as the last major pioneer of China’s navy. It could hardly have occurred successfully under lesser leadership than Wu’s. His successors have more quietly and technically pursued the next stage of reforms.

The requirements for institutionalization and jointness imposed by modern warfare make it unlikely that any future PLA Navy commander will match the high-water mark of Wu’s force of personality, bureaucratic status, flag officer and command duration, or independent impact. That, together with severe, sustained decline in Sino-American military relations, make it unlikely that the head of China’s Navy will soon visit the United States, let alone Harvard. There is no going back to that morning of September 20, 2014, in Cambridge, for anyone concerned.

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[1] Andrew S. Erickson and Kenneth W. Allen, “China’s Navy Gets a New Helmsman (Part 2): Remaining Uncertainties,” Jamestown *China Brief* 17.4 (March 14, 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-navy-gets-new-helmsman-part-2-remaining-uncertainties/>.



[2] Joshua L. Kwan, “Jiang Zemin Visits Harvard, Sparks Protests,” *The Harvard Crimson*, June 4, 1998, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1998/6/4/jiang-zemin-visits-harvard-sparks-protests/>.

[3] Beth Potier, “China Premier Comes to Harvard: Wen Jiabao Urges Young Americans to ‘Turn Eyes to China’,” *The Harvard Gazette*, December 11, 2003, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2003/12/china-premier-comes-to-harvard/>.

[4] “Wadsworth House,” <https://marshal.harvard.edu/wadsworth-house/>.

[5] In addition to Wu himself, the delegation consisted of: Major General Xu Nanfeng (徐南烽), Defense Attaché, PRC Embassy, Washington, DC; Senior Captain Xie Dongpei, Director, PLAN General Office; Senior Captain Wang Bin, Chief, Operations Department, PLAN Headquarters; Senior Captain Shen Yaping (沈亚平), Naval Attaché, PRC Embassy; Senior Captain Jiang Wen, Chief of Naval Academic Research Institute; Captain Yu Dayong, Secretary for Admiral Wu Shengli; Captain Zhang Yanbo, Chief, PLAN Foreign Affairs Office; Commander Wang Guozheng, Staff Officer, PLAN Foreign Affairs Office; and Commander Diao Pu, Researcher, Naval Academic Research Institute.

[6] Wu explained that the PLA currently had a total of no fewer than 67 military education-related schools—which is the same number it had had since 1998 (albeit down from extraordinary peaks of 115 in 1998, 125 in 1968, and 246 in 1956). See Kenneth Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People’s Liberation Army’s 37 Academic Institutions* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020), 6, [https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020-06-11%20PLA%20Academic Institutions.pdf](https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Research/Other-Topics/2020-06-11%20PLA%20Academic%20Institutions.pdf). By the end of Wu’s tenure, based on a reorganization in June 2017, PLA military schools would consolidate down to the 37 it has today, of which 8 are PLA Navy institutions. To

this day the PLAN's eight military institutions are: the Naval Command College (海军指挥学院) in Nanjing, the Naval Engineering University (海军工程大学) in Wuhan (branch campus in Tianjin), the Dalian Naval Academy (海军大连舰艇学院) in Dalian, the Naval Submarine Academy (海军潜艇学院) in Qingdao, the Naval Aviation University (海军航空大学) Yantai (branch campus in Qingdao), the Naval (Second) Medical University (海军军医大学 (第二军医大学)) in Shanghai, the Naval Service Academy (海军勤务学院) in Tianjin, and the Naval NCO School (海军士官学校) Bengbu. See Kenneth Allen and Brendan Mulvaney, "Changes in the PLA's Military Education," in Roy Kamphausen, ed., *The People of the PLA 2.0* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2021), 184, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/944/>; Allen and Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions*, 16, 111–48.

[7] Jeffrey Becker, "China's Military Modernization: The Legacy of Admiral Wu Shengli," Jamestown *China Brief* 15.16 (August 18, 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-military-modernization-the-legacy-of-admiral-wu-shengli/>.

[8] "Chinese Naval Task Force Deployed to Gulf of Aden," *New York Times*, December 26, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/26/world/asia/26iht-26china.18934177.html>.

[9] Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea... and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation/Brookings Institution Press, 2015); Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Anti-Piracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden*, Naval War College *China Maritime Study* 10 (November 2013), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-red-books/12/>.

[10] Liu Xuanzun, “PLA Navy Completes 1,600th Escort Mission, Making Concrete Efforts to Safeguard Peace,” *Global Times*, December 6, 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303146.shtml>.

[11] The author thanks Ryan Martinson for these points. For his related scholarship, see Ryan D. Martinson, “Deciphering China’s ‘World Class’ Naval Ambitions,” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* (August 2020), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2020/august/deciphering-chinas-world-class-naval-ambitions>; Ryan D. Martinson, “Jinglue Haiyang: The Naval Implications of Xi Jinping’s New Strategic Concept,” Jamestown *China Brief* (January 9, 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/jinglue-haiyang-the-naval-implications-of-xi-jinpings-new-strategic-concept/>.

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