

# Junior Leader PME in the PLA



PLA troops await arrival of Defense Secretary Gates in Beijing

U.S. Air Force (Jerry Morrison)

By MARK K. SNAKENBERG

**A**rmies develop leaders for certain purposes, to operate under a common doctrinal approach.<sup>1</sup> Thus, an outside observer can learn much about an army by analyzing its professional military education (PME) and the desired characteristics of the people it produces. Careful analysis of the education and training of an army's junior officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) is particularly insightful. The substance of these leaders' instruction indicates the likely development of a foreign army's tactical conduct for the next 5 to 10 years and reveals much about its expectations for warfare at the tactical level during that period. It is therefore a useful tool in conducting predictive analysis of how that army will fight in the near term. However, there is a secondary benefit to studying junior officer PME that is of equal significance. Because it takes 15 to 20 years for junior officers to become senior leaders, military establishments must anticipate two decades in advance what characteristics will be required of its senior leaders and inculcate them into junior leader PME so those personnel are fully prepared to operate under the expected conditions. Thus, study of current junior officer PME may provide a glimpse into a nation's long-term goals and vision of its geopolitical situation.

This article explores the junior leader PME of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in an effort to achieve this insight. Far from a comprehensive examination, this work is intended to provide predictive analysis of Chinese expectations and conduct of tactical operations during the next 5 to 10 years and strategic expectations during the next 15 to 20 years, based on an evaluation of the ongoing development of company-grade officers and NCOs in the army component. Although a number of factors, such as domestic and foreign political considerations, the economy, and social developments, will ultimately determine China's course, this approach is useful in establishing what China wants militarily under ideal conditions, and what problems Beijing expects its military leaders to be able to resolve in the year 2025.

**Junior Leader PME and PLA Reform**

Historically, the development of all PME within the Chinese army has been nonlinear. That is especially true of junior officers and NCOs.<sup>2</sup> Tied to internal political requirements as much as global military developments,<sup>3</sup> junior leader development evolved erratically since the founding of the PLA in 1927 and has varied in intensity from virtually no education during the Cultural Revolution to today's stated goal of higher education for all officers and NCOs. The current Chinese system must therefore be viewed not as the product of 80 years of uninterrupted development (as in Western armies), but as a manifestation of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) current military goals.

Building upon the limited reforms and dramatic downsizing of the PLA initiated under Deng Xiaoping, in 1995 President Jiang Zemin announced the *Two Transformations* that underpin the current Chinese strategy of *Active Defense*.<sup>4</sup> Initially based on observations of U.S. military conduct during the 1991 Persian Gulf War against Iraq—and reinforced by lessons from the 1995–1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, the 1999 Kosovo campaign, and Operations *Enduring Freedom* and *Iraqi Freedom*—these transformations directed the military to prepare for wars under modern, high-tech conditions, and to form an army based on quality, not quantity.<sup>5</sup> Both of these

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transformations represent significant shifts from the historical PLA doctrine and force structure that relied on mass armies of relatively uneducated peasants operating under the concept of "People's War."

Central to the Two Transformations and Chinese leaders' vision of future warfare is the concept of informatization, which is the linchpin of PLA reform and the major evaluation criterion for all operations. Justin Liang and Sarah Snyder, in their definition of *informatization*, say that, "more than just a convenient organizing



principle, [it] is a sophisticated idea about aligning capabilities and requirements in the face of perpetual change [engendered by modern warfare].<sup>6</sup> To meet the intent of the Two Transformations, the army is significantly reshaping its officer development to produce a well-educated *New Type Officer* capable of conducting informatized warfare through mastery of high technology.<sup>7</sup> Various indications suggest that this PME reform is taking hold in senior and field-grade officer institutions—traditionally the most important figures in China's centralized military. However, to truly achieve the Two Transformations and challenge modern informatized militaries, the PLA must expand these concepts to junior officer and NCO PME. The following two sections examine whether the Chinese believe this is necessary, and what progress they have made to achieve reform if desired.

**NCO PME: A Nascent Professionalism**

Judged against historical norms, non-commissioned officer professional military education is significantly advancing within the army from a relatively low starting point; however, analysis reveals that the PLA's current system is unlikely to produce the desired outcome of NCOs capable of operating under informatized conditions without further serious reform. This section explores recent army policy regarding education, contrasts it with current practice, and identifies the system's strengths and weaknesses while evaluating their impact on China's goal of conducting informatized tactical operations.

Historically, the PLA invested very little PME into its NCOs. Early in the PLA's history, the limited instruction received tended to focus on literacy, basic tactics, and political instruction.<sup>8</sup> After independence, instruction was expanded to include technical training on assigned weapons systems under the Soviet PME model.<sup>9</sup> The army expended little effort in educating NCOs beyond minimum functional requirements, and did not intend for them to perform any meaningful leadership role. Officially, this trend is changing. As one PLA observer notes:

*Requiring education and training for NCOs is something the PLA is focused on in both the officer and NCO corps. In the case of NCOs, this is to address the need for better educated and more skilled personnel to compensate for its shortcomings on the conscription side of the force and take some of the burden off of officers, as well as to create a more effective NCO corps in a more modernized military.*<sup>10</sup>

To meet this challenge, the army increased education standards in 2005, stipulating that "individuals selected as NCOs must have a specified level of education and must go to military academies for training."<sup>11</sup> It established a goal of raising all junior NCOs' education levels to high school equivalency, and all senior NCOs to the level of 3-year college (the Chinese equivalent of technical school) graduates by 2008.<sup>12</sup> That year, the PLA added the requirement to possess a relevant certificate of professional qualification for all types and levels of NCO.<sup>13</sup>

**Major Mark K. Snakenberg, USA, is assigned to the U.S. Army Pacific Executive Engagements Services Directorate, Fort Shafter, Hawaii.**

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For an army with no tradition of a professional, educated NCO corps, the PLA's goals are revolutionary; and in many cases, the PLA's demands exceed the required education levels of NCOs in established informatized armies. Most impressively, evidence is emerging that many NCOs are earning more than one professional certificate.<sup>14</sup> Whether this is a function of wholesale reform or early indication of institutions "teaching the test" to increase the population holding professional degrees remains to be seen.

While the educational goals are clear, the system for achieving them is cumbersome and almost precludes uniform development of quality across the force. Unlike most modern armies, which possess a unified strategy and process for developing NCOs from selection to retirement, the PLA's method is complex and difficult for outsiders to understand based on the fact that "no single Chinese source [outlines] the totality of the training system for conscripts and NCOs."<sup>15</sup> Basically, PME consists of general/technical training, specialty training, and sustainment training. The lack of a clear plan for NCO development stems from the fact that perhaps hundreds of army and civilian activities are responsible for institutional development. Theoretically, three national departments—General Political

Department Cadre, General Staff Department (GSD) Service Arms and Training, and GSD Military Affairs—are responsible for various aspects of the overall program; however, the practice of selecting NCO candidates at the regimental/brigade level from volunteers who extend their service at the conclusion of their 2-year term of conscription, and then sending them to 1 of 35 NCO PME institutions, dozens of civilian universities, or military training centers across the various military regions, severely complicates the PLA's ability to adhere to a common developmental program. Further, graduates of these various institutions receive differing educational experiences: academy graduates receive college core courses and technical training in 2- to 3-year programs; civilian graduates earn a professional certificate or technical degree. Some NCOs do not attend any of these colleges and instead study 2- to 3-year technical courses online or receive training at their units. Some candidates are embedded with operational units to observe and learn the duties of an NCO; others are not. Following general/technical education, candidates receive specialty technical training consisting of 1- to 3-month courses either at a military training center or online before officially becoming an NCO. Responsibility for sustainment training over an NCO's 30-year career<sup>16</sup> is split between corps level for major training and regiment/brigade level for on-the-job training; it is unclear at what intervals/milestones this occurs. Taken as a whole, this system offers significant risk of producing leaders who lack a common doctrinal approach to their profession.<sup>17</sup>

Among the many criticisms of this system within the PRC is the argument that current PME produces graduates who are "unable to function in their jobs after graduation from professional military schools"<sup>18</sup> due to lack of line experience. Unlike other modern armies that select seasoned soldiers to serve as NCOs, the PLA identifies an essentially minimally trained soldier as a candidate, sends him to school for up to 3 years, and returns him to a unit where he is expected to supervise similarly inexperienced conscripts. Because young Chinese NCOs—though long on educational and technical knowledge—lack real army experience, junior officers (with a similar lack of line experience) are forced to heavily supervise conscript soldiers—duties best left to NCOs. Although the current system should, in the long term,

produce a senior NCO who is increasingly effective due to his extensive education, in the short term current practices undercut efforts to professionalize the NCO corps by limiting young personnel's experience prior to arrival at their first units. Embedding candidates in colleges/academies with units should help alleviate this problem, but it cannot fix it. Such a program cannot substitute for prolonged daily line experience. This issue must be resolved for the PLA to achieve the Two Transformations.

Of equal significance is the lack of emphasis on leadership development. In this regard, the army is still a prisoner of its tradition of creating technicians. Nearly all the advances in education policy focus on increasing NCO general and technical education—leadership development is conspicuously absent from the discussion. In fact, aside from courses preparing NCOs to become squad leaders, the vast majority of PME focuses on technology—on mastering equipment—rather than leading people. This is as true of induction training as it is of later sustainment PME.<sup>19</sup> This is not to argue that leadership development is not occurring within the context of NCO PME; however, the fact that this aspect of professional preparation is not prominent in studies of the system suggests it is of secondary importance. The informatized battlefield requires NCOs capable of leading independent operations over an increasingly dispersed and complex terrain. Technical training and rudimentary cognitive skills no longer suffice even in the most centralized armies. NCOs must be educated, trained, and empowered to exercise initiative on the battlefield without an officer's direct supervision. Despite its efforts to empower NCOs through reductions in officer strength and assignment of NCOs to duties traditionally performed by junior officers,<sup>20</sup> the PLA's continued failure to cultivate leadership and initiative through PME puts the army's attempts to conduct informatized warfare at significant risk.

Clearly, China is embracing the importance of education within its NCO corps.<sup>21</sup> This represents a major break from PLA tradition and is a key element of achieving the Two Transformations. However, despite significant advances from its low starting point in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the current system contains many flaws that must be reformed in order to produce a truly modern army. In this regard, NCO PME must be considered a work in progress. As analyst Thomas J. Bickford



PLA soldiers train to disassemble and reassemble assault rifle

Xinhua News Service

notes, “an effective educational and training system that is capable of turning out the kind of officers and NCOs the PLA wants . . . is something that takes years to build.”<sup>22</sup> The PRC must address these deficiencies before it can succeed in its objective of conducting informatized war at the tactical level.

### Developing the New Type Officer

Unlike NCO development, junior officer PME is much discussed within the context of PLA reform and therefore more easily understood by outsiders. Both systems share key similarities including a focus on general/technical education and decentralized accession training. Unlike NCO PME, however, post-accession education is structured and predictable. The PLA’s junior officer development is therefore commensurate with other modern militaries and does not require the wholesale reform that NCO education does. In evaluating this system, policy will again be contrasted with practice. Strengths and weaknesses will be identified, and their impacts on conducting informatized operations will be evaluated.

China’s officer development is radically changing to produce the desired New Type Officer capable of mastering high technology. Historically, junior officer PME, like NCO PME, developed in a nonlinear manner based on the CCP’s prevailing goals, and focused on technical specialization primarily with leader training afforded only to officers selected as platoon or company commanders.<sup>23</sup> All education was through military institutions. This is no longer the case. Starting in 1987, technical and command training were increasingly combined to produce a more-rounded officer.<sup>24</sup> Following the U.S triumph over Iraq in 1991, the PLA recognized “the importance both of modern hi-tech conditions and of having officers educated in the new technologies necessary to fight under such conditions. This led to a further deepening of educational reforms and an even greater emphasis on officer education, reflecting a major rethink of the PLA’s basic strategy.”<sup>25</sup> Since 1999, civilian schools have been increasingly integral to officer development.<sup>26</sup> A “process of continuous officer education, requiring officers to periodically upgrade their education and military knowledge”<sup>27</sup> is in effect, and promotions are becoming more tied to education and professional skills.

As with its NCOs, China’s junior officers come from a variety of sources.

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Sixty-seven PLA academies provide high school graduates and active duty soldiers an undergraduate education en route to becoming officers, and furnish existing officers with a graduate education.<sup>28</sup> Increasingly, however, the army is turning to civilian institutions to provide both advanced degrees and especially pre-accession education, observing a model that approximates the American Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) program.<sup>29</sup> As of January 2009, 117 colleges and universities<sup>30</sup> provided nearly half<sup>31</sup> of the PLA’s new officers through the National Defense Student program. Chinese leaders reportedly prefer civilian-educated officers because of the questionable quality of PLA educational institutions<sup>32</sup> and implicitly believe that “graduates of civilian universities are better geared to leading a modern military.”<sup>33</sup>

Following general/technical education, which includes opportunities for civilian cadets to embed with operational units along the NCO model,<sup>34</sup> cadets report to a PLA military school to receive pre-assignment training. This includes instruction in basic military subjects and is designed to prepare the officer for duties as a platoon com-



National Archives

“Tianhe” supercomputer is one example of resources China has invested in information technology

mander. A later course prepares officers for company command. These courses reportedly promote “active learning [by] encouraging debate, creativity, innovation, and spontaneity.”<sup>35</sup> If that is true, they are a far cry from traditional Chinese military instruction, which stressed rote solutions and unquestioning obedience. The validity of this claim is difficult to determine and certainly does not extend to political matters, but the fact that such methods are being paid lip service suggests the PLA takes the requirements of informatized warfare seriously. The practice of pre-assignment training prevails over the rest of the officer’s career and indicates a well-thought-out system. What is not known is the quality of instruction at these institutions. Additionally, many Chinese junior officers pursue graduate degrees from a variety of sources including PLA



PLA Navy sailors participate in honor guard

U.S. Air Force (Jerry Morrison)

institutions, civilian universities, and even the National Defense University.

Taken as a whole, officer development—though again not administered by a single unifying activity—seems to demonstrate real potential for producing personnel capable of conducting informatized operations. The factors potentially precluding this include the suspect quality of PLA pre-accession training, uncertainty as to the extent junior officers are allowed to exercise operational initiative, and the burgeoning Chinese economy, which threatens to entice these well-educated individuals away from army service into corporate life. Compared to its starting point and NCO PME, however, the junior officer system shows great promise in developing the desired New Type Officer. This has tremendous implications for future PLA operational conduct in both the near and far term.

### Probable Near-term Implications

Based on an examination of NCO and junior officer PME, the next 5 to 10 years promise to be an era of transition for the PLA at the tactical level of war. Formations are increasingly capable of mastering the sophisticated weapons systems being acquired by the PRC due to increased technical training among NCOs, and officers in turn are increasingly capable of employing these systems effectively. Initially, doctrine will remain defensive but will transition to a more offensive approach as the PLA gains confidence. Sophisticated techniques relying on combined arms and joint tactics are likely to emerge later in the decade based on tactical leaders' intellectual readiness to absorb such advanced methods.

A shortfall in tactical conduct is likely to emerge, however, while implementing these concepts. Successful execution of informatized warfare results from regular field experimentation and detailed analysis of lessons learned over years by multiple units under various conditions. Armies, even if intellectually ready to adopt modern techniques, cannot execute them overnight. Having adopted a doctrine of modern tactical conduct, the PLA will endure a period of frustration at not being able to execute the doctrine in actual field conditions—training or otherwise. This period is likely to last at least half a decade. A window of vulnerability at the tactical level thus emerges between the time current techniques are abandoned and desired techniques are mastered. Compounding the natural difficulty of this transition is the inability of the NCO corps to shed its technician legacy and become a truly professional institution. This is a daunting challenge because it is difficult to create a culture of initiative among personnel who have never been entrusted with significant leadership responsibility. Second, because it runs counter to existing practice, the army will struggle to effectively implement necessary PME reforms in the near term even though it recognizes the desirability of professionalizing the corps. This puts the entire conduct of informatized tactical operations at risk until the deficiency is resolved, and may delay the adoption of modern tactics beyond the anticipated window.

Junior officers will be subject to the same frustrations as the NCO corps, but their participation in informatized warfare experiments over the next 10 years bodes well for

their ability to extend informatization into the operational and strategic realms later in their careers as senior leaders. Today's junior officer is setting the stage for future success.

Over the next decade, China's adversaries should exploit weakness at the tactical level by striking PLA formations quickly, using various means simultaneously and in divergent locations. The resulting tactical problem is likely to overwhelm a command and control system that, although enjoying the trappings of modern computers and communications technology, is still reliant on centralized directions from officers. In potential antinarcotics, peacekeeping, antiterrorism, and counterinsurgency operations, this is a tremendous liability; and during this period, only China's most elite units are likely to be equal to the task of informatized warfare.

### Probable Long-term Implications

By 2025, China will be well on the way to achieving its stated goal of "accomplishing mechanization and making major progress in informatization."<sup>36</sup> By that time, today's junior officers will have between 15 and 25 years of army service with at least half that time exposing them to informatized warfare. The tactical shortcomings noted above should be mostly resolved within the next 15 years. Additionally, by that time the focus on technical education and credentialing should provide the PRC with one of the world's premier cyber-warfare, electromagnetic warfare, and information warfare capabilities—areas China views as providing it with an asymmetric advantage over potential adversaries. Assuming constant (but not necessarily spectacular) economic growth and political stability, the PLA should be a force capable of physically conducting informatized operational-level maneuver regionally—inadequacy of strategic lift and sustainment capabilities notwithstanding—supported by strategic enablers including the asymmetric advantages mentioned above. Because Taiwan remains the PLA's primary mission, and an invasion requires integration with the navy, air force, and Second Artillery Force, emphasis on joint training and education will continue to escalate. Courses at the National Defense University and recent exercises with Russia are means of educating PLA officers in established joint procedures and might represent an attempt to extrapolate best practices from a military historically recognized for operational excellence. Because of their advanced civilian/military educa-



PLA soldiers train on firing range

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tion and development under informatized conditions, the PLA's officers will be ideally suited to participate in and/or command an invasion of Taiwan if called upon by the CCP. Examining an invasion scenario from the ground forces' point of view, the PLA should be capable by 2025 of defeating Taiwanese forces and successfully challenging modern armies (including the U.S. military) either there or elsewhere in East Asia. The emerging system of junior leader PME is designed to ensure this occurs.

China's anticipated geopolitical situation also lends itself to potential small-scale operations outside the region including peacekeeping, actions to preserve economic interests, and actions to secure ethnic Chinese in foreign countries. By 2025, political leaders will cease viewing PLA capability as a liability and increasingly see the army as providing options when conducting diplomacy or reacting to crises. The temptation to use such a force thus increases, although it is impossible to determine just how attractive such a course will be. Army leaders must be comfortable conducting modern, independent operations supported by other services—an eventuality for which junior officer PME seems to be preparing the leaders of 2025.

Projecting current trends 15 years into the future, the army's structure is likely to be dramatically changed. Barring a major deterioration in CCP/PLA relations or political stability, the PLA will be unified under a single controlling headquarters to facilitate control and joint interoperability rather than broken down into four general headquarters/departments. This development will be facilitated by increased reductions in PLA end-strengths based on increasing defense expenditures, particularly in personnel and equipment modernization. The army is likely to adopt a modular approach to force structuring in line with other modern militaries. Units will increasingly train to common standards. These developments will generate further reforms in PME including consolidation of military schools, reduction or elimination of the PLA's role in providing pre-accession, general/technical education and a corresponding increase in civilian schools'

roles, and a centralized training and education command capable of synchronizing PME for the modular force. Emphasis on technical skills will be reduced in favor of developing strategic competencies including an understanding of the impact of nonmilitary dynamics on military affairs. The generation of officers produced by the PLA in 2025 is likely to compare favorably with the officers produced by other armies in their ability to conceive and execute informatized operations.

Like forecasting the weather, predictive analysis is fraught with the danger of being wrong; however, it is important to provide at least a sense of what the future holds. Various factors outside of PME will impact China's tactical operations over the next decade and its geopolitical situation in 2025, but this work provides a basis for further research and intellectual debate. With China as an emerging power and potential rival in East Asia, the United States and its Army in particular must expend the effort to understand the PLA, its people, and its doctrine. A good first step would be addressing the existing knowledge gaps regarding junior leader PME. In doing so, U.S. leaders may be able to anticipate China's future course and even learn lessons applicable to the U.S. Army, which China views as its most likely competitor. **JFQ**

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner, "Introduction," in *The "People" in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China's Military* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), 19, available at <www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=858>.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Bickford, "Trends in Education and Training, 1924–2007: From Whampoa to Nanjing Polytechnic," in Kamphausen et al., 20.

<sup>3</sup> Justin B. Liang and Sarah K. Snyder, "The 'People' in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China's 80-Year-Old Military," 2, available at <www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=834>.

<sup>4</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (Information Office), *China's National Defense in 2008* (Beijing: Information Office, 2009), 7–8, available at <www.cfr.org/publication/18292>.



PLA land, naval, and air forces conduct joint exercise to improve combat capabilities

<sup>5</sup> Kristen Gunness and Fred Vellucci, "Reforming the Officer Corps: Keeping the College Grads In, the Peasants Out, and the Incompetent Down," in Kamphausen et al., 192.

<sup>6</sup> Liang and Snyder, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Gunness and Vellucci, 192–193.

<sup>8</sup> Bickford, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>10</sup> Gunness and Vellucci, 200–201.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>13</sup> Dennis J. Blasko, "PLA Conscript and Noncommissioned Officer Individual Training," in Kamphausen et al., 112.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>16</sup> Gunness and Vellucci, 200.

<sup>17</sup> For detailed treatment of the varieties of PLA NCO education, refer to Blasko.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>19</sup> Gunness and Vellucci, 211.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>21</sup> Blasko, 126.

<sup>22</sup> Bickford, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>28</sup> John F. Corbett, Jr., Edward C. O'Dowd, and David D. Chen, "Building the Fighting Strength: PLA Officer Accession, Education, Training, and Utilization," in Kamphausen et al., 144.

<sup>29</sup> Corbett et al., 147.

<sup>30</sup> Information Office, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Liang and Snyder, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Corbett et al., 156–157.

<sup>33</sup> Kamphausen et al., 8.

<sup>34</sup> Corbett et al., 156.

<sup>35</sup> Bickford, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Information Office, 7.