

The Chinese Military's Mindset

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Introduction

The Chinese military figures preeminently in President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" (*zhong guo meng*) as the "Strong Army Dream" (*qiang jun meng*). China's rise and the PLA's growing capability are redefining global and regional power equations. Understanding the Chinese military's mindset has become even more important in this milieu. Rather than dwelling on an academic interpretation of strategic culture which continues to be theorised¹, this article aims to look at the Chinese mindset in the framework of traditional strategic culture, which is focused outwards, and organisational culture, which is focused inwards. The primary aspects analysed are the traditional Chinese military strategic culture, the formative influences on the PLA and the contemporary developments to provide the practitioner with a framework to better discern the Chinese military's mindset.

The Traditional Chinese Military Strategic Culture

Traditional Chinese military culture has two strands viz. the civilisational attributes and the strategic culture. History and exclusiveness of the Chinese culture have led to certain deep rooted civilisational attributes. China saw early consolidation of political power under the imperial court of the Qin and Han dynasties after a violent and tumultuous ancient period. Imperial contiguity under subsequent dynasties, the strength of the Chinese culture and a strong 'Han' identity manifested into the 'Middle Kingdom' syndrome and the *Tianxia* concept. Overtime grew a self-perception as a superior, self-contained, pacifist and defensive civilisation. There is also a strong belief in the strong correlation between internal stability and external threat. The constant threat from the northern nomads engendered a continental outlook towards strategy and led to the concept of frontier defence and peripheral buffers to

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protect the Han motherland.² The peripheral buffers to the Han motherland namely; Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and subsequently Tibet have been controlled or lost depending on the strength of the ruling dynasty and this has been a cyclic process through most of Chinese imperial history.

The traditional strategic culture is evident from the ancient texts. The Chinese were the first to formally collate their ancient military texts including *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*.³ Five of the Seven Classics including *The Art of War* were written during the 'Spring and Autumn' (722 - 481 BC) and the 'Warring States' period (approx 403 to 221 BC).⁴ This era is termed as a period of basic establishment of Chinese strategic theory.⁵ During the Warring States period seven major states on the North China plains⁶ struggled in a long drawn political and military contest to become the hegemon (*ba*), with emphasis on statecraft, detailed assessment of relative state power, strategic alliances, deception, long term planning and preparation for war which permeated the subsequent Chinese strategic culture. The salience of the Seven Military Classics is that from the Song Dynasty (960-1126 AD) onwards, these were used as official texts for martial related examinations having a lasting impact on generations of military and political leaders.⁷

The PLA's *Science of Strategy (2005)* divides the content of ancient Chinese strategy into "Theory of Victory in Advance" (war preparation to include knowledge and war build up), "Theory of Complete Victory" (victory by safe and varied means including attacking the enemy's strategy and alliances, using psychological, coalition and economic warfare) and "Theory of Victory through Fighting" (actual war). The latter theory includes the use of dialectical terminologies to highlight the dynamic nature of war as characterised in *The Art of War*. These three theories were considered as an organic whole supporting each other to form a "strategic theoretical system" to conquer the enemy.⁸ Much academic research has been carried out on the ancient and imperial Chinese military texts by both the Chinese and western scholars. Differing perceptions exist with one school of thought including the Chinese propounding that Chinese culture is essentially pacifist in nature preferring the use of nonviolent means to subdue or deal with adversaries and that this culture is rooted in Confucianism - Mencius principles.⁹ Johnston (1995) claims that Chinese strategic

culture is based on hard realpolitik considerations with emphasis on offensive action and on flexibility or *quanbian* (assessment of relative strengths and the situation). He bases this claim on an academic analysis of the contents of “The Seven Military Classics” and the military texts of the Ming Dynasty in dealing with the Mongols.¹⁰

The traditional Chinese military culture influenced many Chinese leaders including Mao Zedong, Zhu De who purportedly memorised “The Art of War” and Marshal Liu Biao who taught “The Art of War” at the PLA Academies.¹¹ Conservative “hawks” in the establishment, including the PLA, invoke this era and there are books written on the similarities between the Warring States period and the current multipolar world.¹² Thus the framework of the traditional Chinese military culture is important for understanding the military strategic culture.

The Formative Influences on the PLA

All organisations are shaped by their initial leadership and experiences. The PLA is no exception to this rule. Arbitrarily taking the period from 1927¹³ to the Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958 as the initial formative years of the PLA, the main formative influences can be summarised as the Marxist Strategic Theory, the towering leadership of Mao Zedong, the initial operational experiences and the Soviet influence. The importance of these formative influences is primarily in the organisational culture of the PLA.

Marxist Strategic Theory. The ideological fountainhead of communist ideology has been Marxism - Leninism. In addition to the ideological aspects, the PLA traces concepts related to People's War, Active Defence, advancement of science and technology and proletarian way of operations to Marxist Strategic theory.¹⁴ Further, even today the PLA strives to align the contemporary situation to the ideological framework.

Mao Zedong's Military Strategy. Mao shaped the PLA and also produced a vast body of military writings which became a kind of scripture for the PLA. The most important aspects of Mao's strategy as per the PLA are his interpretations of Marxist-Leninist ideology as applicable to Chinese conditions, the primacy of politics in military strategy and the strategic guidance of People's War and Active Defence.¹⁵ The PLA continues to abide by these principles

showing Mao's enduring legacy in its discourse and Active Defence suitably modified is the strategic guidance even today.¹⁶

The Operational Experience. During the formative years the PLA was constantly in conflict starting with the Revolutionary War (1920s to late 1940s; including the War against Japan (1937-45) and the Civil War (1946-49)) and continued after the establishment of the PRC with the Korean War and the Taiwan Strait Attacks (1954-55 and 58). Further during this period the PLA evolved across the entire spectrum of conflict from guerilla warfare to conventional warfare. The PLA graduated to large scale manoeuvre and conventional warfare during the Civil War (1946-49) of which three important campaigns namely, the Liao Shen campaign, the Beijing Tianjin campaign and the Huai Hai campaign had major lessons for the PLA and are studied in the PLA Academies even now.¹⁷ These initial operational experiences in conventional warfare shaped the operational and tactical level philosophy of the PLA.

The Soviet Influence. The Soviet influence, which had existed from the inception of the Communist Party of China (CPC), increased after the Korean War when it was decided to build a professional army modelled on the Soviet Red Army. Consequently the period between 1954-58 saw large scale 'Russianisation' covering all aspects including organisational changes, professional military education and doctrine, translation and dissemination of Red Army manuals (regulations, curricula, handbooks and research reports), weapons and equipment procurement and Soviet military advisers at practically every level.¹⁸ Although the subsequent Sino-Soviet split impacted the relations, the PLA organisation was modelled on the Soviet Army and the PLA which for much of its existence due to necessity had been largely decentralised became centralised, hierarchical and rigid along horizontal and vertical organisational lines.

At the end of the formative period, the Chinese military had a nationalistic, ideological and operationally experienced mindset. Most Chinese military leaders had less or no formal military education and learned through practical experience. The CPC also saw enemies, both within and outside the country, posing an existential threat to it and reinforced the military's ultra-nationalistic outlook and sensitivity to territorial matters. On a broader note, the Chinese military mindset could be considered to be ultra-

nationalistic with sensitivity to territorial integrity, realist by nature with reliance on assessment of relative military power (national power) and long term planning, laying emphasis on deception, offensive pre-emptive action and surprise at the operational level, dependent on Mao's military philosophy and drawing lessons from China's rich traditional strategic military culture. Some of these aspects are hard coded in the PLA mindset. However, contemporary changes in modern warfare have influenced the Chinese operational thought and the recent reorganisation will impact the organisational culture.

The Chinese military became highly politicised in the following years and became mired in the internal politics of the CPC. Deng Xiaoping's take over after Mao's death heralded a new era and the PLA's journey from becoming a combined arms force to the transformation for prosecuting integrated joint operations began in earnest.

Contemporary Developments

China has changed faster than any other country has in a short span of five decades. The Party has moved on from 'ideological purity' to 'economic development' as *raison d'être* and under the present leadership is drumming the nationalistic beat. Economic changes have created interests beyond the mainland. China has emerged from a regional power status to consider itself part of a triangle of big powers to include the USA, Russia and China.¹⁹ In addition to these factors, the PLA has also been impacted with the changing nature of warfare and the expanding arc of PLA roles. Fortuitously the economic resources, leadership guidance and improving indigenous technological capabilities have been enablers for the PLA in its quest for the "Strong Army Dream". Given the opaqueness of China's real strategic goals, inferences have to be drawn from the important manifestations which are evident in the professionalism, modernisation and the changing priorities of the PLA.

Professionalism. The PLA's influence within the CPC has reduced in comparison to the past although it still stands as a powerful institution within the Chinese political structure. Heath (2015) contends that the PLA is evolving into a functional equivalent of a modern, national army while being organised along Leninist principles implying that the PLA is moving from a political first to

becoming a professional political army.²⁰ It also implies that, like other State institutions in China today which have become more professional, the military is in tune with the strategic and ideological framework provided by the CPC and focused on the security domain. Consequently, it mostly retains major influence in the security and defence related issues including strategic arms, territorial disputes and policies with regard to countries like India, Japan, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia and the USA.²¹

Modernisation. The comprehensive modernisation process, aimed at being capable of winning wars under conditions of informationisation by mid-21st century, is largely on track with interim objectives being achieved. In consonance with the demands of integrated joint operations, the PLA has carried out reorganisation of higher and operational level defence organisations. A major driving force of the PLA modernisation is the large military research community including the PLA Academy of Military Science and other military education institutions. Comprehensive study on foreign armies, conflicts and concepts is carried out by this community and an important outcome has been the hybridisation of Chinese military thought with western war fighting concepts. It is common to see military texts using terminology like asymmetric, non-linearity, tempo of operations alongside phraseology straight from Mao Zedong's thought (*Mao Zedong Sixiang*). Chinese war fighting concepts are aligning more with the West, though the change is more in nature of Michael Porter's definition of 'operational efficiency' rather than strategy.²² The PLA graduated from combined arms operations (*hetong zuozhan*) in the 1980s to joint operations (*lianhe zuozhan*) in the 1990s to its current aspirational doctrine of integrated joint operations (*yitihua zuozhan*) with system of systems (*zuozhan tixi*) capability, akin to the western network centric warfare, under an overall vision of time bound "mechanisation (*jixiehua*) and informationisation (*xinxihua*)". The PLA has systematically carried out its modernisation to become a more capable and effective modern fighting force and a modicum of confidence is already evident in the unfolding events in the South and East China Seas.

Maritime Focus. The Chinese Defence White Paper 2015 titled "Military Strategy" clearly states that China has to build itself into a maritime power.²³ The PLA Navy (PLAN) has moved beyond Admiral Liu Huaqing's "Near Seas Active Defence Strategy" to "Far Seas Operations". While Chinese articulations are indicative

of a defensive outlook towards Chinese economic maritime interests there are indications of the influence of Mahan on Chinese Strategists.²⁴ Contemporary Chinese maritime strategy is still being analysed based on the growing PLAN capability, Chinese publications and PLA texts with some scholars positing that China is making a layered developmental strategy with a combination of “Near Seas Defence, Far Seas Operations”, as it projects power in an incremental manner outwards.²⁵

Geopolitics. The PLA has always established a ‘main strategic direction’ for any given period. As mentioned in the *Science of Strategy*, its orientation in the 1950s was the South East Coast and in the 1960s post the Sino-Soviet split, became the Northern Areas²⁶. The current reorganisation into five Theatre Commands clearly indicates its new orientation towards the maritime domain in the Asia-Pacific region. The geopolitical significance of Taiwan has grown because of the Chinese contest for geostrategic space with the US in the Asia-Pacific region. Further, though not clearly articulated, there is a clear perception of the East China Sea and the South China Sea being considered as the new maritime buffers akin to the peripheral buffers in the historical continental strategy. The developments in the South China Sea and East China Sea signal that the Chinese will use both coercive and non-coercive policies in this quest for regional dominance which can be considered a litmus test for China becoming a ‘Big Power’ in its own right.²⁷

Conclusion

China’s metamorphic and rapid change has created both prosperity and contradictions. Wealth has also created inequality; capitalism flourishes in the cloak of modified communist ideology, and growing societal aspirations co-exist with and challenge authoritarianism. Metaphorically, the PLA also reflects this reality and despite the projection of rapid development, the PLA will absorb the changes desired in a much longer time frame than is being projected, especially in the organisational culture. In order to comprehend the Chinese military’s mindset, all the frames of reference including the traditional and formative influences as also the contemporary developments need to be appreciated.

The Chinese military has a realist and nationalistic outlook with both hard-line and moderate factions within its ranks. The

maritime outlook of the military is coming to the forefront and the Chinese are aiming to contest the maritime space in the Asia-Pacific from the US. The important question in the future will be – if the Chinese, and by corollary the military, be successful in applying an essentially continental strategy in the maritime domain where the connotations are different and zero sum outlook cannot be applied. Further, will China continue to view the world through the insular lens of the ‘Middle Kingdom’ and the outlook of ‘Warring States’ period in a bid for world pre-eminence or adopt a more mellow outlook to limit the military buildup and work out a regional security architecture which is based on mutual trust and accommodation?

Endnotes

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³ The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China are *The Art of War (Sun Zi Bing Fa)*, *Wu Zi Bing Fa*, *The Methods of the Si Ma (Si Ma Fa)*, *Wei Liao Zi*, *Tai Gong's Six Secret Teachings (Tai Gong Liu Tao)*, *Three Strategies of Huang Shi Gong (Huang Shi Gong San Lue)* and *Tang Tai Zong Li Wei Gong Wen dui*.

⁴ Ralph D Sawyer & Mei Chun Sawyer. *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*. Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado.1993.

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⁶ John K Fairbanks & Merle Goldman. *China : A New History (Second Enlarged Edition)*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge .2006. p.49.

⁷ Alastair Ian Johnston. *Cultural Realism : Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey. 1995. p.46.

⁸ Peng Guangqian, et.al. *op. cit.* pp.90-91.

⁹ Address at United States War College by Lt Gen Li Jijun, Vice President of Academy of Military Sciences, Aug 1997 Letort Paper No 1.

¹⁰ Alastair Ian Johnston, *Op. cit.*

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- ¹³ The Red Army traces itself to the Nanchang Uprising of 01 Aug 1927.
- ¹⁴ Peng Guangqian, et.al. *op. cit.* p.102.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* p.104.
- ¹⁶ Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China. *China's Military Strategy (National Defense White Paper) 2015*. Accessed from <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/> on 08 Aug 2015.
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- ¹⁹ Fu Ying. *How China Sees Russia, Beijing and Moscow are Close, but not Allies*. Foreign Affairs. January/February 2016, p.104.
- ²⁰ Timothy R. Heath. *China's New Governing Party Paradigm: Political Renewal and the Pursuit of National Rejuvenation (Rethinking Asia and International Relations)*. Ashgate Publishing Company.2014. pp. 85-86.
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- ²³ Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China. *China's Military Strategy (National Defense White Paper) 2015* . *op. cit.*
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- ²⁷ SL Narasimhan. *China's Strategy : History to Contemporary*. Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol CXLIV, No. 597, July-September 2014.pp. 386-394.