

THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION

by

LIEUTENANT COLONEL GEORGE K. OSBORN, USA

(What is the role of the Chinese People's Liberation Army in the Political Socialization of the Chinese People?)



The hypothesis here advanced is that, except for a period during the decade of the 1950's, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has played a major role in the political socialization not only of those who serve (or have served) in its ranks but also of the Chinese people at large.¹ This article is intended to project the conceptual framework of the hypothesis and to highlight areas where additional research would be useful.

Obviously, the magnitude of the political socialization role has varied over time—both as a function of its importance relative to other roles for the PLA as well as its importance relative to other institutions which also play some part in the process. The post-1949 peaks of magnitude appear to have been in the immediate 1949-53 period, when other bureaucratic institutions of the State and Party were in the process of construction, expansion, and consolidation. They occurred in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward,

when the PLA had to step forward and help pick up the pieces, and since the peak of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), when the PLA has held the country together as the State and Party bureaucracies have undergone reconstruction.

The post-1949 trough in magnitude was in the 1950's—roughly from the end of active hostilities in Korea in 1953 to the Lushan Conference and the suppression of P'eng Te-huai in 1959—when the PLA played what would appear to Western observers a more conventional military role. The major concerns of the PLA during this period of just over half a decade were essentially internal ones of force modernization and training, in which the PLA absorbed the conventional equipment and doctrine. The political socialization role of the PLA in those years appears to have been concentrated in impact on the members of the PLA itself—the short term service personnel who passed through the ranks, and the longer term officers and other ranks who made up the more or less permanent cadre. In fact, one might speculate that the PLA played a counter-role in political socialization at that time to the extent that it inculcated a set of concepts and a professional military ethos—something we might label "better expert than red."

HISTORY

The historical roots of the PLA role in political socialization, of course, go back almost as far as the very foundation of the Chinese Red Army itself in the late 1920's. Indeed, they possibly may go back even farther to the young cadres who paved the way politically for the Northern Expedition. Mao Tse-tung recognized the importance of the Red Army in political socialization in his "The Struggle in the Chinglang Mountains" in 1928, and, in his critique, "On Correcting

Lieutenant Colonel George K. Osborn, Military Intelligence, is a graduate of Stanford University, where he earned a BA, MA, and PhD. His military assignments include staff and command duties with infantry and field artillery units in the United States and Europe, and in politico-military staff positions in the Far East. A member of Phi Beta Kappa who has devoted many years to the study of Chinese affairs as they interact with other nations in the world, Colonel Osborn graduated from the USAWC in 1970 and is now an associate Professor of Social Sciences at the US Military Academy.



Mistaken Ideas in the Party," drawn up for the Ninth Party Congress of the Fourth Red Army in 1929, when he pointed out:

... The Red Army fights not merely for the sake of fighting but in order to conduct propaganda among the masses, organize them, arm them, and help them to establish revolutionary political power. Without these objectives, fighting loses its meaning and the Red Army loses the reason for its existence.²

During the Long March, the Red Army devoted its major efforts to self-preservation; but even during these trying days, both the Red Army and the Party organizations took advantage of every opportunity to engage in proselytizing activities.³ The political socialization activities of the Red Army during the Yen-an Period, both internally and externally, have been described by Edgar Snow in his *Red Star Over China*. The expansion of the Red Army and its auxiliaries during the Japanese War (1937-45) and the building both of Party organizations and local governments with the assistance of the Red Army provide ample evidence of the importance assigned to political socialization by the Army.⁴ The missions of the Red Army during this period were described, allegedly by Mao Tse-tung, as:

- (1) to fight the Japanese invaders,
- (2) to carry on productive activities, and
- (3) to carry on mass work among the people.⁵

The Civil War years (1946-49) saw great changes in the PLA—it became a large, reasonably well-trained force with sufficient heavy equipment to fight large-scale conventional campaigns against the Kuomintang (KMT). Obviously, it had to be preoccupied with the conduct of military affairs. Nevertheless, its role in political socialization could not be and was not ignored. Former Japanese puppet and ex-KMT soldiers had to be converted into effective members of the PLA; mass work had to be carried on in both "old" and "new" liberated areas; and the PLA had to provide

the backbone of the administration in much of China.

Even during the Korean War (1950-53), the role of the PLA in political socialization remained significant. The leaders filled important posts in the civil administration while continuing to hold both military rank and position, and the PLA had to carry out productive activities in the economy and mass work among the people. The PLA also participated in the land reform activities following the decision to carry out land reform in 1951, while at the same time standardizing equipment and training, with some assistance from the USSR. The People's Militia, while not under PLA control, inevitably relied upon the PLA for equipment and training, but the militia program had not really developed much momentum by 1954.

The reorganization of the state structure in 1954 was accompanied by a shift in the PLA role. As noted already, the PLA concentrated its efforts on the modernization and training of the post-Korea forces, and the strengthening of central government ministerial/bureaucratic control as well as the expansion of the party structure reduced the role of the PLA. The shift to conscription in 1955 meant that more young men would "pass through" the PLA and then back into civilian life, thus giving the PLA a role in socializing these individuals. But the relatively small size of the PLA as a function of total population or even as a function of those coming of conscript age each year limited the impact the PLA might have. In addition, demobilization of long-term volunteers during and after 1955 sent into the civilian sector five million or more individuals who had been thoroughly socialized during PLA service.

Although the argument between two schools, crudely labeled "better expert than red," headed by Peng Te-huai, and "better red than expert" or "both expert and red," headed by Mao Tse-tung and Lin Piao was to continue until 1959, it was obvious by 1957 that it was serious and that the stakes were high. The PLA was drawn into the rectification campaign of 1957 and the Great Leap Forward, both as a subject and as an



People's Liberation Army in a Tenth Anniversary Parade.

object. Lin Piao summed up the problem and announced the victory of the Mao-Lin position as follows:

In building up our army into a modernized army, we should of course pay very great attention to improving equipment and mastering technique. But we must at the same time pay attention to the other side, which is indeed the predominant side . . . we must not forget

political interests, we must emphasize the political side. . . . Henceforth it will still be a fundamental task in the building of our army to strengthen theoretical education in Marxism-Leninism, to strengthen education in socialism and the general line of the Party and to link this closely with the practice of contemporary revolutionary struggle and the change in the thinking of the members of the army. . . . 6



People's Liberation Army member assisting Mongolian peasants.

RECENT EXAMPLES

Of course, the most recent examples of the military playing a major role in political socialization are associated with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. In fact, it might be argued that the PLA anticipated the GPCR by its campaign to study Mao Tse-tung's thought even prior to 1966. At any rate, even though few, if any,

probably anticipated the degree of PLA involvement that would come in 1967 and 1968, the PLA clearly assumed a prominent position when *Chieh-fang-chun Pao* published the editorial, "Hold High the Great Red Banner of Mao Tse-tung's Thought and Actively Participate in the Great Socialist Cultural Revolution," on April 18, 1966. Then, as the GPCR tore apart the fabric of both Party and State organization, the PLA

found itself assuming ever greater responsibilities for the day-to-day governance of China.

Many of the events of the GPCR remain unknown to us, and there are many known events and factors we cannot explain to our satisfaction today. Nevertheless, it is clear that the PLA itself went through serious internal struggle between or among various factions. We know that the General Political Department of the PLA Headquarters disappeared from public view for some two years and that political guidance came from the Political Work and Literary and Art Units of the Military Affairs Committee of the CCP Central Committee, and from the Cultural Revolution Group of the PLA, Chiang Ching (Mao's wife).

In spite of the difficulties within the PLA, it is obvious that most of its command and control mechanisms remained intact and functioning and that the central leadership of the Party and Government were able to rely on the PLA in restoring stability. The Revolutionary Committees, formed during 1967-68, were based on the formula of the three-way alliance of the PLA, cadres, and revolutionary masses; but it is obvious that the PLA was at least *primus inter pares*, except possibly in the case of Shanghai.

More recently, in the reconstruction of the 29 provincial-level Party committees in China, beginning in November 1970 and running through August 1971, the PLA continues to occupy a prominent position. Of 29 provincial level Party committee leadership groups, 13 first secretaries have a clearly professional military background, 10 come from the ranks of past or present PLA political commissars, and only six might be called party professionals. In the ranks of second secretaries and secretaries, 27 out of 97 are professional officers, another 30 are or were political commissars, seven appear to have spent most of their careers (at least since 1949) in the state bureaucracy and 24 are Party professionals. The remaining nine must be the representatives of the "masses," "old, middle-aged, and young." Finally, of the 32 deputy secretaries announced by NCNA,⁷ 11 are either professional officers or political commissars, 18 are Party professionals, two

are from unknown background, and one appears to have been a bureaucrat. In addition, although we lack detailed data on county and commune Party committees, the reports of travelers and refugees seem to indicate a significant military presence there also.

Similarly, in the field of education, at all levels, we find the PLA playing an important role. The existence of worker, peasant, and soldier students at the reopened universities in 1970 and 1971 is accompanied by notice of PLA men in key places in university administration. At the primary and middle school levels, we find not only discharged soldiers serving as teachers but also emphasis on military or paramilitary training through the "Little Red Guards." The May 7 Cadre Schools, organized along military lines, also may represent a significant extension of the PLA's role.

CONCLUSION

Two factors should be reasonably obvious by now. First, it is feasible to conclude that the PLA and its predecessor, the Red Army, have had a significant political role to play from their very beginnings, when Mao Tse-tung and Chu Te met in south Hunan in the spring of 1928 and proceeded to establish the Fourth Red Army. Second, since 1966-67, with the serious dislocation of Party and State machinery, the PLA has served as the principal agent of the CCP leadership, first in holding the People's Republic together, second in reconstructing both Party and State. Hence, the PLA has become the single most important organized political force in China. In addition, as Ralph L. Powell has recently shown, the PLA has assumed an increasing and significant economic role.⁸

What inferences may we draw from all of this? Obviously, any answers we essay must be tempered by the observation of impending leadership changes at the top—Mao Tse-tung is 78 and Chou En-lai is 73. Lin Piao, at 64 one of the younger members of the old leadership and Mao's onetime heir—apparent, now is out of contention for power. Nevertheless, given China's essentially defensive strategy—one it has pursued consistently since 1949—the state of internal communications, the importance

of the agricultural sector in China's economy, the relative underdevelopment of the industrial sector, the size of the population, and so forth, it appears that the Chinese Communist Party and the leadership of the People's Republic have succeeded in integrating the PLA into the social, political and economic life of China in a way unequaled in any of the other so-called developing nations. Unlike the leadership we find in some other military establishments and states, the present Chinese leadership does not want its armed forces to be a professional island, isolated from society, intervening from time to time, and then attempting to withdraw. The efforts to restore the balance in China since October 1971 are further logical steps toward political integration.

NOTES

1. The definition of political socialization

explicated in Almond and Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach*, Boston, Little Brown, 1960, pp. 64-72, is followed here.

2. Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-tung, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1963, pp. 19-50, 51-62. Foreshadowing Lushan, see the section, "On The Purely Military Viewpoint," *loc. cit.*

3. For example, see Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China*, New York, Random House, 1938, 1944, pp. 201-218, *passim*.

4. For example, see Committee on Judiciary, United States Senate, *The Amerasia Papers*, Washington, GPO, 1970, pp. 811,817,818-821, 824, 836-842, 867-875.

5. *Op. cit.*, p. 1031.

6. Lin Piao, "March Ahead Under the Red Flag of the Party's General Line and Mao Tse-tung's Military Thinking," *Ten Glorious Years*, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1960, pp. 67-89 (quotation from pp. 74-75.)

7. New China News Agency.

8. "Soldiers in the Chinese Economy," *Asian Survey*, XI, 8 (August 1971), pp. 742-760.



Members of the Ansai Company in Yen-an studying the teaching of Chairman Mao.