

The Only Constant Is Change: Analysis of Recent Military Promotions

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Hong Kong press in mid-July highlighted recent shuffles in the senior Chinese military leadership. All of the changes took place below the Central Military Commission level, but did involve top positions in all four General Departments. This article identifies these changes, offers biographies of the newly promoted officers, and offers preliminary analysis of the promotions.

The 10 July 2009 issue of *Wen Wei Po*, a PRC-owned newspaper in Hong Kong well known as a channel for unofficial messages and highly regarded as a source of accurate information, highlighted a series of promotion changes on the official PLA website, www.chinamil.com.cn. The promotions involved all four General Departments (Staff, Political, Logistics, and Armament), as well the Academy of Military Sciences and the Chengdu Military Region, bringing the total number of general officers in the PLA to 174.¹

General Staff Department Changes

Two senior officers were promoted to leadership positions in the General Staff Department, replacing officers who had reached retirement age, while one was promoted in place to the rank of full general. The latter, General Ma Xiaotian (马晓天) was fully profiled in the 24th issue of *China Leadership Monitor*.²

His continued career success is no doubt due in part to his successful management of his two portfolios, foreign relations and intelligence. In particular, General Ma has been a forceful advocate of Chinese national interests in the context of the U.S.-China military-to-military relationship, defending Beijing's positions in public fora like the Shangri-La Dialogue and a wide range of bilateral exchanges.

In addition to Ma's promotion, Liu Zhenwu retired as deputy chief of the general Staff, replaced by LTG Hou Shusen (侯树森).

Hou was born in 1950 in Fumeng County, Liaoning Province, graduating from Jilin University. Before promotion to positions at the Center, Hou spent most of his career in the Shenyang Military Region (SYMR). Following a series of command and headquarters positions, Hou was selected as *mishu* for CMC member and General Logistics Department Director Wang Ke (王克), which is an important indicator of rapid promotion. After serving as commander of the 15th Motorized Regiment and deputy

commander of the 23rd Group Army, Hou then moved to the MR-level logistics system. Between 1989 and 2005, he served as deputy chief of staff (1989–93), chief of staff ('93–99) and director (1999–2005) in the SYMR Logistics Department. From 2005 to 2009, Hou was promoted to chief of staff for the entire SYMR, which is a critical planning and operational vice administrative position. Hou was promoted to the rank of major general in 1999 and lieutenant general in 2007. Hou is also a member of the 17th Central Committee.

In the course of his career, Hou has also authored or co-authored a number of articles on military affairs, including topics as diverse as logistics, party work, auditing work, and corruption:

- Hou Shusen and Ping Zhichao, “A Number of Reflections on All-Army Logistics,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 18 May 1990, p.3.
- Hou Shusen, “Strengthening the Party’s Advanced Nature During the Anti-Corruption Struggle,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 4 July 2001, p.6.
- Hou Shusen and Tang Mingyuan, “Preserving Advanced Nature First Requires Liberating Our Thinking,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 29 August 2001, p.6.
- Hou Shusen, “Be Vigilant in Peacetime About Mentioning ‘Suffering’,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 12 December 2002, p.2.
- Hou Shusen, “Make Great Effort to Increase the Capacity of Party Committees to Bring Forth New Ideas and Develop,” *Liberation Army Daily*, 14 July 2005, p.7.
- Hou Shusen, “It’s Time to Be Enthusiastic About Strengthening the Efficacy of Audit Supervision Work,” *Military Economic Studies*, Vol. 23, Issue 6, 2002, pp.47–49.
- Hou Shusen, “In Making Operating Mechanism Systems More Effective, Guard Against and Resolve Corruption Problems,” *Journal of the National Defense University*, Issue 5, 2002, pp.86–88.

The increasing range and breadth of these titles shows Hou’s broadening over the course of his career, developing the generalist skills necessary for higher level of command.

Major General Chen Yong (陈勇) was promoted to the position of assistant chief of the general staff, replacing Major General Yang Zhiqi, who reached mandatory retirement age.

Chen was born in June 1952 in Jiangxi Province. Since 1978, Chen has risen through the ranks of the military educational system, beginning at an armor academy teaching military tactics but then quickly advancing to the positions of teaching group leader, deputy head of research section, head of research section, and then deputy department chair of the training department. Chen then transferred to the Armored Command Academy to serve as associate dean, before being promoted to vice-president and then president of the Shijiazhuang Army Command Academy. In 2002, Chen was

named president of the Nanjing Army Command Academy, the top army command school in the PLA.

General Political Department Changes

Xu Yaoyuan (许耀元), assistant director of the GPD, was promoted in place to Lieutenant-General.

General Logistics Department Changes

In the latest round of changes, GLD Deputy Directors Ding Jiye and Qin Yinhe were promoted to lieutenant general. Qin Yinhe was born in 1951 in Henan Province. Like Chen Yong, Qin rose through the ranks of the professional military educational system, though Qin is a military doctor. He first served at the Third Military Medical University's Xinqiao Hospital as a urological surgeon, then successively as a department chair, lecturer, teaching department deputy director, teaching department director, hospital vice-administrator, hospital administrator, dean of studies, and head of the training department. Qin was then transferred in 2000 to be deputy head of the PLA General Hospital, and in 2004 was promoted to be head of the hospital. In 2007, Qin was named a deputy director of the GLD, while retaining his leadership of the hospital. Qin is an alternate member of the 17th Central Committee, and deputy head of the China Hospital Association.

Ding Jiye was born in August 1949 in Qingdao, Shandong Province. He graduated from the Military Economic Studies Institute in Wuhan, and his career has specialized in military finance affairs. Ding is a member of the PLA delegation to the National People's Congress, and is a frequent public commentator on defense budget issues.³

General Armaments Department Changes

Major General Niu Hongguang (牛红光) was promoted to deputy director of the General Armaments Department, replacing Zhang Jianqi, who had served as deputy head of China's manned space flight program.⁴

Niu was born in 1951 in Anqiu, Shandong Province. He reportedly has university-level education. He previously served as the chief of staff at the Jiuquan Space Launch facility, and chief of staff in the General Armaments Department headquarters.

Other Promotions

Apart from the General Department-level changes, Academy of Military Sciences Political Commissar Liu Yuan (刘源) was promoted to full general, as was Chengdu

Military Region Political Commissar Zhang Haiyang (张海阳).⁵ Both officers have excellent political connections.

Liu is the son of former president Liu Shaoqi, who was once heir apparent to Mao Zedong in the 1960s but died in prison in 1969 after being purged in the Cultural Revolution.⁶

Zhang is the third son of Zhang Zhen, a legendary general in the PLA, and both of his brothers are also general officers.

Conclusions and Implications

The PLA's recent round of promotions is too small to support broad analytical generalizations, but some observations are possible. In no particular order, these changes reinforce a number of features of the senior military officer corps, some new, some old:

- **Rising technocrats:** It is striking that all of the officers can claim some extent of university-level training, with two graduate-level professors selected to be General Department deputy directors.
- **Connections matter:** The promotions of Liu Yuan and Zhang Haiyang highlight the continuing success of the so-called "princelings" within the Chinese *nomenklatura*. This phenomenon runs counter to the meritocratic, "scientific development" *tifa* of the day, and engenders significant cynicism within the Chinese populace about the political and financial corruption of the ruling elite.
- **Patriarchy:** Though certainly not unique to China or militaries more broadly, all of the promoted officers, along with nearly all of the senior military leadership, are men.
- **Ethnocentrism:** In keeping with the majoritarian Han supremacy, all of the promoted officers are from the Han ethnic group.

Notes

¹ "China Promotes 3 Generals, Bringing Total To 174," Xinhua, 20 July 2009.

² <http://www.hoover.org/publications/clm/issues/16610676.html>.

³ See Ding comments in the following articles: Liu Mingxue, "[Interview with Ding Jiye, Head, Financial Affairs Department, General Logistics Department] Further Intensifying Armed Forces' Financial and Economic Management," *Jiefangjun bao*, 2 February 2007, p.3; Li Zi, "Spending To Improve Military Life—China's Servicemen and Women are Expected To Have Their Salaries and Allowances Increased," *Beijing Review*, 22 July 2005; Meng Na and Li Xuanliang, "Chinese Military Experts: US Peddling of the 'Theory of China's Military Threat' Is Aimed at Promoting Arms Sales," Xinhua, 10 June 2005; "General: China Has No Intention of Big Military Expansion," Xinhua, 9 June 2005; "China Military Expenditures Still Short of Actual Needs: General," Xinhua, 5 March 2005; Guo Nei, "Military Spending To Swell Reasonably," *China Daily*, 8 March 2004; "PLA Delegates to NPC Offer Three Reasons for Defense Spending Increase, Consider Defense Spending Relatively Low," *Zhongguo guofang bao*, 13 March 2003; and "Ding Jiye, Director of Finance Department of General Logistics Department, Answers Reporter's Questions on the Reform in Drawing up the Armed Forces Budget," *Jiefangjun bao*, 30 April 2001, p.2.

⁴ Zhang oversaw over 100 spacecraft and satellite launching and test missions, including the launching of “Asia I,” “Fengyun I,” “Austar,” and the “Shenzhou” series.

⁵ “China Promotes 3 Generals, Bringing Total To 174,” Xinhua, 20 July 2009.

⁶ Choi Chi-Yuk, “Well-Connected Trio Promoted To Generals,” *South China Morning Post*, 21 July 2009.