

Zhang Wannian: A Political Biography

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The political biography of Zhang that follows is the first of a series of sketches of politically important Chinese military leaders.

Zhang Wannian's Military Career

General Zhang Wannian was born in Shandong province in August 1928. He joined the PLA's Eighth Route Army in 1944, placing him among the third generation of military leadership. Early in his career, he served as a troop leader, communications officer, and political instructor in units subordinate to the Fourth Field Army, moving southward with those units later identified as the New Fourth Army. He fought in Xinkailing and the Dashan Blocking Action, for which he may have received a merit citation, as well as the Liaoxi-Shenyang, Peiping-Tientsin, Hengyang-Baoji, and Guangxi campaigns.

After 1949, he followed a traditional, combat officer promotion path through the ranks of the 41st Corps, based in the Guangzhou Military Region, eventually rising to command of the 367th Regiment. He did not serve in Korea. Some Hong Kong accounts state that he participated in 1953 defense of Dongshan Island, but the unit involved was 122nd Division of the 41st Army (corps), not Zhang's 123rd Division. From 1958-61, he attended the Nanjing Military Academy, which was then headed by Zhang Zhen. Following his stint as regimental commander, Zhang was promoted to staff officer position in the Guangzhou Military Region headquarters.

In 1968, he was promoted to command the 127th Division of the 43rd Corps, which was also subordinate to the Guangzhou Military Region. Zhang's unusually long stint of ten years in this position is likely due to the tumult of the Cultural Revolution. During Zhang's September 1998 visit to the United States, he disclosed that during the late sixties, he spent a considerable amount of time in Vietnam as a military adviser. Zhang led the 127th Division during the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war, distinguishing himself during the battle of Liang Shan (Lang San) by achieving one of the few battlefield victories for the Chinese side. As a result, Zhang was personally decorated by Deng Xiaoping, and thereafter he was on the fast track for promotion. From 1978 to 1982, he rose to deputy and then commander of the 43rd Corps. Following the standard track, Zhang's next promotion moved him upwards as well as laterally to serve as the deputy commander of the neighboring Wuhan Military Region.

Having proven himself at a command outside of his power base, Zhang moved back to command the Guangzhou Military Region from 1987-90. There he began to display trademark forward-thinking ideas about professional military modernization and doctrinal development. Under his supervision, the Guangzhou Military Region during this period created the PLA's first rapid reaction unit and held the first joint exercises. At the same time, Zhang commanded the military region during its wildest experiments with go-go capitalism, which may have later provided him with sufficient motivation to support the divestiture of the PLA from its commercial enterprises. Contrary to press reports,

however, Zhang was not reluctant to send units from his military region to Beijing in 1989, dispatching the elite 15th Airborne Corps at an early stage of the crisis. In the wake of the massacre, Zhang was rotated to command the strategically important Jinan Military Region.

Zhang in Leadership Politics

In 1992, Zhang became director of the General Staff Department, effectively making him the army's top operational commander. He was a surprise choice, picked because he was an outsider with few factional ties. His profile was particularly attractive to Deng Xiaoping, who had just purged the brothers Yang Shangkun and Yang Baibing from the PLA leadership and was actively rooting out their factional networks. In their place, Deng installed veteran army cadres Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen, the latter of whom was Zhang Wannian's commandant during his attendance at the Nanjing Military Academy in the late 1950s and early 1960s. From his key position at the General Staff Department, Zhang Wannian continued and expanded his focus on doctrinal modernization and professionalism. He is credited with upgrading the PLA's combat capabilities, increasing the frequency of exercises, and revising contingencies for fighting future wars.

During the 1995-96 Taiwan Straits crisis, Zhang was widely reported to have observed the Nanjing "theater exercise" in November 1995,¹ and he reportedly directed the Nanjing War Zone Command headquarters in March 1996. In 1995, he was elevated to vice-chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), along with Chi Haotian. As expected, they replaced Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen as the executive vice chairmen of the CMC at the Fifteenth Party Congress in 1997. Zhang Wannian reportedly replaced Zhang Zhen as the executive vice chairman concerned with "professionalism" issues, including the portfolio for operations, training, tactics, and doctrine. While the Admiral Liu Huaqing's seat on the Politburo Standing Committee was not filled with a military replacement, Zhang was promoted to the Politburo as well as the Chinese Communist Party Secretariat, a key node for paper flows in the top leadership. His preeminent position in the military was partly confirmed by his attendance as the sole senior military representative at the changeover ceremonies in Hong Kong in 1997.

In recent years, Zhang has continued to push the modernization of the PLA, but he has personally been beset by health problems and embroiled in various controversies. According to Hong Kong media and interviews with military officials in Beijing, Zhang was afflicted with a serious bout of stomach cancer in 1998, and he had to retreat from public view for a significant period of time. He reportedly twice offered to resign in the late nineties, once because of persistent rumor-mongering about his health and another time because of embarrassing cost overruns on the new Ministry of National Defense building on Fuxingmen Road.

Those who have met Zhang Wannian describe him as a "soldier's soldier" who has genuine "command presence." One acquaintance admiringly has referred to him as a "troop leader," pointing to

¹ Gu Boliang and Xu Dianlong, and Huang Qiusheng, "Zhang Wannian Observes 'Nanjing Theater' Exercise," *Xinhua*, 25 November 1995.

an enviable record of combat and command experience. Zhang is widely perceived as a professional military officer, committed to "army building," PLA modernization, and the development of joint operations. He has no background in politics, and no identifiable political ambitions in areas beyond military issues. Zhang has smartly distanced himself from both Tiananmen and the Yang clique. He has clearly established a good relationship with Jiang Zemin, and appears to trade political support for backing of military programs and modernization.

Details of Zhang's Career

- Born in Longkou City, Yuanhuang County, Shandong in August 1928
- Joined PLA's Eighth Route Army in August 1944
- Joined the Chinese Communist Party in August 1945
- 1944-45: serviceman in the Seventh Company of the Third Independent Battalion of the East Shandong Beihai Independent Regiment.
- 1945-47: deputy leader and leader of the Communication Squad of the Third Battalion of the 35th Regiment of the 12th Division of the Fourth Column (Northeast Democratic United Army), then commanded by Wu Kehua and Peng Jiaqing.- 1947, bodyguard, 36th Regiment, 12th Division.
- 1947-48: deputy platoon leader, platoon leader, and deputy political instructor of the Fifth Company of the 36th Regiment of the 12th Division of the Fourth Column in Northeast China.
- 1948-50: section staff officer, deputy section chief, and section chief of the Communication Section of the 36th Regiment of the 12th Division of the Fourth Column of the Northeast (Fourth) Field Army.
- 1950-56: head of Operation Section of 369th Regiment of 123rd Division of 41st Corps and staff officer of the Operation Section of the 41st Corps's Headquarters.
- 1956-58: deputy regiment commander and chief of staff of 368th Regiment of 123rd Division of 41st Corps.
- 1958-61: Preparatory Course Department and Basic Department of the PLA Nanjing Military Academy.
- 1961-62: deputy regiment commander of the 367th Regiment of 123rd Division of 41st Corps.
- 1962-66: regiment commander of the 367th Regiment of 123rd Division of 41st Corps.
- 1966-68: section chief of the Combat Section of the Operations Department of the Headquarters of the Guangzhou Military Region and deputy department chief of the Operations Department.
- 1968-78: division commander, 127th Division of the 43rd Corps.
- 1979: fought in Sino-Vietnamese Border War
- 1978-81: deputy commander of 43rd Corps and concurrently division commander of 127th Division of the 43rd Corps.
- 1978-79: concurrent with division command, attended PLA Military Academy.
- 1981-82: army commander, 43rd Corps.- 1982-85, deputy commander, Wuhan Military Region.
- 1985-87: deputy commander, Guangzhou Military Region.
- 1987-90: commander, Guangzhou Military Region and deputy secretary, party committee.
- 1990-92: commander, Jinan Military Region and deputy secretary, party committee.
- 1992-95: director of the General Staff Department; member of Central Military Commission; party secretary of GSD Party Committee.

- 1995-97: vice chairman, CMC.
- 1997: executive vice chairman, CMC

Party and State Positions

- 1969: delegate to the Ninth Party Congress.
- 1993: delegate to the Eighth National People's Congress.
- 1982: alternate member, Twelfth Central Committee.
- 1987: alternate member, Thirteenth Central Committee.
- 1992: member, Fourteenth Central Committee.
- 1997: member, Fifteenth Central Committee; member, CCP Secretariat; and member, Politburo.

Promotions in Military Rank

- 1988: promoted to lieutenant general.
- 1993: promoted to general

Awards

- Five top merit citations.
- Order of Liberation, Third Class

Proteges

- Guangzhou Military Region Deputy Commander Liu Zhenwu.
- Lin Xinliang.
- Shenyang Military Region Political Commissar Jiang Futang
- Yang Guoping.

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