

Wang Ke: A Political Biography¹

James Mulvenon

Wang Ke's Military Career

Wang Ke was born Wang Maoqing in August 1931 in Xiaoxian County, Jiangsu Province (later Anhui Province). In the early 1940s, this part of Jiangsu became an operating base for the New Fourth Army. With only an elementary school education, Wang joined the local unit of the New Fourth Army as a “young soldier” at the age of 13, serving as a communicator for the armed working team of Xiaoxian County. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) commander of the local military subdistrict was Zhang Zhen, a future top People's Liberation Army (PLA) officer and powerful patron for Wang for the remainder of his career. Wang was reportedly personally trained by Zhang, who sent him first for additional education and tactics instruction.

During the War of Liberation (1945-49), Wang first served in the Fourth Division of Zhang Zhen's New Fourth Army, which evolved in November 1945 into the Ninth Column of the Huazhong Field Army in Huaibei. This column fought in campaigns from northern Jiangsu to southern Shandong, including battles in Chaoyangji, Huaiyang, Lianshui, Subei, and Lunan. In February 1947, the Ninth Column of the Huazhong Field Army merged with the Second Column of the Shandong Field Army in Tancheng, Shandong, to become the Second Column of the East China (Huadong) Field Army. Wang served as an assistant cultural instructor and literacy teacher in the Fifth Division of this column, and reportedly worked in grassroots units as a probation officer and platoon leader. In October 1947, Wang's unit fought in the counterattack along the Jiaodong-Jinan railway line and in the Huai-hai campaign. He received a commendation from Zhang Zhen for bravery in battle at the bridgehead of the Wannian floodgate of the Grand Canal. In February 1949, the Second Column of the East China (Huadong) Field Army was renamed the 21st Army of the Third Field Army. Wang served as deputy political instructor of a regimental training team of that army's 62nd Division. In May 1949, the 21st Army was involved in the battles to cross the Yangzi River, fighting Nationalist troops in Hangzhou, Wenzhou, Ningbo, Fenghua, and Xiangshan as well as bandits in Linhai. The army was finally stationed in Zhejiang Province.

After Liberation, Wang took part in the Zhoushan campaign from March-May 1950 as a regimental staff officer in the 62nd Division of the 21st Army, and later became a staff officer in the division's headquarters, which performed garrison duty in Zhejiang. In March 1953, the 21st Army was deployed to North Korea as the second replacement Chinese People's Volunteers unit, entering the country through the Changdian Estuary in Jilin. Wang's unit entered in the war's final stages, when the Chinese leadership began rotating field armies from the inner provinces onto the battlefield in order to harden their combat abilities and give them experience in modern warfare tactics against U.S. and U.N. forces. His unit took part in the

Jincheng counterattack, the summer offensive of 1953, and the Kumsong campaign, where Wang became a dedicated advocate of the devastating power of modern artillery.

After 1953, the 21st Army stayed in North Korea for garrison duty, primarily nonmilitary labor to support North Korea's rehabilitation and economic recovery. Wang left the infantry for an artillery regiment, serving successively as a battalion staff officer, battalion commander, and then concurrently as first deputy regimental commander and chief of staff of the regiment. In 1958, China's military presence in North Korea ended, and the 21st Army returned to China. Wang's unit was the last to withdraw, and it was redeployed to Shanxi Province, where Wang was promoted to deputy head of the 21st Army's artillery department.

In order to transfer his battle-hardened skills to the next generation of artillery officers, Wang in 1959 moved to the Xuanhua Artillery School of the Beijing Military Region, where he served as deputy director and then director of the training section. The main task of the school was to train company- and platoon-level military cadres and reconnaissance officers. In 1962, the school merged with the Wuwei Artillery School in Wuwei, Gansu Province, which had previously specialized in the training of special artillery technicians.

Between 1964 and 1969, Wang served as the deputy director of the combined school's training department. One source reports that Wang was briefly posted to Tianjin during the Cultural Revolution as deputy division commander of the 66th Army's 196th Division, which serves as the "model division" for foreign visitors and dignitaries.² Wang was reportedly transferred to this division to improve its artillery performance for important guests, including Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger.

In February 1969, the Wuwei Artillery School was closed, and Wang was posted to serve as the head of the artillery department of the Lanzhou Military Region. From 1970-72, he was deputy commander of a garrison division of the Lanzhou Military Region, and he served as political commissar of the same division from 1972-78. Following his tenure in Lanzhou, Wang underwent midlevel professional military education at the PLA Military Academy in Nanjing. After graduation in 1980, Wang returned to the Lanzhou Military Region to serve as a division commander under the 21st Army, though it is not clear whether he commanded the 61st, 62nd, or 63rd Division.

In 1983, Wang was appointed commander of the 21st Army in the Lanzhou Military Region, after 34 years of working his way up through a single unit hierarchy. In 1985, the 21st Army was reorganized as the 21st Group Army. In 1986, Wang was promoted to commander of the Xinjiang Military District under the Lanzhou Military Region, and then further to deputy commander of the Lanzhou Military Region in 1990. Wang replaced Fu Quanyou as commander of the Lanzhou Military Region in 1992, and then moved laterally to command the Shenyang Military Region in November of the same year. In 1995, Wang moved to Beijing as a member of the Central Military Commission (CMC) and director of the General Logistics Department. At age 71, Wang is widely expected to retire at the 16th Party Congress in 2002.

Analysis

In terms of possible factional alignments, Wang Ke is one of the last active-duty third generation military leaders. He served primarily in the Third Field Army during his career, developing a close personal tie to Third Field Army supremo General Zhang Zhen when he was only 13 years old. General Zhang probably had a role in Wang's later promotions to the central level, and the two finally served together on the Central Military Commission from 1995-97. Geographically, Wang Ke served most of his career in the northwestern Lanzhou Military Region, which permitted him to develop potential ties with Fu Quanyou and possibly the late PLA elder Wang "Big Cannon" Zhen.³

Professionally, Wang Ke built a career as an artillery officer, earning the standard artillery honorific "jack of all guns" at an unusually young age. As the PLA's senior logistics officer since 1995, Wang has led a dramatic series of reforms. In the past, PLA logistics was service-based, with separate branch hospitals and POL (petroleum, oils, and lubricants) stations. Wang's reforms have implemented joint logistics at the military region level for the first time, allowing PLA personnel to receive medical care and gasoline at any military region facility.

Details of Wang's Career

1931, born in Xiaoxian County, Anhui Province

1944, joined New Fourth Army

1944, communicator, armed working team of Xiaoxian County

1944-45, Fourth Division, New Fourth Army

1945-47, Ninth Column, Huazhong Field Army

1947, joined Chinese Communist Party

1947-49, assistant literacy teacher, Fifth Division, Second Column, East China (Huadong) Field Army

1949, deputy political instructor, regimental training team, 62nd Division, 21st Army, Third Field Army

1949-53, regimental staff officer and division headquarters staff officer, 62nd Division, 21st Army, Third Field Army

1953-54, battalion staff officer, artillery regiment, 21st Army, Chinese People's Volunteers

1953-56, battalion commander, artillery regiment, 21st Army, Chinese People's Volunteers

1956-58, deputy regimental commander and chief of staff, artillery regiment, 21st Army, Chinese People's Volunteers

1958-59, deputy head, artillery department, 21st Army

1959-60, deputy director, training section, Xuanhua Artillery School, Beijing Military Region

1960-61, director, training section, Xuanhua Artillery School, Beijing Military Region

1962-69, deputy director, training department, Wuwei Artillery School

1969-70, head, artillery department, Lanzhou Military Region

1970-72, deputy division commander, garrison division, Lanzhou Military Region

1972-78, political commissar, garrison division, Lanzhou Military Region
1980, graduated from PLA Military Academy
1980-83, division commander
1983-85, commander, 21st Army
1985-86, commander, 21st Group Army
1986-90, deputy commander, Xinjiang Military District
1990-92, commander, Xinjiang Military District and deputy commander, Lanzhou Military Region
1992, commander, Lanzhou Military Region
1992-95, commander, Shenyang Military Region
1995-present, member, Central Military Commission
1995-present, director, General Logistics Department

Party and State Positions

- 1992, member, 14th Central Committee
- 1997, member, 15th Central Committee
- member, Ninth National People's Congress

Promotions in Military Rank

- 1988, lieutenant general
- 1994, general

Notes

¹ This biography draws heavily from a wide variety of sources, including the excellent biography of General Wang in David Shambaugh's forthcoming University of California Press book, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems & Prospects*; "Wang Ke, Commander of the Shenyang Military Region," *Inside China Mainland*, March 1994, 81-85; and Liu Paifu, "Wang Ke: Future Chief of the General Logistics Department," *Guang Jiao Jing*, October 16, 1995, 76-78.

² "Wang Ke, Commander," 83.

³ See Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*.