

Hu Jintao and the “Core Values of Military Personnel”

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In late 2008, CMC Chairman Hu Jintao introduced the concept of “the core values of military personnel” [军人核心价值观], extending his previous concept of the “socialist core values system” to the People’s Liberation Army. The resulting political campaign centered on the implementation of a 20-character phrase: “being loyal to the party, deeply cherishing the people, serving the country, showing devotion to missions, and upholding honor” [忠诚于党, 热爱人民, 报效国家, 献身使命, 崇尚荣誉]. This article examines the origins, content, and dissemination of this political campaign, assessing its implications for party-army relations.

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The term “core values” did not originate in the PLA, but has been adapted from the larger “harmonious society” discourse associated with Hu Jintao. In his speech to the Sixth Plenum of the 16th Central Committee in October 2006, Hu called for the development of a “harmonious society” in China, which in turn required the development of a “harmonious socialist culture” built upon what he termed the “socialist core values system” [社会主义核心价值体系].¹ This quest for harmony is a direct response to changes in China in the reform period, where “social and economic components, forms of organization, benefit-oriented relationships and patterns of distribution have become increasingly diverse and so have people’s value orientation, social conscientiousness and ways of living.”² Hu described these values as including “ideals and beliefs and ethical standards common to the whole of society,” which would “lay a firm ideological and ethical foundation for the whole party and the people of all ethnic groups throughout the country.”³ From this point forward, he asserted that the “system of socialist core values is the inner spirit and the soul of the life of a socialist system.”⁴ Thus, the “socialist core values system” is the “soul” of the Hu Jintao worldview, providing a set of social values to complement the “objective” policymaking methodology of his widely propagated concept of “scientific development.”

The main elements of the “socialist core values system” are four-fold: “the Marxist guiding ideology, the common ideal of socialism with Chinese characteristics, the national ethos with patriotism as the core and the spirit of the times with reform and innovation as the core, and the socialist concept of honor and disgrace.”⁵ This latter element, which is a “natural combination of the traditional virtues of the Chinese nation, excellent revolutionary moralities and the spirit of the times,”⁶ includes Hu’s Neo-Confucian prescriptions of the “eight honors and eight disgraces.”⁷ The overall goal of the values system is to “strengthen the ideological and moral foundation for social harmony, to create the maximum social consensus, to unite the people, to stimulate liveliness and to provide a source of culture and a spiritual driving force for social harmony,” with the end result of “building a wealthy, civilized and harmonious socialist modernized country.”⁸ Two years later, Party organizations explicitly labeled the heroic response of the Party, military, and people to the Wenchuan earthquake as an example of “socialist core values,” since it was “people-centered,” highlighted the “sincere virtue of mutual help,” “demonstrated the collectivist moral code,” and united “the strength of the entire Chinese nation.”⁹

Lest anyone think that the development of a socialist core values system could include ideas at odds with the ideology of the Party, however, *People’s Daily* commentaries are very clear:

Construction of a culture of harmony with the socialist core value system as the fundamental goal falls into the category of ideology. We respect and tolerate diversified development in society. This absolutely does not mean allowing any kind of anti-Marxist social ideology to borgeon [*sic*] and does not mean allowing our major ideology to vacillate . . . The history of human development shows that different ideological and value systems may possibly co-exist in a society; however, the guiding ideology, ideals, and faith across a country should be the same. This is the guarantee of the healthy, steady, and harmonious development of a country.¹⁰

Instead, the Party encourages the people (and, by extension, the PLA) to focus on national cohesiveness through patriotism:

Through 5,000 years of historical evolution, the Chinese nation has created a great ethos that regards patriotism as the core and that is characterized by unity, unification, love of peace, industry, bravery and consistent independence. The great ethos of the Chinese nation, with patriotism as the core, is the result of the deposit and sublimation of the long-lasting history of the Chinese nation. This great ethos has already been deeply built into the conscientiousness of our nation, the character of our Chinese nation and the temperament of our Chinese nation and has become an orientation of values with which all ethnic groups unite into one and struggle together.¹¹

Hu's "socialist core values system" concept has remained a consistent theme in leadership speeches, party theoretical publishing, and plenum work documents from late 2006 to early 2009, and likely will do so for the duration of his primacy.

"Socialist Core Values System" in PLA Media

While the "socialist core values system" (SCVS) discourse was initially focused on "the Chinese people" at large and the CCP in particular as the vanguard of the people, this section shows that the concepts were quickly integrated into military political work. Shortly after Hu's plenum speech in fall 2006, "socialist core values system" began to appear regularly in PLA media and ideological journals. In a 7 December 2006 article in *Liberation Army Daily* that effectively represents the themes of PLA political work in late 2006 and early 2007, two military political work commentators identified a special role for the PLA in implementing SCVS:

The armed forces should move ahead of the whole society in building the socialist core values system. Our armed forces are the people's armed forces under the party's absolute leadership. The party's banner is the armed forces' banner. The character and principle of the people's armed forces require that we must give full play to the superiority of the political work in the armed forces and must ensure that the military troops will always play a leading role in the building of the socialist core values system.¹²

The author's asserted clear historical precedent for the PLA's lead role in fostering moral values:

From the revolutionary war period to the peaceful construction period, our armed forces have always attached great importance to enhancing ideology and moral building. Such heroes and models as Zhang Side, Dong Cunrui, Huang Jiguang, Qiu Shaoyun, Lei Feng, Su Ning, Li Xiangqun, and Hua Yiwei have embodied the spirit of various periods, won the respect and admiration of the masses, and produced extensive and profound influence on the forming of good social morality and conduct.¹³

The authors further assess that the PLA's leading role continues to this day, as the military has "always taken the lead in carrying forward the national spirit and the spirit of the times and has played an exemplary role in implementing the scientific development concept and building the harmonious society," two of Hu Jintao's most important theoretical contributions to CCP ideology.¹⁴ Throughout the remainder of 2006, 2007, and 2008, PLA media continued regular but relatively low-intensity propaganda about the "socialist core values system," including a group commentator article by senior political work officials in November 2006,¹⁵ articles in the Party's theoretical journal *Qiushi*¹⁶ and the military theoretical journal *China Military Science*¹⁷ in August 2007, and even articles linking hardy perennial Lei Feng to SCVS in March 2008.¹⁸

Hu Introduces “Core Values of Military Personnel”

On 30 December 2008, Hu Jintao delivered a critically important speech, introducing the concept of “core values of military personnel” [军人核心价值观], and the accompanying 20-character slogan: “being loyal to the Party, deeply cherishing the people, serving the country, showing devotion to missions, and upholding honor” [忠诚于党, 热爱人民, 报效国家, 献身使命, 崇尚荣誉]. He offered the following definitions of the five main components:

- **Being Loyal to the Party:** “To be loyal to the party is to consciously uphold the party’s absolute leadership over the armed forces, hold aloft the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics, fortify ideals and convictions about socialism with Chinese characteristics, and resolutely obey the party’s orders at all times and under all circumstances.”
- **Deeply Cherishing the People:** “To deeply cherish the people is to faithfully practice the basic aim of serving the people wholeheartedly, put the people’s interests above and ahead of everything else, always preserve the people’s army’s political character, cast in one’s lot and share weal and woe with the masses, and show selfless devotion to the people.”
- **Serving the Country:** “To serve the country is to vigorously promote the patriotic spirit; closely link an individual’s future and destiny with the country’s future and destiny; resolutely defend the country’s sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity as well as the state power based on the people’s democratic dictatorship; and make contributions to building a prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, and harmonious modern socialist country.”
- **Showing Devotion to Missions:** “To show devotion to missions is to perform the sacred duties of revolutionary soldiers, cherish the armed forces, be proficient in military skills, cherish and show dedication to one’s work, not shrink from making sacrifices, be valiant and skillful in battle, and resolutely perform the historical missions entrusted by the party and the people to the military at a new phase in the new century.”
- **Upholding Honor:** “To uphold honor is to consciously cherish and defend the honor of the country, the military, and military members; put honor ahead of one’s life; consciously practice the concept of socialist honor and disgrace; promote the spirit of revolutionary heroism and collectivism; improve quality and develop in an all-around way; strive for first-rate results and render meritorious service; uphold the integrity of a revolutionary; and strictly observe military discipline.”¹⁹

Even though the concepts were released on the next-to-last day of the year, Xinhua identified it as the top key phrase in the PLA for 2008,²⁰ and *Liberation Army Daily*’s New Year’s message for 2009 described “core values” as the “fundamental, most central sense of values reflecting our military personnel’s relationship with the Party, the people, the nation, and the Armed Forces, and the relationships among our military personnel.”²¹

In early January 2009, the General Political Department issued two key circulars

outlining an education campaign designed to cultivate “the core values for revolutionary soldiers of the contemporary era.”²² Entitled “Notice Regarding Implementing the Important Instructions of President Hu and Vigorously Cultivating Core Values of Contemporary Revolutionary Military Personnel,” and the “Opinion Regarding Carrying Out Extensive Thematic Educational Activities in the Entire Armed Forces To Cultivate Core Values of Contemporary Revolutionary Military Personnel,” these two documents outlined a campaign described variously as “a major event in this year’s political work for the whole army,”²³ “a major strategic mission for the ideological and political construction of the military in the new historical circumstances,”²⁴ and “great realistic significance and far-reaching historic importance.”²⁵ The core PLA political work documents, including the “People’s Liberation Army Political Work Rules,” “People’s Liberation Army Ideological and Political Education Outline,” “Theoretical Study Regulations for Cadres Above the Regiment Level,” “Basic Military Theoretical Study Regulations,” and “Political Theory Teaching Regulations for the Institutes,” have been revised to reflect the new guidance.

As part of the campaign, *Liberation Army Daily* ran a seven-part series of commentaries on the “core values of contemporary revolutionary servicemen.”²⁶ The articles reiterated many of the major themes of Hu’s speech. They described the complex environment in which the campaign became necessary:

The current era is an epoch of great social revolution, the collision of concepts and cultural interactions. People’s ideological concepts, morality and values are increasingly diversified. Some western countries have accelerated their strategies of westernizing and splitting China. All kinds of hostile forces have accelerated their ideological infiltrations and sabotage against China. There are no closed-door military camps in an opened-up world. All kinds of ideological schools will inevitably exert their influence on the ideological concepts and pursuit of values of officers and soldiers. Only when our military, as an armed group that carries out special political tasks, upholds these core values—not only reflecting the essence of our military but also meeting the spirit of the times—and fully acts as the dominant force and guide, will our military ensure the creation of the mainstream spirit, despite the diversification of values and effectively defend against erosion of all kinds of corrupt ideologies and cultures.²⁷

The “core values” outlined by the campaign are meant to counter these negative phenomena, since they “centrally answer fundamental questions—such as whose command we should obey, for whom we serve the military and for whom we fight—not only reflecting the excellent traditions of our military but also adding new connotations of the times to these conditions.”²⁸ Despite the tumultuous changes occurring among the population, the overriding goal of the values campaign is to facilitate continued Party dominance of the army: “[Only then] will our military ensure that officers and soldiers are politically firm and ideologically and morally pure; and will there be a guarantee that our military is always the people’s army under the party’s absolute leadership.”²⁹ The

commentary closes by identifying a continuous historical thread of PLA values from its founding to the present day, linking together “the famous Jinggangshan spirit, the Long March spirit, the Yan’an spirit, the Lei Feng spirit, the flood-combat spirit and the earthquake disaster relief spirit.”³⁰

On 1 February 2009 the military media publicized an extraordinarily transparent “inner-party democratic life session” attended by members of the Central Military Commission.³¹ According to published reports, the members of the CMC had “heart-to-heart talks, laying their hearts bare to one another . . . conducting criticism and self-criticism.” Party-military relations, discussed in the context of the “core values” campaign, was the central theme of the coverage, as it quoted members calling “for “strengthened ideological and political work among all armed forces to keep the country’s military building in a proper political direction in accordance with the new conditions.”³² The CMC engaged in self-criticism of their own failings and extended criticism of the rank and file, insisting that “despite the achievements that the forces had made . . . slack management continued to different extents in some ranks.”

Party-Military Implications of the PLA “Core Values” Campaign

The intensity, duration, and depth of the “core values” campaign raise many questions, especially “why now?” and “to what end?” The text of the campaign materials suggests a few conclusions. First, the “core values” campaign is clearly the military sub-set of the larger Hu Jintao–inspired campaign to build a “harmonious society” with a “harmonious culture.” In that respect, the “core values” campaign reflects the Party leadership’s concern that the military, which recruits its members from Chinese society at large, must also therefore be dealing with issues resulting from the same social, political, and economic dislocations and transitions as the rest of China. Second, the “core values” campaign creates a rich normative narrative about the special values of military organizations (honor, duty, etc.) and the traditional Confucian values of China, but ultimately the campaign is instrumental, focused intensely on continued Party dominance of the PLA. While highlighting inspirational stories about the PLA’s historical contributions to China and the more recent heroism of the Wenchuan earthquake, it is likely not an accident that the values campaign coincides with efforts to clean up “serious problems” of “embezzlement, bribery, dereliction, violation of rights and breaches of duties” in the ranks through issuance of a new regulation entitled “Opinions for Further Strengthening the Work for Preventing the Crime of Abuse of Position in the Military Under the New Situation.”³³ These new regulations replace rules with the same title issued only in 2006, strongly suggesting that the previous efforts had failed in the face of continuing and likely evolving violations. Third, and perhaps most important, the “core values” campaign is personally associated with Hu Jintao, and the relevant campaign materials are always clear to highlight the need to make sure that “officers and soldiers are ideologically, politically and behaviorally very much in line with the Party Central Committee, and that they strictly follow orders from the Party Central Committee, the Central Military Commission *and Chairman Hu*” [emphasis added].³⁴ It is therefore reasonable to expect that this campaign will continue throughout the remainder of the 17th

Congress period, and its curtailment will be yet another signal of the passing of the baton to the next generation of civilian leaders of the military system.

Notes

¹ “Communiqué of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, Adopted on 11 October 2006,” Xinhua, 11 October 2006.

² Staff commentator, “Shaping Soul, Persisting in Guiding Position of Marxism—Second Commentary on Comprehensively and Accurately Understanding Socialist Core Values System,” *Renmin ribao*, 22 December 2006, p. 1.

³ “Communiqué of the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th CPC Central Committee, Adopted on 11 October 2006,” Xinhua, 11 October 2006.

⁴ Staff commentator, “Persist in Correct Orientation of Harmonious Cultural Building—First Commentary on Comprehensively and Accurately Understanding Socialist Core Values System,” *Renmin ribao*, 20 December 2006, p. 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For a full Party ideological analysis of the connection between traditional Chinese values and the “socialist core values system,” see Zhang Youyi and Wang Jie, “Traditional Chinese Culture and the Socialist Core Values System,” *Zhongguo dangzheng ganbu luntan*, 6 May 2007, pp. 39–41.

⁸ Staff commentator, “Persist in Correct Orientation of Harmonious Cultural Building—First Commentary on Comprehensively and Accurately Understanding Socialist Core Values System,” *Renmin ribao*, 20 December 2006, p. 1.

⁹ Ministry of Education’s Research Center for Deng Xiaoping Theory and the Important Thinking of the ‘Three Represents,’ “The Great Earthquake Relief Spirit Demonstrates the Vigor of the Socialist Core Values System,” *Qiushi*, 1 October 2008, No. 19.

¹⁰ Staff commentator, “Shaping Soul, Persisting in Guiding Position of Marxism—Second Commentary on Comprehensively and Accurately Understanding Socialist Core Values System,” *Renmin ribao*, 22 December 2006, p. 1.

¹¹ Staff commentator, “Grasping Essence, Promoting National Spirit, Spirit of Times—Fourth Commentary on Comprehensively, Accurately Understanding Socialist Core Values System,” *Renmin ribao*, 24 December 2006, p. 1.

¹² Wang Jianwei and Wen Zhongmin, “The Spiritual Pillar for the Whole Nation’s Unity and Progress—On the Building of the Core Values System of Socialism,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 7 December 2006, p. 6.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Yang Chunchang, deputy director of Army Building Research Department at PLA Academy of Military Sciences; Yan Xiaofeng, deputy director of Marxist Research Institute of National Defense University; Zhang Mingcang, research fellow at Research Institute of Political Work in Military under PLA Academy of Military Science; Professor Gu Zhiming, PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics; Dai Weimin, president of Shanghai branch of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics; and Gong Fangbin, deputy director of Research Institute of Political Work in Military under the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, on their experiences in studying Decision adopted at Sixth Plenum of 16th CPC Central Committee, “Build Socialist Core Value System,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 9 November 2006, p. 6.

¹⁶ Major General Shou Xiaosong, “Views on the Innovative Development of the Party’s National Security Strategic Theory,” *Zhongguo junshi kexue*, 20 August 2007, pp. 43–54.

¹⁷ Wang Jianmin and Zhang Haiyang, “Converting High Political Conscientious Into Ability, Quality To Combat in Brave, Skilled Manner,” *Qiushi*, 1 August 2007, No.15.

¹⁸ Staff Commentator, “The Charisma of Lei Feng Spirit Will Live Forever,” *Jiefangjun bao*, 5 March 2008, p. 5.

¹⁹ Xu Zhuangzhi and Cao Ruilin, “(Military Affairs) Hu Jintao Calls for Vigorously Cultivating the Core Values of ‘Being Loyal to the Party, Deeply Cherishing the People, Serving the Country, Showing

Devotion to Missions, and Upholding Honor' for Contemporary Revolutionary Soldiers," Xinhua, 30 December 2008.

²⁰ Zhang Mimi, Gong Linmeng, Huang Ming, Li Xuanliang, Li Yun, Zhu Hongliang, Wang Yushan, and Huang Shubo, "[Military] Chinese Soldiers in 2008," Xinhua, 31 December 2008. The others are "Military Operations Other Than War," "Spacewalk," "New Outline," "Building the Army by Opening the Door to the Outside World," "Drafting Highly Educated Youths Into the Army," "Military Hotlines," "Japanese Ship Visits China," "Sino-Indian Joint Antiterrorism Training," and "Escort by Warships."

²¹ "Comprehensively Improve Our Army's Ability to Carry Out Its Historic Mission in the New Century and the New Phase," *Jiefangjun bao*, 1 January 2009, p. 2.

²² "(Military Affairs) General Political Department Issues Circular Urging the Whole Army and Armed Police Units To Extensively Launch Educational Activities With the Theme of Cultivating the Core Values for Revolutionary Soldiers of the Contemporary Era," Xinhua, 5 January 2009; and "General Political Department Issues 'Opinions' Requiring Units of Entire Military and People's Armed Police To Widely Launch Themed Education Activities—Putting Great Efforts into Educating on Core Values of Modern Revolutionary Soldiers," *Jiefangjun bao*, 6 January 2009, p. 1.

²³ "(Military Affairs) General Political Department Issues Circular Urging the Whole Army and Armed Police Units To Extensively Launch Educational Activities With the Theme of Cultivating the Core Values for Revolutionary Soldiers of the Contemporary Era," Xinhua, 5 January 2009.

²⁴ "The General Political Department Issues a Circular Urging All PLA and Armed Police Force Units To Carry Out and Follow Through on Chairman Hu's Important Instruction and Vigorously Cultivate the Core Value Concept of Revolutionary Military Personnel of Our Time," Xinhua, 11 January 2009.

²⁵ "Servicemen Urged To Study Hu's Instruction on Value," Xinhua, 11 January 2009.

²⁶ Staff commentator, "Important Basic Project of Ideological and Political Building—First Commentary on Vigorously Fostering Military Core Values of Contemporary Revolutionary Servicemen," *Jiefangjun bao*, 4 January 2009.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Li Xuanliang, "The CMC Recently Holds a Special Democratic Life Session in Connection With Activities for Studying and Practicing the Scientific Development Concept. Hu Jintao Presides Over and Addresses the Meeting. Guo Boxiong, Xu Caihou, Liang Guanglie, Chen Bingde, Li Jinai, Liao Xilong, Chang Wanquan, Jing Zhiyuan, Wu Shengli, and Xu Qiliang Attend the Meeting," Xinhua, 1 February 2009.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Four General Departments Promulgate 'Opinions' on Strengthening Work of Preventing Crime of Abuse of Positions in Military in New Situation," *Jiefangjun bao*, 24 February 2009, p. 1; Staff commentator, "Another Measure Focuses on Institutional Building," *Jiefangjun bao*, 24 February 2009, p. 1.

³⁴ Staff commentator, "Being Loyal to Party—Second Commentary on Fostering Core Values of Contemporary Revolutionary Servicemen," *Jiefangjun bao*, 6 January 2009, p. 1.