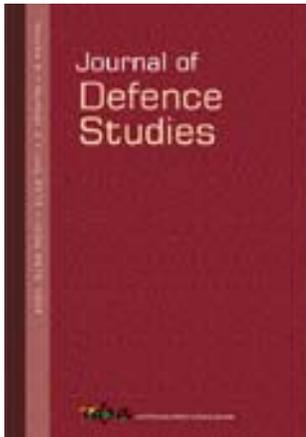


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The Military Media and its Relevance for China

*Gunjan Singh**

The role of the media in China has been one where it is expected to be the 'mouthpiece' of the party. Media outlets have been used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as propaganda wings and are expected to inform the people about the CCP's policies and actions. In addition, the introduction of the Internet has transformed the media landscape. There has been a steady increase in the number of Internet users and blogs in China. In 2011, the number of Internet users was around 513 million.¹ Broadly, the Chinese media can be divided into three categories: the party media, the military media, and the business media. This commentary attempts to analyse the role of the military media in China.

The party media is the one which is controlled by CCP and is used by the leadership to put forward its agenda and propaganda. The military media is controlled by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and is used to propagate its perspectives on issues and various national and international developments. The business media or the commercial media covers the news and events which the Chinese people are interested in, like business opportunities, fashion and other day-to-day developments. It is the commercial media in alliance with the Internet and communication networks that has been pushing the boundaries of 'what can be reported'. A few examples of these are the explosion of Internet traffic and blogging incidents like the Zhejiang railway accident, Chongqing 'Nail House'² incident, among others. Before that, however, a broad overview of the

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Chinese media will help in locating the military media and provide a perspective about it.

The general characteristic of the media in China is that it is regarded as the 'mouthpiece' of the Party and the Government. The media is primarily used for the purpose of helping the party with its 'propaganda' in general, and being a medium by which its policies and announcements are extended to the people. However, after the reforms and opening up of the Chinese economy there has been shift in the general situation of the media. More and more media houses have developed as the economy grew. Another important factor has been the withdrawal of government subsidies, and the media houses have to now depend on advertisement revenues in order to sustain themselves. However, the military media is one sector where the Government has still continued with the subsidies and maintains a very strong control.

CHANGES IN THE CHINESE PARTY AND MILITARY MEDIA

After a decade of economic reforms and opening of the Chinese economy, media organizations underwent a major transformation. This was primarily because the Chinese Government withdrew their subsidies in the 1990s and the media outlets had to earn money in order to survive. This was also the phase in which the CCP allowed advertisements and these became the primary source of earning for the media, both print as well as electronic. While some of the Government papers were shielded, this led to a boom in commercial media in China. There is no fully private media in China as the private ownership share cannot exceed 49 per cent.³

A similar approach was undertaken with respect to the military media. Though these organs were allowed to use advertisements, the subsidies continued. This was also the case with major Party papers, which were expected to toe the Party line in a role similar to the military media. Overall, the above description makes it evident that the role of media in an authoritarian system is quite different from the one in democratic societies. In the latter, the media is perceived to be the watchdog of the society and does not follow the dictates of the government or the state.

Most PLA publications provide a 'milder' description of, and approach to, the military modernization which the Chinese Army is currently undertaking. Even though these publications try to underplay developments, they serve as an important platform for gaining authentic information for both domestic as well international audiences. A study of the military media gives us an idea about the changing dynamics between

the Party and the PLA. In a country like China, where genuine information is tough to sift from the huge amount of propaganda undertaken by the Government, the information and announcements that these publications carry are regarded as formal pronouncements by the Government, and also help one understand the line of policy. According to McGregor: ‘In order to avoid any public exposure of differences between the party and the PLA, the Central Propaganda Department works towards keeping “distinctive military voices out of public debates.” It is accepted fact that the military is expected to not have an opinion.’⁴

THE MILITARY MEDIA IN CHINA

Some of the important publications of the PLA are *People’s Liberation Daily*, *Liberation Army Daily*, and *China Defense News*. It is said of the PLA Daily that ‘this daily newspaper is an authoritative media of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) to release military news and comprehensive military-related information. It is the official newspaper of the Central Military Commission.’⁵

According to Tai Ming Cheung: ‘Despite its lack of autonomy and monitoring responsibilities, the military media apparatus in China occupies a strategic position within the People’s Liberation Army... hierarchy apparatus. First, it offers a window into the military activities and, secondly [*sic*] it is an important link in the communication line between the CCP and the PLA.’⁶ Another important aspect is that the military media reports directly to the PLA General Political Department.⁷ It has also been seen that the people who hold important positions in the military media are later promoted to tactical positions in the PLA.⁸

Cheung further discusses the role which the military media plays in China today. According to him, the military media has some important functions, including⁹:

- showing the PLA as the defender of the country’s national security and territorial integrity;
- instilling a strong sense of nationalism and patriotism in the masses;
- showing complete loyalty of the PLA towards the CCP leadership;
- aiding communities during national disasters;
- highlighting the technological achievements of the PLA;
- showing the PLA as a peaceful force and not a threat to the region;
- and

- highlighting the commitment of the PLA towards the economic development of China.

However, according to John Lee, ‘because of the high level of secrecy prevalent within the PLA, there was an increase in the threat perception and the general notion is that the PLA created the [*sic*] China’s Ministry of National Defense Information Office (MNDIO) in 2008 in order to counter this negative image.’¹⁰ In the words of Matthew Boswell, ‘the development of a spokesperson and press office for the PLA appears to reflect a realization by the Chinese defense establishment that in today’s highly mediated environment, conspicuous silence on matters of public interest is no longer a viable public relations strategy.’¹¹ This highlights an attempt by the military media towards engaging the domestic and international media.

A broad-based analysis of the military media and the party media in China highlights the dichotomy in the Chinese media system. The recent election of Ma Ying-jeou, as the Taiwanese President, had two very different headlines. The military media stated: ‘Ma Ying-jeou’s Re-election Eases Tensions between China and US.’¹² On the other hand the *People’s Daily* stated: ‘Ma’s Re-election Opens New Chances for Peaceful Cross-Strait Relations.’¹³

The Chinese military media has also been underplaying the relevance and importance of the Chinese aircraft carrier. It is also evident that the military media generally adopts a more hardline approach when it comes to issues related to the United States, Taiwan and Asia Pacific. This clearly underscores the fact that the military media in China is the more hawkish section of the Chinese media.

On the announcement of India planning to increase troops along the border, the *PLA Daily* reported: ‘India’s decision to boost its military capabilities near the border with China was a political move aimed at “containing” China’s rise.’¹⁴ Generally, the party media attempts to undertake a more balanced approach to issues of foreign policy and diplomacy. This is also due to the fact that the military media has to push the national security and threat agenda in order to gain more funds for modernization.

This dichotomy between the media (military and party) shows the difference in the agendas of the CCP and the PLA. There is also a need to study the publications of both in order to understand the existing dynamics of Chinese politics. Though the PLA has a very strong voice in

foreign policy and strategy making in China, there are events where the party and the military media toe different lines.

Though not totally opposite, there are differences that exist. For a clear understanding of Chinese politics and the dynamics between the CCP and the PLA, a study of the respective publications will be very helpful.

NOTES

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6. Cheung, Tai Ming, 'Engineering Human Souls: The Development of Chinese Military Journalism and the Emerging Defense Media Market', in Susan L. Shirk (ed.), *Changing Media, Changing China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 130.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 131. It has been noted by Tai Ming that General Sun Zhongtong who was a deputy director of the General Political Department (GPD) took over as a Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman and Member of the Politburo. Other examples are General Chi Haotian, who was the Defence Minister and Vice Chairman of CMC, and Xu Caihou. For details see *Hong Kong Wen Hui Daily*, FBIS, 25 June 2011, quoted in 'Engineering Human Souls: The Development of Chinese Military Journalism and the Emerging Defense Media', in Susan L. Shirk (ed.), *Changing Media, Changing China*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
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