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## Transparency and the PLA – Some Observations

*Martin Andrew*

### Significance

The late Robert Bathurst noted that ‘the dilemma of an analyst in any culture is that he or she cannot reliably see beyond his or her own cultural walls’. One’s own culture defines what is real and what is not.<sup>1</sup> Western governments and defence commentators insist that China is not transparent – that it is hiding its intentions and military capabilities. This is exasperating the Chinese government as the opposite is true. China regularly discusses its intentions and issues and equipment purchases through defence journals and the *People’s Liberation Army Daily*.

### What we need to know: main findings

The Chinese government makes far more extensive use of Chinese language media than English language media to reveal its intentions and to discuss foreign policy. This is because it can more comfortably draw on the Chinese language to convey its intentions both domestically and to overseas Chinese (i.e. Sinophone) audiences. Many Chinese characters (*Hanzi*) have a particular cultural context. In addition, the Chinese government believes that the grandchildren of Chinese nationals are still citizens of China (*Huaqiao*) and is reaching out to them both as a target audience and as intermediary to the Western world. In Singapore the Chinese language *Ming Pao* newspaper gives more in-depth coverage of events than does the English language *Straits Times*. Even an English subtitle of a Chinese language article can miss out on the subtleties of the characters.

Apart from broadsheets like the *People’s Daily* (*Renmin Ribao*) or *People’s Liberation Army Daily* (*Jiefangjun Bao*), the Chinese government often uses defence journals to convey its message to a specialist audience and to discuss the matter with informed readers. It also gives overseas readers a better understanding of the issues. Journals such as *Bingqi Zhishi* (Ordnance Knowledge) has been published since 1982 with *Tanke Zhuangjia Cheliang* (Tank and Armoured Vehicle) *Qing Bingqi* (Light Weapons) and *Jianzai Wuqi* (Naval Weapons) having been around for two decades. All have provided insights into Chinese weapons systems, tactics, strategy, and, importantly, what China’s defence planners are interested in. The main issue is therefore not lack of transparency on the part of the PRC’s defence establishment, but the lack of reliable translation to Western decision makers and academics in the field of security studies alike.

The United States intelligence community and decision makers relied on the CIA’s Foreign Broadcasting Information Service (FBIS) from 1941 until 2005 when it was subsumed by the Open Source Center. It was noted before a Senate committee in 2001 that the FBIS only “translated books on special request...and translates approximately one per cent of the open source Chinese military newspapers and very few magazines.”<sup>2</sup> Other government departments employ translators on a needs basis as the United States government and intelligence community requires. These open source translations are not readily available to academics.

Universities and think-tanks, other than RAND and the Centre for Naval Analyses are increasingly relying on secondary open sources such as the Jamestown Foundation’s *China Brief*; Jane’s Information Group material such as *Jane’s Defence Weekly*; or from U.S. Military journals like the *Military Review*, and the Strategic Studies Institute’s books and papers. The exception to this

appears to be the China analysts at the United States' Navy War College (especially the work of Andrew Erickson), who translate Chinese material for their open source work. In the majority of cases, even inside the United States Department of Defense, such open source reports are written by people with little if any Chinese written language skills. These individuals often quote each other's work in a circularly-reinforcing manner or as Ralph Peter's wrote, '...we have intellectual plagiarists who recycle each other's reports'.<sup>3</sup>

Software has made it easier for the quick reading of online literature like the Chinese language *People's Liberation Army Daily* newspaper. Moreover, software providing real-time translation of foreign languages into English is now available. Skimming a newspaper for sound bites may be sufficient as a means of entertaining professionals at security debate fora. However, languages have cultural nuances which online translators cannot always discern, and to be useful in a specialist field, the individual translating requires knowledge of the technical terms in their target language; a specialist on armour would have difficulty translating a medical article.

### **What does this mean?**

It means that, despite China quite readily releasing information and despite more platforms allowing defence analysts to read the information online, many politicians and decision makers are reading poor translations and analysis in the mass media – long before professional military linguists can place them in the right context.

*Bingqi Zhishi* and *Jianzai Wuqi*, regularly discuss regional flashpoints like: the North Korean nuclear standoff, the South and East China Seas, the First and Second Island Chains, China's naval ambitions and capability and regional responses. They do not shy away from controversy or from showing the reasons behind China's naval build up and providing information on future acquisitions. Two recent articles on the "Type 055" Destroyer show this. The first showed various Western commentaries on the ship, bemoaning the cultural bias and inaccuracies, whilst the second article shows the current direction the People's Liberation Army Navy is currently heading.<sup>4</sup>

For universities, the lack of freely available government translations has meant translations of work on the PLA into English that are available to the faculties and scholars have had to come from private translation services (often with little understanding of the material being translated) or by individuals themselves.

Let us start with a few underlying truths. Threats are basically prioritised into possible and probable. Is it possible China could launch a missile strike at Japan? Given the right scenario, yes it is. Currently, the probability is regarded as very low. The United States military and CIA are not everywhere as they are task directed. Of course that does not preclude having a few people stationed as defence attaches, or liaison officers at embassies all around the world but is a nevertheless a statement of limitation. Some countries have areas of prime strategic interest and the United States might supplement its intelligence wherewithal by garnering their advice and often also following it. An example is New Zealand whose area of primary strategic interest is the island nations of the South West Pacific.

When it comes to Sino-American ties, American intelligence operatives are generally viewed as being either on the 'Red Team' also known as 'Panda Huggers' or are part of the 'Blue Team'. The 'Red Team' sees China as an expanding power that can be accommodated and that its military is no threat to United States' interests in the region; whereas the Blue Team claims that China is actively and aggressively rearming and is spying on and stealing the United States' military and technological secrets.

A quick word here in support of translators generally. Frankly there is little money for the effort required and one gets abused, often quite angrily, when one's translation does not fit with someone else's view higher up in the chain. This is akin to the 'My mind is made up! (So) Don't confuse me with the facts!' attitude, which is quite prevalent in all organisations.

So where does the US administration get its views on China, other than from its own employees?

There are, of course, groups like the Falun Gong who provide translated material slanted towards their view, as do Christian groups reporting on persecution inside China. Media organisations are, of course, at the mercy of Chinese censors, police and immigration officials to name just a few constraints. These limitations do not prevent journalists like Bill Gertz writing articles and a weekly column on Chinese security issues and their threats to U.S. national security, in the *Washington Times* newspaper -- Bill Gertz being unashamedly and openly part of the 'Blue Team'.

Due to the lack of translated material, individuals translating and writing freelance can disproportionately influence threat perceptions. Many of the best write freelance for the Jamestown Foundation's *China Brief* which has an excellent reputation inside the United States government. I myself translate and analyse Chinese Defence magazines, having been fortunate in acquiring a source of commercially produced Chinese defence magazines, and have been translating these regularly since October 2003.

One issue affecting transparency is the shortage of independent reporting on China's intentions. The People's Liberation Army has an entire department translating foreign journals and newspapers, and some of that material is published in Chinese media and is then mistakenly believed as being of Chinese origin - by both Chinese and Western bloggers, with poor understanding of military issues - and not as an example of the Western media being incorrect. Some people in the "blogosphere" present such articles as 'fact', not providing attribution for others to check. Similarly, in the United States and Western media more broadly a few names keep re-appearing when reporting on military developments in China, backing up each other's statements. The concentration of media ownership in the West has seen more stories shared, with a slant or 'spin', and sloppy referencing. Consequently, Western academia draws on these recycled stories without much independent corroboration.

The *Caucus Forum* is one such newsletter that is prone to circular referencing often quoting *The National Interest* which in turn had quoted from *Jane's* which had relied on unnamed 'Defence Analysts'.<sup>5</sup> Both journals quoting the *Jane's* article put their spin on it to make the reader believe that the Chinese had been concealing their deployment efforts in the South China Sea. In fact, China has never denied doing this as was shown in the *People's Liberation Army Daily* of 12 August 2012 where it gave a very comprehensive history of the effort required to create a habitable island out of a coral reef.<sup>6</sup> This single case of the reporting of the building of islands is an example of the Chinese government being transparent on the issue, and yet vested interests put a spin on it to suit their political endgame.

When Hillary Clinton, said, "we need to learn to empathize with our opponents", she was howled down yet that is what exactly the United States military did during the Cold War. The U.S. Army's Soviet Military Academy was created to train specialists on the Soviet military who were groomed inside the intelligence services to become as Soviet-psyched as the Soviets themselves. With the end of the Cold War, the ability to train generations of personnel intimate with a threat - and thus able to understand the nuances in language and technology - no longer exists.

## Will anything be good enough?

The Chinese have a right to secure their national security material yet there is a belief that regardless of what they do, it can never be enough to please the United States government. The one area the PLA has not been transparent in is the number of intermediate and intercontinental ballistic and cruise missiles along with the number of nuclear warheads held. Other than those, the PLA has been quite open about its equipment and structure. The Chinese government has released a myriad of details about its strategy, tactics and equipment in magazines yet are often ignored because they are written in Chinese rather than English, and deliberately overlooked even when skilled translators are available.

The most obvious example of this was the 2010 publication, *Assessing Chinese Military Transparency* by Michael Kiselycznyk and Phillip C. Saunders, by the National Defense University.<sup>7</sup> The authors wrote in the summary that they were only concentrating on Chinese White Papers, noting that: "Despite some limitations in the methodology (most notably omitting information published in other government documents when assessing transparency), we believe that it provides a reasonably objective and comparable way to evaluate relative military transparency".<sup>8</sup>

So by exclusively looking at White Papers - which, being policy documents, rarely look at equipment or divisional structures - the terms of reference ensured that the Chinese government would be accused of a lack of transparency.

Yet this argument was easily refuted by the September 2009 publication of the second edition of *How the PLA Fights: Weapons and Tactics of the People's Liberation Army*, by the US Army's TRADOC Intelligence Support Activity for Threats.<sup>9</sup> It includes 417 endnotes, well over 95 percent being from Chinese language sources, and includes extensive equipment profiles and the structure and organisation of units from squad to division

Other than its nuclear forces, the military in China is as transparent as any regional military, perhaps even more so.

**Martin Andrew** (PhD, Bond) is a defense policy expert pursuing an academic life after 28 years in the Australian military. Trained as a Sinologist, his research has also embraced the forces policing Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s. His more recent projects include counterinsurgency, wound ballistics and international law, close-quarter combat and pre-Second World War Blues music.

*Views and assessments articulated in the CPI Policy Papers are that of the author/s. They do not necessarily represent the views of the CPI at the University of Nottingham.*

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> 'Timothy Thomas in reply to a question', *Security Issues: Strategic Perceptions*, August 3 2001, *US-China Security Review Commission*, US Senate, Washington DC, p. 395.

<sup>2</sup> 'Michael Pilsbury in reply to a question', *Security Issues: Strategic Perceptions* August 3 2001, *US-China Security Review Commission*, US Senate, Washington DC, pp.401 & 402.

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<sup>3</sup> Peters, R, 'The case for human intelligence', *Armed Forces Journal International*, Volume 142, Number 12, July 2005, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> 'Shi xuixi sou 052D "Qian jia fu" Liangxiang de neice', *Jianzai Wuqi*, 2014 Niandi, 10 Qi, Zhongdi 203, pp. 10 – 17; 'Daxing shuimian zhantou jianting', *Bingqi Zhishi*, 2015 Niandi, 2 Qi, Zhongdi 370, pp. 23 & 24.

<sup>5</sup> 'China's Grand Strategy Challenge: Creating Its Own Islands in the South China Sea', *Caucus Forum*, Washington DC, 9 December 2014; Vuving, A. 'China's Grand Strategy Challenge: Creating Its Own Islands in the South China Sea', *The National Interest*, 8 December 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Zhong Jijun Li Tang. 'Tian yashao bingchizi qing — Ji haijun xin shashang shuiqu jiandao shoubadui', *Jiefangjun bao*, 10 August 2012, [http://chn.chinamil.com.cn/jwjj/2012-08/10/content\\_4988001\\_2.htm](http://chn.chinamil.com.cn/jwjj/2012-08/10/content_4988001_2.htm) accessed 10 August 2012

<sup>7</sup> Kiselycznyk, M. & Saunders, P.C. *Assessing Chinese Military Transparency*, Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives, No. 1, national defense University, Washington D.C, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew, M. *How the PLA Fights: Weapons and Tactics of the People's Liberation Army*, US Army's TRADOC Intelligence Support Activity for Threats, Leavenworth, 2009.