Analysing Chinese Civil–Military Relations: A Bottom-Up Approach

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Abstract

This article examines Chinese civil–military relations using a bottom-up analytical approach and hitherto untapped sources, including interviews with military personnel in active service. It argues that traditional approaches to political control, which generally interpret the changing political–military relationship through military professionalism and institutional autonomy, miss out on important aspects and may generate erroneous conclusions. Here, focus is instead on the professional autonomy of the Chinese officer corps. Through an empirical study of the organization of military work at two of China's top military education institutes, the article illustrates how professional autonomy and direct political control vary, both between hierarchical levels and issue areas. This highlights the multidimensionality of both control and professional manoeuvrability and underlines the fruitfulness of including an intra-organizational perspective in order to reach better informed conclusions about political control and civil–military relations in today's China.

Keywords: People's Liberation Army; political control; professional autonomy; cadre administration; Chinese military education

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The People's Liberation Army's (PLA) close links to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its central position within the politicized bureaucracy mean that it is intrinsically tied to the overall political stability of the Chinese party-state. Thus, it is important for the political leadership to control and govern this powerful institution. The Chinese reform process, initiated in the late 1970s, has given rise to an intriguing transition in the political sphere which has affected the relationship between the Party, the state and the military, the three actors within the so-called "iron triangle" of communist politics.[1] Research has shed light on the far-reaching marketization and privatization of the Chinese state's civilian institutions, as well as on the growing autonomy of public service administrators and lower administrative levels.[2] Without passing

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1 Perlmutter and LeoGrande 1982, 778.

2 See, e.g., Mok 2005; Chung 2001, 53.

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judgement on how the quality, or effectiveness, of political governance and control has been impacted, it is clear that the *way* in which they are exercised has been altered.

The reform process has also targeted the PLA and thus has affected the CCP–PLA relationship, too. As prescribed by Marxist-Leninist ideology, there is an overlap in the functions of the party and the army in socialist systems worldwide, which consequently gives the military in these states an important political role.[3] In China, the overlapping responsibilities of political and military leaders were prominent during the early decades of the PRC, when the military's participation in the civil administration was considerable, with officers and soldiers serving as Party branch secretaries and government officials.[4] After decades of modernization, the PLA today resembles the standing armed forces found in non-communist states in several ways: it applies a system of ranks and grades; has mainly an international, as opposed to domestic, mission; regards military expertise as a precondition for promotion; and does not take an active participatory role in regional or local politics.[5] The reforms have also resulted in a de-revolutionized military doctrine, fewer but better trained troops, the modernization of military equipment, and more regularized staff policies.[6] At the same time, the overt, institutional structures for political control, as manifest through the systems of political commissars, political departments and Party committees, have remained intact.

Since control over a politicized administration rests on explicit ideology, an operational logic based on substantive as opposed to formal rationality, and recruitment and promotion criteria tied to ideological commitment rather than expertise, the changes described above naturally prompt the question, how does civilian (Party) control over the PLA play out in this modernizing and "de-ideologizing" setting?[7] This question forms the central focus of this study. Although there are several accounts of China's military modernization,[8] systematic studies that concentrate primarily on the political control of the PLA in the post-reform era are few.[9] The comparatively meagre output may be explained by the problems with access and the fact that Chinese scholars within China do not publish on the PLA. Also, despite a greater overall flow of military information, the quality of such data often leaves much to be desired. While these obstacles remain, it is important to find alternative methods of analysing the accessible data. This study attempts to address this challenge by widening the theoretical starting points and using a bottom-up approach.

3 Balla 1972, 176.
4 Li, Xiaobing 2007, Ch. 6.
5 Crane et al. 2005; Dreyer 1988; Gunness and Vellucci 2008.
6 Gunness and Vellucci 2008; Shambaugh 1999.
7 For defining characteristics of the cadre administration, see Balla 1972; Glaessner 1977, 69; Therborn 1978.
8 See Shambaugh 2002; 1999; Crane et al. 2005; Shambaugh and Yang 1997; Dreyer 1988.
9 For an overview, see Bickford 2001. For shorter accounts, see You and Alderman 2010; Li, Nan 2010; 2006; Finkelstein and Gunness 2006. See also Ledberg 2014. Earlier works include Jencks 1982; Joffe 1967.

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Political Control in Chinese Civil–Military Relations

As with studies on communist civil–military relations in general, the literature on the political control of the Chinese military is dominated by the theoretical premises in Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*.[10] Huntington's legacy means that the dominant research paradigm, both before and after China's reform era, rests on military professionalism. This is seen as an important – perhaps even the most important – parameter in determining the relationship between the CCP and the PLA. Huntington's thesis is that a professional military, defined through expertise, responsibility and corporateness, does not get involved in politics, which implies causality between professionalism and (objective) civilian control.[11] Professionalization, according to Huntington, further requires that the officer corps enjoys autonomy within its professional spheres.[12]

In line with Huntington's understanding of professionalism and objective control, and against the background of PLA's history of political participation, studies on Chinese civil–military relations often approach the issue of control via investigations of military infringement on civilian policymaking.[13] The reduction of military participation in politics, in combination with military modernization, is generally interpreted as evidence of growing professionalism. Indeed, the scholarly literature on the PLA frequently assumes that there is an "automatic correlation between military modernization and professionalization."[14] Since professionalism, according to Huntington, requires autonomous military professionalism and an independent military sphere, some studies argue that the autonomy of the PLA vis-à-vis the political leadership has indeed increased.[15] Yet these studies do not study autonomy so much as make assumptions as to its existence on the basis of fragmented organizational data on the division of labour between civilian and military state institutions, or between high-ranking civilian and military officers. These observations are then used to reach conclusions about political control based, at least partly, on a negation of Huntington's theoretical assumptions, i.e. that increasing professionalism in the PLA affects the CCP's ability to control the military, since professionalism entails more autonomy for the military. This then creates a rift in their shared interests and undermines the Party–army symbiosis (subjective control) of the Marxist-Leninist state.[16]

Professionalism is a rather unrefined analytical tool and is hard to measure. It is also problematic to argue convincingly for a causal link between professionalism and state/Party control without properly analysing military autonomy. The

10 See Herspring 1999.
11 Huntington 1957, 8–10, 83.
12 Ibid.
13 See, e.g., Joffe 1999; Mulvenon 2001; Kiselycznyk and Saunders 2010; Swaine 1992.
14 Bickford 2001, 17.
15 Shambaugh 2002, 17–19, 31, 54; Li, Nan 2010, 22, 41; Scobell 2005, 236–37.
16 See, e.g., Joffe 1996, 300.

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suggestion here, therefore, is to shift the focus to military autonomy, one aspect of professionalism that makes political control visible.

Military autonomy in the study of communist civil–military relations

Theories of civil–military relations in communist systems acknowledge the importance of autonomy for the interpretation of a state's overall political–military relationship.[17] According to Amos Perlmutter and William LeoGrande, "any particular communist system … can be located along a continuum defined by the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the military institution."[18] Communist political–military relations may then be classified as coalitional, symbiotic, or fused.[19] These thoughts have been adopted by PLA scholars such as Ellis Joffe and David Shambaugh, but in their writings, the three characteristics of Party–army relations are identified as symbiosis, control and professionalism.[20] Joffe sees the three characteristics as complementary, rather than distinct phases, whereas Shambaugh envisions a more linear development from symbiosis to control to limited autonomy.[21] Studies on other non-democratic states also commonly assign explanatory value to military autonomy. Military autonomy is often seen as an indicator of military intervention in politics, and generally treated as an independent, *institutional* variable that explains changes in control.[22] Decision-making authority regarding defence budgets, military reforms and doctrine is often the focus of such studies.[23]

A central argument in this article is that military autonomy is an important parameter in regard to political control, yet to focus on the autonomy of the military institution is problematic, especially in China and other states with political and military overlaps. For example, it is unclear whether documented changes in representation in top political and military institutions, or military withdrawal from regional and local politics, should be interpreted as growing military autonomy, defined as institutional decision-making power in military matters, or rather viewed as functional separation. I therefore suggest an intra-institutional focus on the military profession. Instead of examining the degree of legal or financial autonomy that is granted to the military institution, professional autonomy can be determined by investigating the manoeuvrability of the military officers within the organization. This also corresponds to the sociological research tradition on professions and professionalization, on which Huntington draws heavily.[24] Autonomy accordingly refers to discretion originating from professional expertise, which justifies a focus on the conduct of work by the officer corps.

17 Colton 1979; Kolkowitz 1967.
18 Perlmutter and LeoGrande 1982, 782.
19 Ibid.
20 Shambaugh 2002; Joffe 1996.
21 Joffe 1996.
22 For studies on other states, see Alagappa 2001; De S.C. Barros and Coelho 1981; Pion-Berlin 1992.
23 Alagappa 2001; Pion-Berlin 1992; Trinkunas 2001.
24 See Carr-Saunders and Wilson 1933; Lewis and Maude 1952.

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The institutional overlaps and the politicization of the PLA also have implications for a study of *professional* autonomy. For example, top generals, who are members of the CMC, and directors and deputy directors of other central military institutions concurrently hold seats in China's top political institutions.[25] This arguably makes them Party leaders in their own right and thus complicates any analysis of their professional autonomy. This, then, is an argument against conducting a study on professional autonomy that focuses on the highest levels of the military organization, a common approach of previous studies.[26] However, to study professional autonomy at levels below the absolute top also acknowledges the findings of earlier civil–military studies, such as the difference in politicization between higher and lower levels of civil–military decision making and the varying importance of personal ties.[27] It is also logical given suggestions that the CCP and the PLA are interlocked at the top but that "the separation is complete" from the group army level downwards.[28]

Studying professional autonomy in the PLA

Here, professional autonomy is defined as the right of the profession as a collective, and its members as individuals, to exercise professional competence and judgement in the execution of work and in decision-making processes regarding matters of central importance to the profession. This definition draws upon studies on public administration and the sociology of professions. Public administration literature focuses explicitly on autonomy in relations between the state and its agencies and defines autonomy as decision-making power regarding inputs and methods in the production process.[29] It is problematic, as argued above, to focus solely on the institution and on managers, which is common in this literature. Yet, to conceptualize autonomy as discretion regarding *what* the organization uses in its operations, and *how* it uses it, can serve as a starting point for a study on professional autonomy if focus is moved to the profession.

Contrary to mainstream political science research, which generally focuses on structures, sociological studies on the professions acknowledge the importance of actors and their manoeuvrability. To examine how members of a profession can exercise professional competence in the execution of work and in decision-making processes corresponds to what Andrew Abbott defines as acts of professional practice: "claims to classify a problem, to reason about it, and to take action about it."[30] However, whereas autonomy is generally used to define professions within this discipline, it is here treated as an open, empirical question.[31]

25 See, e.g., Mulvenon 2013.
26 See, e.g., Mulvenon 1997; Joffe 1999; Shambaugh 2002, Ch. 2.
27 Swaine 1992, Ch. 1; Joffe 1996.
28 Joffe 1996, 303. See also Bickford 2001, 17.
29 Yesilkagit and Thiel 2008; Verhoest et al. 2010.
30 Abbott 1988, 40.
31 Sarfatti Larson 1990; Sciulli 2010.

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Based on these points of departure, the current study focuses on the role of the profession in deciding *what* it uses when conducting its work, and *how* it conducts it. Since the officer corps functions in a highly hierarchical organization, its professional autonomy may vary internally. To capture the potential stratification within the profession, it is necessary to ask: *who* makes the decisions? These questions – *what*, *how* and *who* – constitute the analytic starting point for this study. Together, they generate an answer as to how the balance between political and professional consideration plays out in the daily business of the Chinese military. This provides a better informed picture of how political control is exercised in a modernizing PLA within the transforming Chinese party-state, and how professionalization may be interpreted in such a context.

Professional Autonomy in the Organization of Military Education

The empirical study of this paper focuses on the professional autonomy of the Chinese military officer corps within military education. The continuous efforts to reform and upgrade the Chinese military have obviously impacted, and continue to impact, the content and organization of military education. Although military developments have followed the political and economic turns of Chinese politics since the founding of the Whampoa Military Academy some 90 years ago, the mid-1980s saw a breakthrough with the establishment of the National Defense University in Beijing and the shift in military strategy announced by Deng Xiaoping.[32] Since then, but especially from the 1990s onwards, professional military education has been regarded as a priority.[33] At the time of this study (2010–13), some 25 years after reforms were first implemented, the number of academies had been reduced; regulations for the standardization of educational programmes had been adopted; graduate programmes had been introduced; new teaching methods were encouraged; admission processes had been improved; and greater cooperation with civilian educational institutions had been sought.[34] Studies of concurrent reforms within the civilian education system point to government ambitions to decentralize education and to delegate autonomy to lower levels, but it is unclear if this applies to the military as well.[35]

The changes to military education are generally seen as part of the development of professional military education (PME) in China,[36] which in turn is regarded as a "major indicator of the degree of military professionalization."[37] Education is indeed central to all professions, and to manage the organization thereof and its content is a precondition for furthering professional expertise. Yet, as mentioned above, the very understanding of professionalism implies

32 Bickford 2008, 32; 2003.
33 Shambaugh 2002, 175; Bickford 2003, 15.
34 Bickford 2001; 2008.
35 Hawkins 2000; Painter and Mok 2008.
36 Bickford 2008; Skypek 2008.
37 Li, Nan 2008, 291.

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that the everyday work of the organization is guided by military expertise, exercised through the military profession, which enjoys professional discretion. Since teaching is the main task of the professionals in this study, evidence of professional autonomy in this area includes, for example, professionals having some influence over planning processes; signs of collegial decision making regarding crucial issues; a degree of flexibility and room for interpretation regarding course content; and some capacity to influence teachers' appointments and pedagogical methods. The analysis below probes how central decisions regarding these matters are implemented. It also takes into account decisions surrounding the selection of teaching materials, what courses are taught, and how they are taught. The study also examines who makes these decisions in order to shed light on potential stratification within the profession.

The study centres on two of China's top three military institutions: the National Defense University (*Guofang daxue* 国防大学, hereafter NDU) in Beijing and the National University of Defense Technology (*Guofang kexue jishu daxue* 国防科学技术大学, hereafter NUDT) in Changsha.[38] The NDU focuses on higher education and training for senior officers and is generally where commanding officers are sent prior to promotion.[39] The majority of the students at the NUDT are cadets or technical officers.[40] The differences between these two institutions also prompt discussion of the organization of military education at different levels, from undergraduate cadets to the most senior generals, and facilitate a comparison of courses with different foci.

A note on the sources

To study professional autonomy using an actor-centred approach requires an understanding of the daily work of the military institutions. In terms of data collection, this necessitates interviewing actors; however, by its very nature, the PLA is closed to outsiders and arranging interviews with active military personnel is a tricky process. Within China, there are restrictions on PLA officers talking to foreigners, and all interviews require official permission, applied for at the Chinese Ministry of National Defense (MND). This is often a time-consuming process hampered by many obstacles, not least because the MND generally requires an upfront list of potential interviewees and their place of work – information which is generally unavailable to outsiders.[41]

After many years of fieldwork, I have reached the conclusion that one can only gain initial access to this system via informal channels; however, once inside, the

38 The NDU and the NUDT are senior-level military institutions ("large units," *da danwei*) and thus are directly subordinate to the CMC. The third institution, the Academy of Military Science (AMS, *Junshi kexueyuan*) in Beijing, is excluded from the analysis owing to its limited educational mission.

39 Shambaugh 2002, 178.

40 Interviewee XIX.

41 David Finkelstein illustrates this problem by stating that "even the telephone directories of the most mundane organizations are usually considered controlled items." Finkelstein 2002, 123.

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system remains extremely formal. As is often reported in China, the key is to be introduced by a high-ranking person who can vouch for you. At both schools, I relied on personal relationships to make the initial point of contact. However, I have found that when interviewing military personnel, as opposed to civilians, the commonly used strategy of respondent-driven sampling, whereby the sample grows through referrals made by the interviewees to other persons in the target group, simply does not work. In my experience, military officers are generally unwilling to provide names or contact details of fellow officers.

The semi-structured interviews for this study were conducted between 2010 and 2013 as part of a larger study which had a total of 19 respondents.[42] Of the seven respondents included here, three were at the time engaged in teaching and planning at the NDU, two were at the NUDT, one was at the Academy of Military Science, and one person was a demobilized officer who had previously taught both at the NDU and the NUDT. Respondents' military ranks ranged between lieutenant and senior colonel, and their military grades ranged between company and division level. Since some of the interviews were conducted with official permission by the Chinese MND, information about the dates and localities could facilitate identification. Respondents are therefore only referenced with a number.

In 2016, the Chinese military started to implement reforms to the command structure and organization of the PLA. Of particular importance to this study is that the four general headquarters directly subordinate to the Central Military Commission (CMC) have been renamed and placed under the direct leadership of the CMC, together with 11 additional departments.[43] It is unclear what consequences this change will have for the central-level planning of teaching described below; however, to date, the internal organization of the two schools in this study does not appear to have been affected.[44]

Central-level planning of teaching

The organization of teaching takes place at several hierarchical levels. The CMC, China's top military organ, has overall responsibility for the planning of military education. Decisions taken by this body may directly effect changes to both curricula and teaching methods.[45] At the time of this study, the general headquarters/departments directly subordinate to the CMC did the practical work of

42 Ledberg 2014.

43 "China's new Central Military Commission organ established," *China Military Online*, 11 January 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/11/content_6852723.htm. Accessed 16 December 2016.

44 See the homepage of the NUDT at http://www.nudt.edu.cn/. Accessed 19 December 2016. These changes will nevertheless impact the work of military schools in other ways, for example regarding recruitment of students. See "PLA restructuring changes focus at military schools," *China Daily*, 28 April 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-04/28/content_7028544.htm. Accessed 16 December 2016.

45 Godwin 2008, 330–31, Li, Nan 2008, 294.

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identifying needs in their area of responsibility. These bodies included the General Staff Department (GSD), the General Political Department (GPD), the General Logistics Department (GLD) and the General Armament Department (GAD). Each department issued an annual plan for general education (*peiyang jihua* 培养计划), which was put together with the help of their subordinate schools.[46] The plans were then forwarded to the GSD, which issued a general outline (*junshi xunlian dagang* 军事训练大纲) for military education and training in the PLA.[47] Today, this is likely the responsibility of the CMC Training and Administration Department (*xunlian guanlibu* 训练管理部), whereas the CMC Political Work Department (*zhengzhi gongzuo bu* 政治工作部, formerly the GPD) is responsible for political education[48] and issues the corresponding guidelines for military political education (*sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu dagang* 思想政治教育大纲).[49]

Although the annual plan formulates course content in rather general terms, the political work department is responsible for issuing the teaching materials for political education courses to all military schools in China. There is virtually no room for any interpretation or flexibility in this matter. The corresponding outline for regular military education is, in all probability, not publicly available. Yet, since it applies to all military institutions in the PLA, it likely only provides the broad foundations for teaching. Thus, the detailed planning of teaching must take place at lower military levels. The CMC also issues a five-year plan for military building (*jundui jianshe* 军队建设), which outlines military training and teaching for the upcoming five years. This plan has no direct impact on teaching but affects it indirectly in that it allocates funds to universities, which places limits on their activities.[50]

The advantage of an analysis of the autonomy of the profession, as compared to institutional autonomy, is clearly illustrated here. Since the general outline, which is a goal-oriented document, leaves the actual content of teaching and research to the schools, the level of autonomy of the schools may be interpreted as being substantial. The question remains, however, whether decision-making power has been transferred out of the civilian or Party arena, or if it has merely been delegated to lower political levels. To answer the question of where decision-making power rests, it is necessary to look at the manoeuvrability of the profession that is staffing the organization.

46 The NDU and NUDT are directly subordinate to the CMC but forwarded suggestions to the GSD nevertheless. Interviewee II; interviewee III.

47 CMC 1990.

48 "MND holds press conference on CMC organ reshuffle," *China Military Online*, 12 January 2016, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/2016-01/12/content_6854444.htm. Accessed 19 December 2016.

49 "Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun sixiang zhengzhi jiaoyu dagang" (General outline for ideological and political education of the Chinese PLA), 2009, http://www.mod.gov.cn/policy/2009-11/19/content_4105221.htm. Accessed 28 October 2015.

50 Interviewee IX.

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School-level planning of teaching

Organizational charts of military education institutions are not publicly available, yet by assembling information from various publications, and given the fact that military units are organized in a similar fashion, a picture of the organizational structure at the institutes can be drawn. At the top level of the school is the office of the commandant and deputy commandant, one commander and one political commissar, in keeping with the logic of dual command. On the next hierarchical level, there are a number of administrative departments. At the NDU, these include the training department (*xunlian bu* 训练部), the political department (*zhengzhi bu* 政治部), the administrative department (*xiaowu bu* 校务部), and the research department (*keyan bu* 科研部).[51] The NUDT has corresponding departments at this organizational level, although the English translation of their names differs.[52] The political department at the NUDT is an interesting exception. On its Chinese webpage, what was previously referred to as the "political department" has now been relabelled the "human resources department" (*renli ziyuan bu* 人力资源部). According to military regulations, a political department should be set up as an administrative entity in every PLA unit at or above the regiment level.[53] However, having a human resource department is more in line with a civilian university, and it is possible that the NUDT's official homepage is used primarily as a public interface tool to communicate with other, non-military, universities.[54]

Of these administrative departments, the training department is responsible for planning and evaluating teaching, and for translating the general guidelines issued by the CMC into tangible teaching plans and curricula.[55] At the NDU, the training department has approximately 15 staff members, who are mainly teachers in the different military systems and experts in design and planning.[56] The training department at the NUDT[57] is presumably larger, given the greater number of students there.[58] It is responsible for drawing up teaching plans and for coordinating the teaching plans of its colleges and departments. It is also charged with the development and supply of textbooks.[59]

51 NDU Briefing, PowerPoint presentation acquired on CDROM from the Foreign Affairs Office of the National Defense University in November 2011.
52 See NUDT English homepage at http://english.nudt.edu.cn/. Accessed 5 February 2016.
53 Information Office of the State Council 2002.
54 Interviewee XIX. Similarly, earlier versions of the Chinese and English homepages of the NUDT presented both the president and political commissar, with their academic and military titles. The political commissar is now completely omitted, as is the military rank of the NUDT president.
55 Interviewee III; "The education department," n.d, http://english.nudt.edu.cn/introduce_eng.asp?classid=31. Accessed 15 October 2015.
56 Interviewee IV; interviewee IX; interviewee III.
57 The NUDT homepage calls it the "education department" in English, but the Chinese name is the same as at the NDU.
58 The NUDT training department has at least three subordinate offices (*chu*) and one subordinate centre (*zhongxin*). Interviewee XIX.
59 Hompepage of the NUDT, "The education department."

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The number of additional organizational levels varies between the two universities. At the NUDT, there are three additional levels below the main administrative departments: colleges (*xueyuan* 学院), departments (*xue xi* 学系), and teaching and research groups (*jiaoyanshi* 教研室), which are staffed by teachers and researchers.[60] At the NDU, there are six academic departments or institutions (*jiaoyan bu* 教研部), in addition to the four top administrative departments.[61] Below these, there are a number of institutes (*yanjiu suo* 研究所), centres (*zhongxin* 中心) and teaching and research groups (*jiaoyanshi* 教研室). At the NDU, these units are staffed by between 5 and 25 people and, as in the case of the research and education departments, all units are headed by directors and deputy directors.[62]

Each academic department at the NDU issues a teaching plan (*jiaoxue jihua* 教学计划) based on the general central outline. The plans include detailed information on the courses, the number of allocated teaching hours, the teachers and faculty members, and the teaching methods.[63] The degree of flexibility given to the teachers generally depends on the character of the course and who the students are, as explained below.

The NDU teaching plans are decided upon by a core group of senior staff members and researchers within each department.[64] The university provides five study tracks: national defence research, basic studies, advanced studies, graduate studies and instructor training.[65] It offers both shorter and longer courses for field officers in advance of promotion. Shorter courses are more flexible and are often modified to fit current demands. The longer courses, described as regular courses, are only changed on an annual or a biannual basis.[66] In regard to the shorter courses, the group in charge formulates the teaching plan according to, for example, current international flashpoints, the background of the incoming students, and research results produced by the department.[67] The rate of new course additions at the NDU is reported to be as high as 60 per cent annually.[68] Teaching plans for "regular" courses are developed by comparing the courses at the NDU with courses at other PLA institutions and foreign military schools. Work at the departmental level was described as a rather democratic process,

60 Interviewee X; NUDT Chinese homepage at http://www.nudt.edu.cn/. Accessed 15 October 2015. At the NDU, these are military officers and hold military rank. At the NUDT, the majority of the faculty members are PLA civilians who are in active service and wear uniform but do not hold military rank. Interviewee XIX. See also Blasko 2006, 63–64.

61 Shambaugh (2002, 178) refers to these six units as second-level teaching divisions. Here, I use the Chinese and English terms that officers have on their business cards and follow information gathered through interviews at these departments. NDU Briefing, CDROM acquired from the Foreign Affairs Office of the National Defense University in 2011.

62 Interviewee IX.

63 Interviewee III; interviewee IX.

64 Interviewee IV.

65 Godwin 2008, 327.

66 Interviewee IX.

67 Interviewee IX.

68 Li, Nan 2008, 298.

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one in which all participants put forward their thoughts. Nevertheless, it was made clear that the general director of the department has the final say.[69]

As mentioned above, academic departments at the NDU have subordinate institutes and centres. These sub-units are also involved in teaching and produce a teaching plan for their specific field. Although teachers are involved, the director of the sub-unit has the final say as to what will be included and then forwarded to the head of the department (general director) at the next level.[70] Once all teaching plans from each unit have been put together, they are forwarded to the NDU training department for approval. Although this process implies a degree of negotiation, it was reported that the teaching plans are generally accepted by the training department.[71] After the various plans are assembled by the training department, they are then forwarded to the head of the school for final authorization.[72]

At the NUDT, the planning process varies across the courses and also between undergraduate and postgraduate studies. In general, the process is similar to the one at the NDU, as described above. However, there are some noteworthy differences with regard to the manoeuvrability of the teachers, as discussed below.

The role of the profession in the organization of teaching

The description above provides the framework for how teaching plans are drawn up at the NDU and the NUDT. So far, I have mainly described how this process plays out at an institutional level. However, a more detailed analysis of the role of the profession is needed to derive conclusions about how much autonomy from political influence the military profession enjoys. A comprehensive answer to this question requires a discussion of the stratification within the profession and the role of professional discretion.

The National Defence University

At the NDU, the apex of the Chinese professional military education (PME) system, the organization and execution of teaching is in some respects decentralized. The training department – the administrative department in charge of teaching plans – delegates decision-making power to lower levels. Greater responsibility is given to the general directors at the top of each teaching and research department, and one respondent stated that the directors "can be very flexible" in their relations with the training department.[73] As mentioned above, the shorter courses of three months or less require flexibility and may be updated throughout the year. The general director of the research and education department concerned

69 Interviewee IX.
70 Interviewee IV.
71 Interviewee III; interviewee IX.
72 Interviewee IV.
73 Interviewee IV.

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can act independently to make amendments to the teaching plan, if deemed necessary.[74] These changes do not need to be approved beforehand, although the training department has the power to veto proposals from departments.[75]

The student population at the NDU comprises master's students, doctoral students and military officials from field units who enrol at the school for highly specialized courses. The military ranks of the students range from captain to full general. Interviews reveal that seniority is key to determining the degree of professional autonomy enjoyed by the faculty. This applies not only to decisions regarding course content and teaching methods but also to the execution of the teaching. The principle that "senior officers teach senior officers" generally applies, which underlines the necessity of discussing the stratification within the profession. This is especially true regarding the regular courses, which are taught by officers above the rank of colonel.[76] In the non-regular courses, on the other hand, junior officers may be called upon to teach within their area of expertise. There is a dividing line regarding responsibility that cuts through the teaching staff at the level of senior colonel. At this level and above, a teaching officer is considered qualified to teach the most senior officers at the NDU. This dividing line between colonel and senior colonel is also significant for job security and retirement benefits.[77]

Generally speaking, an instructor has more room for interpretation when the students are junior officers as opposed to high-ranking military personnel. Flexibility in this context means, for example, freedom to identify course literature and compile literature lists, or, in the words of one interviewee, "If the teaching plan states that I have one hour of lecturing, followed by half an hour of discussion, [but] I feel that this is an important subject for discussion, I could lecture for 10 minutes less and increase the discussion time instead, or the other way around."[78] Even so, after giving this particular example, the respondent reiterated that this was only possible if the students were junior officers. This was further emphasized by a demobilized officer teaching at the NDU: "If the students are all very high-ranking officers, there is no flexibility at all – you had better make sure you follow the instructions exactly! You should see how much time they spend on preparations before teaching senior officers!"[79]

In sum, professional autonomy, defined as decision-making power and professional discretion, in the teaching at NDU varies according to the type of course (regular and non-regular) and the student group (lower- or higher-ranking officers). It was reported that in some departments, the teachers were given a detailed manuscript for the whole lecture that had to be followed exactly. In other

74 Interviewee IX.
75 Interviewee IX.
76 Interviewee IX; interviewee IV.
77 Ledberg 2014, Ch. 7 and 8.
78 Interviewee IX.
79 Interviewee XI.

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departments, only rough lecture outlines were used.[80] There is also evidence that the degree of professional autonomy hinges on the seniority of the teaching officer. At the NUDT, most students are undergraduates, and a useful comparison can be made between undergraduate and higher-level teaching.

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Similar to the NDU, the NUDT has a central administrative training department which draws up and coordinates the teaching plans of the school. The degree of professional autonomy and decision making afforded in the teaching of courses is determined by the educational level and type of course. At the undergraduate level, teaching plans are detailed and prescriptive: they dictate what teaching materials are used, the amount of time that is allotted to each course, and the progression of the course. This reportedly applies to the teaching of mechanical skills, such as handling a rifle, as well as to theoretical subjects.[81] What is more interesting in this regard is the influence of the teachers and instructors involved in the drafting of the plans. Approximately 30 per cent of the undergraduate course content is decided by the central authorities. This includes the layout of the undergraduate programme, course modules such as science education, military studies and political education, and a number of compulsory courses within each of these modules.[82] Political education must count for at least 15 per cent of the total courses. Reportedly, instructors generally consider this ratio to be too high, and so to counter this, they incorporate a number of courses with limited political or ideological content into the political education module.[83] In this way, undergraduate students at the NUDT are able to meet the 15 per cent stipulation by studying such courses as "An introduction to defence economics and contemporary world history," which are classified as political education.[84] However, books and other teaching materials for compulsory courses are predetermined, and teachers are reported to have no freedom to alter or adapt the content of the teaching plan. For the theoretical courses, where more than one teacher is involved, planning takes place within teachers' groups. The groups use the same materials to ensure uniformity across the teaching. A teacher may add some personal thoughts, but it is not permissible to omit parts of the teaching plan.[85]

The selection of teaching materials for undergraduate courses is largely centralized. It is common that books are written specifically for a certain course: "First, the course is identified, then we know what books are needed, and these are then

80 Interviewee IX.
81 Interviewee X.
82 Interviewee XIX.
83 Interviewee XIX.
84 NUDT course outline for political education, provided by the NUDT.
85 Interviewee X.

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produced."[86] This is especially evident regarding political education. For example, the compulsory course, "The ideological and moral cultivation and the legal foundation of the soldier," offered during the first semester of the undergraduate programme at the NUDT, follows the chapter outline of the key textbook exactly, or perhaps it is the other way round.[87] This obviously restricts the freedom a teacher has to identify any teaching materials he/she deems suitable and indicates a high degree of centralization in these courses, with the final decision regarding content literature taken away from the instructors. One interviewee reported that efforts to centralize the education at the military schools have increased in the past few years.[88]

In other undergraduate courses where the specifics are not issued from above and also in post-graduate courses, teachers enjoy more autonomy regarding course content and literature. The planning of these courses takes place within teachers' groups in conjunction with the subject supervisor. In this context, the teachers at the NUDT were said to have both wriggle room and decision-making authority.[89] There are, however, clarifications to be made in this regard. First, the degree of flexibility given to the teaching staff is likely linked to the sensitivity of a given subject. There may well be a difference between the social and natural sciences, as some of the social science disciplines can include politically sensitive content. Second, the supervisor involved in the drafting of teaching plans is not only a senior professor but also a leader.[90] Individuals in such positions are not only subject to rigorous review but also receive benefits that other professors do not.[91]

In short, the partial flexibility afforded to the instructors teaching master's courses and junior officers at the NDU is also seen in the teaching of postgraduate students and commanding officers at the NUDT. However, teaching at the undergraduate level at the NUDT is marked by the same centralization and lack of flexibility that characterize the regular courses offered to the most senior officers at the NDU. The room for manoeuvre and the professional autonomy of the teaching officers in this context can be interpreted as being restricted.

Concluding Discussion on Professional Autonomy in the Organization of Teaching

Following the above examination of how professionals participate in the planning of teaching at the two schools in this study, this section discusses what conclusions can be drawn regarding professional autonomy. To reiterate, professional

86 Interviewee X.
87 Course outline provided by the NUDT. The course book is entitled *Junren sixiang daode xiuyang yu falu jichu* (*The Ideological and Moral Cultivation, and the Legal Foundation of the Soldier*). 2009. Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe.
88 Interviewee XIX.
89 Interviewee XIX.
90 Interviewee X.
91 For example, supervisors enjoy more extensive medical care than regular professors. Interviewee XIX.

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autonomy in the organization of teaching means that the profession is allowed to influence planning processes; participate in collegial decision making regarding crucial decisions; enjoy a degree of flexibility and have some room for interpretation of course content; and have some influence over teachers' appointments and pedagogical methods.

The organization of teaching is characterized by varying degrees of centralization and decentralization, both in terms of courses and between schools. Decentralization means that decision-making power is assigned to lower levels in the organizational hierarchy and can thus be seen as a prerequisite for professional autonomy. From the above description of how teaching is organized at the two institutes, some general conclusions can be drawn. Centralization regarding planning, staffing, and identifying course material is still the norm in most courses, and decentralization tends to covary with the specialization of the courses. At the undergraduate level, centralization can be traced back to higher military levels, above the school. At higher educational levels, centralization refers to key leaders at the department level. The more specialized the course, the more decentralization there is. The greatest degree of decentralization is thus found within the non-regular courses at the NDU.[92] These courses necessitate a certain amount of flexibility as teaching plans need to be updated more often. Specialists must thereby be given increased authority concerning content and literature within their field of expertise. In theory, the same flexibility could be applied to the planning of regular courses to ensure the highest quality of education, but this does not appear to be the case. This variance in autonomy at the NDU, the school with the most specialized courses, illustrates the norm of centralization. As illustrated below, the ex-post control applied to courses with more professional manoeuvrability also supports this interpretation.

A similar variation in decentralization is also found at the NUDT with the centralized undergraduate courses and the more flexible graduate courses, where teachers were said to enjoy greater decision-making power. Aside from the fact that more of the courses at the NUDT can be considered to be non-sensitive, the type of student involved also contributes to this difference. The students at the NUDT are generally technical rather than commanding officers. The officers who are educated at the NDU, on the other hand, are current or future military leaders, and their education is more likely to be subject to greater control and centralization.

It is also possible to conclude that the seniority of the students is a determinant regarding teacher manoeuvrability, although this relationship is not linear. At the NDU, there is a clear negative correlation between high-ranking officer students and flexibility on the part of the instructor. A similar correlation was found in the teaching of cadets at the undergraduate level at the NUDT. Also, courses taught to high-ranking officers are subject to more rigorous evaluation and control than

92 According to an introductory CDROM provided by the FAO at the NDU, courses range from "training on the job courses" of between one week and three months, to advanced staff courses of two years.

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other courses. These courses, which at first glance appear to be more decentralized since they are updated regularly within the departments, are at the same time subject to stricter ex-post control. For example, courses intended for high-ranking officers from the field units are generally evaluated by the lecture, through student surveys.[93] In addition, the training departments at the NDU and the NUDT also dispatch a teaching guidance group (*dudaozu* 督导组), made up of retired professors, which sits in on most lectures given to high-ranking officers and evaluates them based on these observations.[94] The control mechanism in these cases is thus applied after, rather than before, the course commences.[95]

While signs of decentralization and professional autonomy are found at both the NDU and the NUDT, especially in regard to the teaching of specialized courses at the NDU and postgraduate studies at the NUDT, the role of the profession at the department level needs to be discussed. As illustrated, the profession enjoys autonomy in some aspects of daily work, but there are significant variations within groups of professionals. Where responsibility has been delegated to lower levels, for example at the NDU where the departments are given greater freedom to decide on courses and content, responsibility rests with the department head. This does not necessarily mean that decision-making power has been transferred to the profession as a group, although this is the case to some degree for the highly specialized courses. More often, it is the general director, not the instructors, who possesses manoeuvrability vis-à-vis the centre. Aside from the general director, leaders of the various units subordinate to the departments also enjoy some influence with regard to the planning of teaching, but the final decision rests with the general director, who also is a professor. Similarly, at the NUDT, the planning of postgraduate teaching is undertaken by the group of teachers involved, together with the supervisor of the discipline. While it may seem clear that a person who has reached the level of professor possesses the professional qualifications needed to make decisions regarding course content and literature, the interconnectedness between the Party and the army complicates the analysis. While it is true that the regularization of staff matters in the PLA has encouraged meritocracy, and thereby also the transparency of promotions, on higher hierarchical levels, politics still matters. This can be seen in the methods used to select high-ranking officers.

In the Chinese military, the cadre department (*ganbu bu* 干部部), a sub-department of the CMC Political Work Department, is in charge of all officer dossiers, which record all relevant career information.[96] Unlike staffing matters at lower levels, which are the responsibility of the cadre department of the school, personnel matters above a certain level are handled by the cadre department of

93 Interviewee IX.
94 Interviewee IX; interviewee III.
95 See Ledberg 2014, Ch. 7.
96 Gunness and Vellucci 2008, 202; Shambaugh 2002, 136; *China Military Online*, 12 January 2016.

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the CMC Political Work Department. The grade positions and military ranks held by general directors or office heads at the NDU imply that this CMC department is responsible for evaluating their competence.[97] According to Chinese law, these officers must also be approved by the CMC chairman, who is generally the head of state.[98]

The CMC Political Work Department, and its sub-departments, are staffed by political officers and have an agenda that extends beyond the strictly military. Its most central task is Party building in the armed forces. All subordinated political departments are thus responsible for administrating, organizing, and implementing political and Party work in their respective units.[99] The additional control mechanisms described above suggest that the promotion criterion of "political integrity" carries more weight the higher up an officer climbs.[100] This means that general directors, heads of the various units of the NDU, and supervisors at the NUDT have not been promoted to these ranks and positions solely based on professional merit, i.e. *military* expertise; they have gained their positions also according to political criteria.

It follows, then, that a person who fails to meet such external criteria will not be considered for a position that brings with it autonomous decision-making power, regardless of their professional skills.[101] Consequently, decisions taken by senior officials in leading positions, such as department directors at the NDU, must meet both professional and non-professional standards, or at least not be at odds with political priorities. The autonomy of the remaining professionals staffing the departments, its centres and units generally extends only to decisions within a limited field, i.e. teaching methods or reading lists, and the teaching of master's and doctoral students, as opposed to undergraduates or senior military officials. At the NUDT, the level of professional autonomy of the teaching staff above the undergraduate level is markedly higher, which may be explained by the subject matter of the courses or the type of students. In this study of military education at the NDU and the NUDT, professional autonomy is thus confined to a limited number of selected individuals, whereas the profession at large often is prevented from using its competence, which may hamper the overall potential of the expertise of the military profession.

So, what does this all imply about the political control of the military? It is not unexpected to find that the hierarchical structures of authority take precedence over discretionary decision making in the context of any military. Yet, the

97 In the Chinese military hierarchy, an officer's grade position (*zhiwu dengji*) takes precedence over military rank (*junxian*) and determines his/her overall position. See Regulations on the Military Ranks of Officers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Ch. III, Art. 9.

98 Law of the People's Republic of China on Officers in Active Service, Ch. III.

99 Information Office of the State Council 2002.

100 Regulations on the Military Ranks of Officers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, Ch. V, Art. 17.

101 That all high-ranking officers are Party members is also an indication of this. Party membership is also a requirement for master studies, at least at the NDU and probably also at the NUDT. One interviewee estimated that only 1 to 2% of the officers are not Party members. Interviewee X.

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inclusion of a wide span of teaching tasks in the analysis, from undergraduate courses for cadets to courses ahead of promotion for top generals, illustrates that there are differences in the approaches to direct political control and professional autonomy. A common feature is that political control is executed through individuals holding leadership positions. Any decentralization of decision making is thus tolerated to the extent that control remains in the hands of individuals selected at least in part for their political reliability. In addition to more overt, distinguishable control systems, such as political departments and Party committees, every leadership position in the regular military system simultaneously constitutes a checkpoint of Party control. The system of political control in the PLA is therefore more complex than a parallel system that merely exists alongside the military system.[102]

In respect to the previous literature on the effects of military reforms on the political control of the military, this study demonstrates that it is important to differentiate between modernization and professionalization, as well as between autonomy and functional separation. Despite institutional changes to the PLA–CCP relationship, and the fact that the military today is governed by rules and directives rather than by ideology and charismatic leadership, this article points to a symbiosis of Party and military which is still manifest in the leadership positions entrusted with professional autonomy. In the cases presented in this study, the correlation between military expertise and professional autonomy, foreseen in civil–military theory and theories of the professions, is conditional rather than automatic. This illustrates the multidimensionality of both political control and autonomy and calls for further studies on the manoeuvrability of the Chinese officer profession, not just the highest leaders, within other areas of military expertise.

Biographical note

Sofia K. Ledberg is assistant professor of war studies at the department of security, strategy and leadership at the Swedish Defence University. Her research focuses on political governance, civil–military relations and the internal working processes of the military organization in China and beyond. She takes a particular interest in the dynamic relationship between the military profession and the hierarchically structured military bureaucracy and how this affects the manoeuvrability of the officer corps.

摘要： 本文利用自下而上的分析方法和至今尚未开发的来源，包括对现役军事人员的采访，探讨中国的军民关系。文章认为，传统的关于政治控制的研究方法，其一般通过军事职业化和院校自治来解释不断变化的政治与军事关系，忽视了许多重要方面，可能会产生错误的结论。因此，文章转

102 Such claims have been made in the earlier literature. See Joffe 1996, 305; Shambaugh 1991, 535; Godwin 1978, 224–25.

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而聚焦于中国军官阶层的专业自主权。通过对中国两个最高军事教育院校的军事工作的组织所进行的实证研究，本文阐述了专业自主权和直接政治控制之间，在等级和问题领域方面的差异。这突出了政治控制和专业灵活性的多维度，并强调了将组织内部透视包容进来的成果，以便获得关于今日中国的政治控制和军民关系的更为明智的结论。

关键词: 人民解放军; 政治控制; 专业自主权; 干部管理和中国军事教育

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