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Contentious Veterans: China's Retired Officers Speak Out

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Abstract:

What drives retired military officers in China toward contention? Decades of research on protest has produced little on veterans' collective action, and even less on that by ex-officers.

Newspaper reports, police journals and veterans' blogs show that contention by Chinese former officers (ranging from occupying government compounds to marches, mass petitioning, open letters and class-action lawsuits) is the result of bad luck in post-military job assignments, a fragmented political system that makes it difficult to ensure that pensions and other benefits reach retirees, and pervasive corruption that leads ex-officers to feel that local officials have embezzled funds meant for them. Contention by former officers typically uses military rhetoric and builds on military experiences, even for former officers who were employed in civilian jobs for many years. Although contention by ex-officers is not likely to rock the state, it says much about how "sticky" military identities are, where veterans fit in the political landscape, Leninist civil-military relations, and the treatment that old soldiers receive in a fast changing socio-economic order.

Key words: People's Liberation Army; protest; popular contention; state-owned enterprises; military officers; China

Contentious Veterans: China's Retired Officers Speak Out

Throughout the new century, the Chinese state has been roiled by contention launched by former military officers. Holding aloft banners praising the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and singing revolutionary tunes, ex-officers have occupied government compounds in small towns, large cities, and even Beijing; many have filed lawsuits against officials who fail to provide them benefits, or have written barbed, open letters that decry their mistreatment. Collective petitioning by groups of retired officers and other veterans has become so commonplace that domestic security officials have gone as far as to designate their activism the third most important source of "social instability," right behind protests by dispossessed farmers and unemployed workers.¹

In this article, we examine the causes of retired officers' contention—what has driven many stalwarts of Communist rule to the barricades, the courts and the web—and to analyze their rhetorical choices when they challenge state power. For example, why do ex-officers, many of whom were assigned managerial positions in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) after their discharge, use militarized language when they are laid off from civilian firms? In their complaints, how do these old soldiers position themselves vis-à-vis core audiences—the government to whom they appeal for status and benefits, and the public from whom they seek sympathy and support? Are they similar to "angry outsiders," like the hundreds of thousands of farmers who have lost their land to urban development, or "disgruntled insiders," like political dissidents whose opposition traces back to official corruption, hypocrisy and lies. Finally, we assess the political significance of officers' protests. Are they dangerous to the regime in any way? Do their actions bear out the notion that retired officers could work together with other aggrieved groups and "swing the tide"² against Communist Party rule?

That demobilized officers protest at all, and in large numbers, is somewhat surprising. Officers are known for their conservatism (including support for right-wing parties, nationalism and authoritarianism) and a Burkean suspicion of mass movements.³ In China, recruits are subject to ideological training from their first day in uniform (often at the expense of professional skills) that is designed to instill loyalty to the party. After their discharge, they are watched by a sprawling security apparatus that pays special attention to people who are skilled in the use of weaponry and feared for their organizational skills.⁴ Tradition and long-standing institutions also limit feistiness by Chinese officers. The Leninist model of civil-military relations has prevailed for nearly a century, with the party not only controlling the gun, but owning it.⁵ Yet former officers do act up, if not on active duty then later in life, when events turn against them.

And when this happens, we academics tend to miss it. Although students of history and politics are attuned to times when individual ex-officers oppose government policy or play a part in establishing a regime,⁶ accounts of the *group dynamics* of veterans' contention have been scarce. Veterans qua veterans tend to be neglected, or their status, identity and political participation is subsumed under what they did next. This is most likely, Gregory Kasza argues, because war and military service are seen to be temporary and abnormal, whereas post-war identities are thought to be long-lasting and stable as veterans settle into marriages, occupations and everyday routines.⁷ Moreover, scholars working on Leninist systems often find it difficult to shake simple assumptions about the lifelong loyalty of soldiers who are nearly always party members, and are inclined to focus on the relationship between state authorities and active military who carry guns, not retired officers who have put them down.

The political leanings of contentious politics researchers also play a role, leading to large holes in how collective action is understood. Left-of-center academics often lump soldiers with the security apparatus and see them as agents of control and reaction rather than dissent and change.⁸ These scholars tend to be attracted by soaring rights struggles rather than narrow economic claims.⁹ Throughout its history, the literature on contentious politics has paid more attention to labor, environmental, anti-nuclear, women's and gay rights movements associated with progressive causes than to veterans' collective action.¹⁰ Conservative people fighting for small gains or to protect their benefits are shunted to the side or receive less attention than they deserve.

Most surprisingly, military sociologists have also given short shrift to contention by ex-officers,¹¹ focusing instead on today's rather than yesterday's soldiers and other topics. *Armed Forces and Society*, the most natural venue for such research, has published extensively on serving officers and their education, socialization, professionalization, attitudes and political beliefs, but little about their political activism.¹² Analyses of retired officers, when they appear, mainly address their ascent into a country's political leadership in order to evaluate civilian control over the armed forces.¹³ What officers do after they leave active service and encounter problems later in life is usually left unexplored.

The China field, for its part, is largely silent on contention by ex-officers, probably owing to assumptions that there is not much of it, or that it is swiftly repressed.¹⁴ When veterans do appear in accounts of protest it is usually as leaders of other disgruntled social groups, particularly villagers.¹⁵ We hear little about them acting on their own behalf with other veterans or officer-specific concerns.¹⁶ Yet the rhetoric and style of former officers' contention suggests that military identity tends to be far "stickier" and longer lasting than sometimes thought.

Despite the passage of time and years of employment elsewhere, military experiences continue to shape the way officers think, gripe and challenge.

We argue that ex-officers in China have been drawn into contention for three related reasons. Most importantly, many of them have been unlucky. As the PLA downsized from the 1980s through the early 2000s, many had the misfortune of being assigned to state-owned factories. After being transferred, they retained their military status and the benefits granted to “state cadres” (*guojia ganbu*). Shortly thereafter, however, many of their enterprises were privatized, modernized or went bankrupt. In all these scenarios, many ex-officers lost both their jobs *and* the transferred status that they had acquired through military service.

Second, programs that were designed to ease the military-civilian transition by providing a range of benefits (from housing to pensions) were underfunded and unevenly enforced by local officials, leaving many officers frustrated and angry. Poor policy design and implementation led thousands of former officers down the path of activism.

Third, a large number of ex-officers blame corrupt local officials for their difficulties obtaining benefits. This sometimes merges with a broader critique of a political system that allows corruption to spread unchecked. Here, ex-officers take the stage as whistleblowers, exhibiting a righteous indignation at rising inequality, injustice and the emergence of a new class of money-obsessed officials.

This three-part explanation emerges from our reading of several types of source material, about which we should say a few words. Owing to the sensitivity of military topics there has been scant coverage of political activism by former officers in the Chinese media.¹⁷ Most reporters are unwilling to risk their careers by investigating officers’ contention, and academics or policy analysts struggle to secure funding to conduct research on them. Foreign social

scientists cannot mingle among protesting ex-officers or survey their attitudes using standard sampling techniques. Nor is it possible to quantify the frequency of veterans contention across time or space, although if pressed, our hunch is that it is significantly more common than sporadic but less than a daily occurrence. We seek to compensate for these limitations in two ways. First, we draw upon a new, internet-based source of information—the “The Voice of the Veteran” (*tuiwu junren zhisheng*) website, whose server is located outside China. For several years, veterans have posted their complaints and tales of mistreatment to this website, with the assistance of “citizen journalists”—ordinary Chinese who seek to bring social problems to the public’s attention. Second, we have relied on reporting by Hong Kong-based correspondents. Blending into the crowd much easier than Western journalists and scholars, they have managed to interview many ex-officers. Hong Kong reporters also provide other news outlets, such as Radio Free Asia, regular updates about contention by various social groups, veterans among them.

We acknowledge that these sources are far from ideal. We certainly would have liked to phone or call on ex-officers at home, or to have arranged interviews with them in other settings, if such opportunities were available. Then there is the issue of selection bias. By focusing on *contentious* ex-officers, we are selecting on the dependent variable, raising the possibility of overstating both the scope and frequency of discontent. Our argument, however, does not apply to *all* ex-officers in China—as we will see, some have been more fortunate than others—but only to those who were sent to SOEs, laid off, and then chose an activist path. They are in the minority (as are protesters in any society), but are important to understand how far and fast demobilized officers can fall after they leave military service and enter a fast-changing socio-economic order that has little use for them. The problems that ex-officers face, we suggest, are

evidence of significant changes in civil-military relations and challenges that the current leadership has yet to find a way to handle, aside from buying time and waiting for troublesome ex-officers to age out of contention and ultimately die off.¹⁸

In what follows, we dig into the grievances that underpin contention by former officers. We then examine the rhetorical choices they make and the persistence of military identities. The conclusion looks at the ambiguous political and social identity of contentious ex-officers and the extent to which their actions are likely to draw in others and shake the state.

Double Whammy

In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping approved the first set of market reforms, it was well-understood, and mostly uncontroversial, that military modernization was not his top priority. Often forgotten today, as the defense budget grows and China is increasingly seen as a regional threat, Deng's famous list of the "Four Modernizations" placed the military dead last, behind agriculture, industry, and science and technology. This decision was driven not only by a social and economic logic—China in 1978 was mostly rural and undeveloped—but also by Deng's antagonism towards the PLA. Prior to and during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the PLA had been drawn into factional struggles by Mao Zedong, and Deng had often ended up a victim of radical Maoists and ambitious army leaders.¹⁹ When he assumed the reins of power in 1978, Deng held highly negative views of the country's military, considering it both unprofessional and too big. This had a basis in fact: the size of the PLA had grown by roughly 85% between the early 1960s and late 1970s²⁰ and the Cultural Revolution had thoroughly politicized its leadership. Its poor combat performance during China's brief border war with Vietnam in 1979 only confirmed Deng's assessment.²¹ In the early 1980s, the military suffered large budget cuts

and shortly thereafter the leadership began reducing PLA manpower, from a high of 4.1 million men and women in uniform in 1985 to fewer than 2.4 million by 2012.²² Not all was bleak for those discharged, however. Demobilized officers were usually assigned state jobs, including ones in government offices, research institutions, archives, and factories.²³

The PLA, however, was not the only institution revamped in the reform era. Many state-owned enterprises, the backbone of China's economy since the 1940s, underwent restructuring, too. In the 1990s and the 2000s over 30 million of their employees were laid off as factories privatized, introduced labor-saving technology or went bankrupt owing to increased competition. Although the layoffs cut across occupational, gender and age groups, middle-aged and older employees proved more vulnerable to downsizing than the younger and higher-skilled. Workers, quite often, resisted this by taking to the streets or filing petitions or lawsuits.²⁴ Scholars have rightly categorized this contention as *labor* protest, but veterans were also among the participants. These veteran-workers included both conscripts and officers. To be sure, not all former military personnel were dispatched to privatized SOEs or ones that went belly up. Those in protected, strategic sectors, such as telecommunications (e.g. China Mobile) or raw materials (e.g. The Aluminum Corporation of China), have found little reason to engage in contention and are seldom found in RFA reports or among our blog posters.

It is hardly surprising that neo-liberal reforms can have a harmful impact on workers. When scholars applied the same reasoning to the state, a similar result was predicted: market reforms would reduce state power and the number of officials as government functions shifted to the market. This, however, has not come to pass. As Vivienne Shue anticipated, economic development led the state to take on a larger set of tasks, including regulatory, rent-seeking and entrepreneurial ones.²⁵ The simultaneous expansion of the government and contraction of the

SOE sector goes a long way toward explaining which former officers are most likely to participate in political activism. Downsized officers who ended up in the civil service or other non-industrial sectors are more inclined to be content with their lot. They retain most of the privileges that flow from state cadre status, including housing, pensions, and medical care. In contrast, former PLA officers sent to struggling or closed enterprises have suffered downward mobility and widespread unemployment. Making the sting even worse, most are fully aware that their former comrades-in-arms remain employed and, in many cases, are prospering.

To see how bad luck and being sent to one enterprise rather than another can lead to discontent, consider Jiang Xiaoguang, a former lieutenant in the PLA Air Force. Jiang served from 1978 to 1991. Upon his discharge he was provided with a stipend of 1700 yuan (US\$200) and assigned a job at a storage facility at a state-run department store in Changzhou, Jiangsu. Like many businesses in the 1990s, this store was restructured and Jiang lost his position. Interviewed by a Hong Kong journalist in 2004, Jiang complained that he had spent his best years in the army and had little to show for it, and that he felt “hopeless” about the turn his life took after leaving the PLA. The reporter asked a Changzhou leader if Jiang’s experience was common. “The official refused to answer the question directly, but said that unemployment among former officers was a ‘normal’ occurrence.” In an interview with the same journalist, Xu Weihong, a Sino-Vietnam War-era junior officer who was selling odds and ends to get by, confirmed that “very many” retired officers remained unemployed throughout Changzhou.²⁶ All lacked health insurance, pensions or funds left over from their discharge stipend.

Ex-officers in circumstances like Jiang’s and Xu’s are often bitter and their discontent is compounded by their jealousy of more fortunate former comrades. In one letter to the PLA leadership, for instance, ex-officers from Shandong pointed out that colleagues who worked for

the civil service or other state-run institutions were doing well. The “overwhelming majority” of officer-protestors, they wrote, came from “inefficient SOEs.”²⁷ This divergence in fates and benefits was also cited in a 2009 demonstration involving 100 veterans who congregated in Tiananmen Square. These men noted that “factories that are in trouble do not follow national policy for former PLA officers; those that are better off, do.”²⁸

Lost in a Maze

In the summer of 2012, security forces put under house arrest several thousand retired officers who planned to demonstrate outside the Central Military Commission in Beijing. Despite this country-wide dragnet, 1,000 of them managed to make it to the capital. There they submitted a formal letter of complaint stating that “far from being welcomed into local government jobs or quasi-governmental units on retirement from the military,” they were instead “ignored or snubbed.” The former officers claimed that this treatment resulted in “extreme economic hardship” for “large numbers” of them. There was “no money for the doctor, and nowhere to turn for help.”²⁹

This report highlights two relevant issues. First, laid-off veterans probably constitute the majority of contentious ex-officers, but they are not alone. Even retired officers lucky enough to be assigned a job may never receive it. Second, many retired officers feel that local officials and their failure to carry out measures designed to benefit veterans are to blame for their problems. How is it possible that former officers, some with high rank and considerable experience in politics, find themselves stymied by local leaders? And why would central authorities find it difficult to provide a modest package of benefits to people whom the media lauds every day as examples of sacrifice and selfless contribution?

Students of the Chinese state have long called attention to its fragmentation.³⁰ The Communist Party retains direct command over the PLA and other core functions it considers critical (such as propaganda, personnel and disciplining errant cadres), but it does not control everything, and it frequently struggles to monitor its 85 million members. That the party is large and omnipresent can be deceiving. In terms of size, the central government is quite small, even in key ministries. Further complicating policy enforcement is the high degree of fiscal decentralization. In a reaction against the command economy of the Mao era, Chinese authorities have allowed local officials substantial discretion over spending and investment. According to World Bank and IMF data, China has one of the most decentralized economies in the world.³¹

For veterans, lines of administrative responsibility are complex. Upon discharge, conscripts are passed off to the Ministry of Civil Affairs. The Ministry is tasked with helping them find jobs, but otherwise does not have a long-term commitment to their welfare. According to Xue Gangling, a law professor with excellent contacts in the PLA, transition to civilian life for decommissioned officers has been managed by a group within the State Council that includes high-level officials from the Central Organization Department, the State Planning Commission, the Office for Public Sector Reform, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance. The PLA's General Political Department is the only military voice in this group.³² Once veterans' policy is set, implementation falls to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, which is responsible for finding positions for former officers and approving state cadre status. Critically, most post-service hiring is not funded by the central government and the bill for taking on an officer lands on the desk of a local government, factory or other organization, many of which are in deep debt themselves. Ex-officers thus face a trifecta of obstacles: a fragmented policymaking structure; an implementing organization that has little natural sympathy for

veterans; and dependence on the good will of local leaders who often have their own budget problems.

Many blog postings and RFA reports capture the anger directed at local officials and the disappointment with central leaders whose policies do not match their rhetoric. In demonstrations in Shandong on Army Day in 2010, officers bemoaned their lack of employment and unfulfilled central promises, as well as meagre salaries that violated national policy. They accused local governments of “neglect of duty” and officials up and down the hierarchy with falsely reporting that “most” veterans were satisfied and only a minority were “troublemakers.”³³ In a poem composed by veterans in Henan and posted to Voice of the Veteran, the provincial Commerce Bureau was blamed for refusing to include years of military service in wage calculations.³⁴ A group of several dozen Hunan officers also wrote an open letter to provincial leaders charging local governments with choosing who they wanted to resettle and hire, and setting pay without consulting national guidelines.³⁵

Even as ex-officers place much of the blame on local authorities, they also hold the Center responsible for their difficulties. This is not surprising. As former political insiders, they know a lot about the state’s administrative plumbing. For instance, most are aware that the Ministry of Finance has not appropriated enough funds to enable local governments to take care of veterans adequately.³⁶ They also recognize that central policies often conflict, and that paying attention to veterans’ benefits may entail ignoring a higher priority, such as putting “stability above all.”³⁷ They also know the central government is responsible for allowing some people to get rich while others, including the country’s “loyal old soldiers,” are left to fall behind.³⁸

Ex-Officers against Corruption

In China, few issues have a greater impact on regime legitimacy than corruption. From the end of the Qing Dynasty through 20th century reform movements and the Communist Revolution, corruption—both real and perceived—has led to unrest and official hand-wringing. Writing in 2011, Chen Caiyou, a deputy party secretary of a municipal Discipline Inspection Committee (the organization charged with ferreting out and prosecuting corrupt officials), attributed collective petitioning to a long list of causes, including “unequal distribution of the benefits of reform,” national policies that were enforced unevenly or not at all, and a “minority” of cadres who “grabbed what belongs to others.” From his perch on the committee, he observed corruption in many places: construction projects, government contracts, factory privatization and even appointments to official posts.³⁹ Public opinion surveys regularly show that ordinary citizens share Chen’s concern, though many people would dispute his belief that only a “minority” of cadres are involved: anger at corruption runs deep and has often led to popular action.⁴⁰

Like other Chinese, and notwithstanding their oath of loyalty to the party, retired officers have seized upon corruption to justify their contention and render their usually neglected cause more compelling. They have linked grasping officials to their plight, and have, at times, used anti-corruption as a rallying cry to push for wider reform. In particular, rampant corruption helps veterans explain to themselves, other veterans, and anyone else listening why promised benefits only sometimes arrive: local officials have embezzled the funds and covered their tracks.

Ex-officers often just want their money and launch contention to denounce officials who have absconded with it. In 2012, for instance, a group of 600 veterans in Shenzhen connected their low wages (compared to civil servants) to corruption and took to the street, shouting “Down with Corruption! Down with Corrupt Officials! Implement the National Retired Officers’ Policy!

Protecting Rights is Ensuring Stability!”⁴¹ That same year, retired army and navy officers gathered outside PLA headquarters in Beijing carrying placards and chanting slogans calling for the fight against graft to be intensified; corruption, they argued, was to blame for missing pension payments and lack of compensation for service-related injuries.⁴²

On other occasions, ex-officers broaden their critique. In 2012, for example, during the run-up to the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress, former PLA officers mounted a nationwide campaign against corruption. These were not new activists; they had spent years petitioning for better benefits. But now they linked their bread-and-butter demands to a larger attack on politics as usual. Because of the party’s failure to control corruption, they argued, the PLA needed to step in and play a “more powerful” role in the political system.⁴³ Calls to halt corruption, when ignored, can evolve into demands to reform a regime that cannot stop graft on its own.

In Gansu, thirty ex-officers who were invited to negotiate on behalf of protesting veterans nicely illustrated the relationship between personal circumstances and shortcomings in governance. Like other retired officers, they complained about “unfair treatment, violation of rights, and low social status,” and were particularly incensed by differences in benefits awarded officers based on year of discharge and where they happened to work. Some of the negotiators focused on regaining their status as state cadres. Others, however, looked deeper and found the root of the problem in the political system, stressing over-centralization, a closed lawmaking process, weak enforcement of constitutional rights, lack of transparency and corruption “surrounding policy enforcement.” Owing to misuse of funds, they charged, central documents that reinstated cadre status were “useless” and the large sums of money budgeted to resolve their difficulties “went nowhere.”⁴⁴

This positioning—combining opposition to corruption with calls for greater transparency, openness, and accountability—belies officers’ reputation for conservatism and unquestioning loyalty to the regime. It builds upon a long-standing critique of civilian authority that traces as far back as the 1950s, when veterans frequently charged CCP officials with corruption and acted as whistleblowers. Like retired officers today, ex-officers in the Mao era also called for better implementation and relying on laws rather than informal documents to carry out veterans’ policy.⁴⁵ Then as now, retired officers saw themselves as upholders of a purer revolutionary tradition that civilian leaders were failing to live up to.

Rhetorical Choices and the “Stickiness” of Military Identity

When ex-officers speak out, they sound more like soldiers than civilians. They use militarized language, evoke pride in having served their country, and employ tactics learned in the PLA. Some of this is probably strategic: a conscious decision to cast themselves as retired officers rather than SOE managers that capitalizes on whatever sympathy exists for veterans, while downplaying any association with people laid off from overstuffed, unprofitable enterprises redolent of the socialist past.⁴⁶

But if some of their positioning is tactical, another part goes deeper and suggests that military identities are long-lasting and a core component of who ex-officers are. Military experiences formed these men and women, are a source of personal satisfaction, and shape their expectations. Retired officers have all heard decades of propaganda emphasizing the PLA’s contributions to ending the nation’s “century of humiliation” and expect to be treated with respect. At a minimum, they feel that they and their needs should not be blithely ignored.⁴⁷

Security sources, reporters' accounts and photographs convey the extent to which ex-officers invoke their military past and skip over their years (sometimes a decade or more) working in a civilian enterprise. Consider how ex-officers act when they march on a government compound. Police officials have noted that mass petitioning by retired officers tends to be "tightly organized" and conducted with a "clear objective" in mind, much like a military exercise.⁴⁸ In photographs of protests in print media, online and on the Voice of the Veteran website, ex-officers and other veterans often appear in uniform, medals hanging from their chests.⁴⁹ When sitting or marching, they arrange themselves in orderly rows and do not readily break ranks if confronted by the police.⁵⁰

Retired officers typically look like soldiers when they protest; they also time their actions according to a military calendar. Their contention is less often launched on Labor Day (May 1) than on the day celebrating the founding of the Communist Party (July 1) or Army Day (August 1): occasions when top leaders are busy trumpeting the successes of the revolution and the PLA's contributions to national defense.⁵¹ By doing so, ex-officers remind people who they were and what they did, and distinguish themselves from other SOE managers who also made sacrifices and helped build the country, but cannot say they shed blood for China or defended its territorial integrity.⁵²

Whether tactical or a result of deeply-held beliefs about who they are and what they deserve, these nods to military experience, identity and contribution skirt over the civilian years in between their discharge and the problems that now urge them toward action. Most likely working together, and reinforcing each other, practices, calculation and conviction create an approach to contention that is distinctly military, rather than civilian.

Outcomes and Implications

Despite their impressive ability to launch contention, ex-officers are unlikely to rock the state.⁵³ Former officers are not united in opposition to party rule or even local authorities. Those who have managed to land a stable job in a government office have interests aligned with the regime, not their PLA comrades. Moreover, the demands of retired officers are usually material, parochial and backward-looking and thus are relatively easy to address or dismiss. Most important, the state has many ways to disorganize organized protest. Voice of the Veteran posts complain of phone taps, surveillance, hacked chat room accounts, preemptive house arrests, beatings, forcing petitioners to return home, and detention in “black jails” and psychiatric hospitals.⁵⁴ Local authorities also stand ready to arrest retired officers who lead protests and make it difficult for aggrieved veterans to gain a hearing in the press or secure assistance from lawyers.⁵⁵

Even though ex-officers are unlikely to sway public opinion against the regime⁵⁶ or shake the state, their contention says much about Party-army relations, how military protest relates to action by other groups, where veterans fit in the political landscape, and post-service identities. First, the absence of a military threat to one-party rule confirms the relevance of the Leninist model of civil-military relations when thinking about high-ranking, active-duty officers. Even during the crisis of 1989, military doubts were high, but insubordination was limited and disappeared once party leaders decided to end the protest movement with force. But among ex-officers, there is not the same “symbiotic relationship” that scholars have shown links the top brass to the party elite.⁵⁷ Here, extending an argument about why the army does not rise up in revolt can lead us astray. For retired officers, factors such as mistreatment and a sense of injustice can complicate any story about the party controlling the military and the unwavering

loyalty of men and women who have borne arms. Connecting the dots too readily is also common in broader studies of communist civil-military relations, which tend to zero in on elite, active-duty officers. What happens after ordinary officers are discharged is seldom addressed, and it is too easy to imagine that because most officers are long-time party members whose loyalty was “cement[ed] to the party-state system” during their service, there is little likelihood of anti-state activism after they retire.⁵⁸

At the same time, China has also changed in ways that make Leninist assumptions about tight control less tenable. Even though veterans are on the radar of public security officials (particularly if they have engaged in protest), they are not enveloped by the monitoring and indoctrination applied to active-duty officers. Under reform, those who have lost their positions are subject to village and neighborhood party controls, not civil-military ones. Laid-off and mistreated ex-officers do remain party members and are expected to support party rule, but once they are demobilized this may mean little more than paying dues and attending an occasional meeting. This has loosened the bonds between the PLA, the party and former officers, and has opened more space for political contention.⁵⁹

Second, the claims made by ex-officers show just how far they have fallen. Their rearguard struggles suggest that many retired officers are more similar to other losers in China’s reform era, such as older workers and farmers, than to “heroic” soldiers admired for their contributions and sacrifices. Many undoubtedly realize that time has passed them by, and that all that they can do now is agitate for old promises to be honored, and to hope, if all goes well, to get a few crumbs, all the while recognizing that there is little in store that will change their situation.

At a time when the PLA has been reluctant or unwilling to push for measures that would improve their fortunes, state policies continue to offer retired officers little. Although China has put into place international “best practices” in some areas of finance, public administration and law, its approach to managing veterans remains remarkably insular, relying upon an unusual combination of old-school bureaucratic intervention (such as assigning jobs) and sending unprepared veterans to meet their fate in the free market without the protection of a national veteran’s statute, their own organization (such as the American Legion) or a bureaucratic organization devoted to their welfare.⁶⁰ If at least some of these support structures were in place we doubt that veterans—most of whom see themselves as loyal and disciplined party members despite their many grievances—would be pushed into confrontational activism.

Third, the career path of former officers highlights a jumbled zone between military and civilian identities and regime “insider” and “outsider” status. Ex-officers obtained their civilian positions by virtue of military service and they expected insider status, but frequently found themselves answering to enterprise leaders who refused to consider their rank or seniority when setting salaries, fired them at the first opportunity, or paid them little deference. So, they quickly became outsiders: not wholly accepted as skilled, productive civilians or as experienced, courageous veterans. Compounding the insult, neither military credentials nor cadre status buffered them when neo-liberal reforms arrived; despite seeing themselves as insiders owed certain privileges, they were as vulnerable as the lowliest worker to being laid off. Being an insider in two ways—an officer in the PLA and a state cadre in a civilian enterprise—meant little when they could be downsized twice.

Their liminal position between soldier and civilian is best illustrated in how they make claims. Retired officers often position themselves as outsiders with an inside track—as members

of a “weak and vulnerable group” (*ruoshi qunti*), like pensioners, unemployed workers, migrant laborers, or the old and disabled,⁶¹ who also happen to be proud, Communist Party members with experience inside the system. Unlike other aggrieved people who need elite allies,⁶² they think they know their way around the halls of power and can be their own advocates. But in the course of being cut down twice, they have been relegated to the position of ordinary civilians, and old ones with outdated skills. The ambiguity of their status, and the misunderstandings it creates, mirrors that of reserve soldiers, who sit “betwixt and between the military and civilian sectors of a society.”⁶³ But in China, the identity of laid-off ex-officers, at least in the eyes of others, is much simpler. They are just retirees who were sent packing from inefficient SOEs, no more or no less. Few care about their military credentials and background, or want to hear about their glorious accomplishments or what they think they deserve. Their grievances, expectations and demands are reminders of a world that is fast receding, which most Chinese, powerful and powerless alike, do not miss or even fully recollect.

1Endnotes

Interview by the second author with a division-level official in a major Chinese city, January 2012.

The interviewee spent many years in the internal security field and continues to have access to internal party publications such as *Cankao Xiaoxi (Reference News)*. See also Chen Baifeng, “Teding zhiye qunti shangfang jiqi yiban tezheng,”

http://soci.cssn.cn/shx/shx_zzshx_578/201310/t20131025_571147.shtml. Accessed May 8, 2014. This article originally appeared in *Shehui Kexue (Social Science)* 8 (August 2012).

2 “Veterans Detained over Protest,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 20, 2012; “Call for Army to Fight Graft,” *Radio Free Asia*, February 23, 2012.

3 For a review of this literature and information on Norwegian, Swedish and West German officers see Yoram Peri, “Ideological Portrait of the Israeli Military Elite,” *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 3 (1977): 28-40. Israeli military elites were unusual in their association with the political left. In the United States, former officers tend to fall in the center or center right of the political spectrum. Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell write that PLA officers “are not unlike military officers elsewhere in being nationalistic, suspicious of adversaries, hawkish, and politically conservative.” See *China’s Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 60.

4 In a protest in Luoyang, ex-officers complained about excessive monitoring. According to one, “the government thinks an enemy lurks behind every bush and tree.” See “Luoyang zai qiye tuixiu de tuiyi junguan gongchandangyuan,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201106/voiceofveteran/24_1.shtml. Accessed February 28, 2014.

5 The extent of civilian control has never been complete and has varied over time. See Andrew Scobell, “China’s Evolving Civil-Military Relations: Creeping Guojiahua,” *Armed Forces and Society* 31, 2 (2005): 228-9. For an overview of civil-military relations in China, see Nathan and Scobell, *China’s Search for Security*, pp. 293-4.

6 For instance, in the Arab world, Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak, Hafez Assad and Muammar Gadhafi were all former officers; in the United States, of course, George Washington is the most prominent example. Ex-officers such as John Kerry were leaders of the Vietnam Veterans against the War, whereas in Israel, Peace Now was founded by former officers. For high-ranking brass who spoke out against the war in Iraq, see Richard Whalen, “Revolt of the Generals,” *The Nation*, October 16, 2006:11-18. For a

sensitive treatment of the role of veterans in early Civil Rights protests, see Christopher Parker, *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle against White Supremacy in the Postwar South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

7 For example, when veterans become workers who then engage in a strike, their military experience is seen as less relevant than their work-related grievances. See Gregory Kasza, “War in Comparative Politics—A Review Article,” *Comparative Politics* 28, 3 (April 1996): 356.

8 *Ibid.*, 357-8.

9 For a notable exception, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

10 There is growing attention to right-wing movements (e.g. Promise Keepers) and “counter-movements” but veterans’ demands for benefits and recognition do not fit in this category. Veterans are often right wing people making left wing demands, or at least demands that track the growth of welfare states. On counter-movements, see David S. Meyer and Suzanne Staggenborg, “Movements, Countermovements and the Structure of Political Opportunity,” *American Journal of Sociology* 101, 6 (May 1996): 1628-60.

11 This might be part of the general neglect of veteran politics. See Paul Camacho and Paul Atwood, “A Review of the Literature on Veterans in *Armed Forces and Society*, 1974-2006,” *Armed Forces and Society* 33, 3 (April 2007): 351. Across 32 years, the journal published 20 articles on veterans, representing 3% of its content.

12 For one example, see Heidi Urben, “Wearing Politics on their Sleeve? Levels of Political Activism of Active Duty Army Officers,” *Armed Forces and Society*, forthcoming, doi:10.1177/0095327X12467774. A text search of the journal found significantly more mentions of “officer” than either “reserve” or “retired” officer.

13 This literature tends to focus on Latin America and Africa. See, for instance, Emmanuel O. Ojo, “Guarding the ‘Guardians’: A Prognosis for Panacea for Evolving Stable Civil-Military Relations in Nigeria,” *Armed Forces and Society* 35, 5 (2009): 688-708; Maiah Jaskoski, “Civilian Control of the Armed Forces in Democratic Latin America: Military Prerogatives, Contestation, and Mission Performance in Peru,” *Armed Forces and Society* 38, 1 (2012): 70-91; David Pion-Berlin, “Defense Organizations and Civil-Military Relations in Latin America,” *Armed Forces and Society* 35, 3 (April 2009): 562-586.

14 Andrew Nathan and Andrew Scobell, for example, claim that the state has managed to placate veterans through a successful jobs program. This effort, they argue, “was carried out without

disruption, testimony to the regime's organizational effectiveness." See *China's Search for Security*, p. 283.

15 See, for instance, Lianjiang Li and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Protest Leadership in Rural China," *China Quarterly* 193 (March 2008): 13, fn. 56; Juan Wang, "Shifting Boundaries between the State and Society: Village Cadres as New Activists in Collective Petitioning," *China Quarterly* 211 (September 2012): 701. Occasionally, veterans also figure in discussions of who is likely to participate in contention. Jing Chen argues that veterans were *not* more likely than others to take part in collective petitions. See "Who Participates in Collective Petitions?," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 13, 3 (2012): 251-68.

16 For an exception, see Neil J. Diamant and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Veteran's Political Activism in China," *Modern China*, forthcoming.

17 The General Political Department of the PLA has surely researched this topic, but their findings are not publically available.

18 Pensioners, older women, and aging farmers are more prone to join collective action in China than in many other countries. On elderly activism in China, see William Hurst and Kevin J. O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners," *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002): 345-60; Xianwen Kuang and Christian Göbel, "Sustaining Collective Action in Urbanizing China," *China Quarterly* 216 (December 2013): 850-71; Yanhua Deng and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Societies of Senior Citizens and Popular Protest in Rural Zhejiang," *China Journal* 71 (January 2014): 172-88; William Hurst, Mingxing Liu, Yongdong Liu and Ran Tao, "Reassessing Collective Petitioning in Rural China: Civic Engagement, Extra-State Violence, and Regional Variation," *Comparative Politics*, forthcoming.

19 Deng was purged during the Cultural Revolution and spent years working in a factory. His primary rival, PLA Marshall Lin Biao, was named Mao's heir apparent.

20 Yitzhak Shichor, "Demobilization: The Dialectics of PLA Troop Reduction," *China Quarterly* 146 (June 1995): 339. On Deng's successful efforts to reestablish control over the PLA in the 1980s, see Terence Lee, "Military Cohesion and Regime Maintenance: Explaining the Role of the Military in 1989 China and 1998 Indonesia," *Armed Forces and Society* 32, 1 (October 2005): 89-91.

21 On the PLA's performance in Vietnam, see Li Xiaobing, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007).

22 Changes in military doctrine have accompanied and reinforced downsizing. For the PLA's force size, see Anthony H. Cordesmann and Nicholas S. Yarosh, "Chinese Military Modernization and Force Development: A Western Perspective" (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies,

2012), p. 55.

23 Conscripts rarely enjoyed this benefit.

24 See, among many others, Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Hurst and O'Brien, "China's Contentious Pensioners"; Feng Chen, "Industrial Restructuring and Workers' Resistance in China," *Modern China* 29, 2 (April 2003): 237-62.

25 Vivienne Shue, *The Reach of the State: Sketches of the Chinese Body Politic* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). For example, there was no stock market in the Mao era. Now there are several and many officials have been assigned to supervise them. On this phenomenon more generally, see Steven K. Vogel, *Freer Markets, More Rules: Regulatory Reform in Advanced Industrial Countries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

26 "Yingji junguan zhaokan cangku Jiangsu tuiwubing jiuye nan," *Radio Free Asia*, May 5, 2004.

27 "Yantai junzhuang ganbu yaoqiu zai shiqi da fanying zhuan ye hou kunjing," *Radio Free Asia*, August 23, 2007. In an open letter, a group of 18,000 officers in Chongqing demanded the same retirement bonus given to civil servants. See http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201108/voiceofveteran/23_1.shtml. Accessed September 23, 2012.

28 "Shandong Weifang yue bai ming tuiwu junren dao Tiananmen bei jie," *Radio Free Asia*, July 21, 2009. For an example of 800 ex-officers who marched into a government compound, demanding to be recognized as cadres and treated the same as comrades who had state jobs, see "Wuhan 800 duo zhuan ye ganbu shi zhengfu menqian heping qingyuan," *Radio Free Asia*, November 21, 2011.

29 "Veterans Detained over Protest."

30 Kenneth Lieberthal and Michel Oksenberg, *Policy Making in China: Leaders, Structures, and Processes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988); Andrew Mertha, "Fragmented Authoritarianism 2.0: Political Pluralization in the Chinese Policy Process," *China Quarterly* 200 (December 2009): 995-1012.

31 Pierre Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 3.

32 See "Tuiwu junren shangfang chengxun xushang taishi," <http://cn.fmnnow.com/2012/05/06/5298>. Accessed February 24, 2014.

33 See “Bayi qianhou tuiwu junren jinjing shangfang qingkuang zongshu,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201106/voiceofveteran/20_1.shtml. Accessed February 11, 2014. In 2009, officers in Yantai, Shandong used the slogan “Resolutely Enforce Decommissioned Officer Policy” in a petition to the central government. See “Shandong Weifang yuebai ming.”

34 “Tuiwu laobing de nahan,” See http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/56_1.shtml. Accessed February 12, 2014.

35 “Tuiwu junren he zhuanye shiguan zhi Hunan shengwei sheng zhengfu ji Changsha shiwei zhengfu de gongkai xin,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201106/voiceofveteran/19_1.shtml. Accessed February 13, 2014.

36 Ibid.

37 For an open letter that notes that attention to stability enables local officials to reject veterans’ demands, however reasonable they are, see “Shandong sheng Yantai shi Fushan qu laobing daibiao gei zhongyang de gongkai xin,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/69_1.shtml. Accessed February 26, 2014.. In 2012, the Minister of Personnel and Human Resources was sued by over 150,000 officers for “trampling on the constitution” for removing their state cadre status. See “Quanguo 162,183 ming jundui zhuanye ganbu zhuang gao renshi bu,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201106/voiceofveteran/14_1.shtml. Accessed February 12, 2014.

38 “Shandong sheng Yantai shi.”

39 Chen Caiyou, “Jiti fang de tedian, chenying ji duice,” *Zhongguo jiancha* 22 (2011): 34-5.

40 Among many others, see Minxin Pei, “Fighting Corruption: A Difficult Challenge for Chinese Leaders,” in Cheng Li, ed., *China’s Changing Political Landscape* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. 236. On the consequences of corruption, see Andrew Wedeman, *Double Paradox: Rapid Growth and Rising Corruption in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

41 “Shubai ming tuiwu junren,” *Radio Free Asia*, January 10, 2012.

42 “Call for Army to Fight Graft”; “Veterans Detained over Protest.” For an example at the township level, much lower in the bureaucratic hierarchy, see “Tuiwu junren he zhuanye shiguan zhi Hunan shengwei.”

43 “Call for Army to Fight Graft.” Some even called the CCP a “class of bigwigs” (*quanguo jieji*). They compared their situation to imperial concubines who were banished to the “cold palace” when they

were no longer wanted. See “Yunnan 23,000 zhi zhong qiye junzhuan ganbu 7/1 xianci,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/27_1.shtml. Accessed March 11, 2014.

44 The veterans called upon the Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection to reverse its passive approach and instead to “investigate and punish the offenders.” See “Gansu fuyuan junguan 1/27/2010 shangfang Lanzhou junqu jiyao,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/78_1.shtml. Accessed February 12, 2014.

45 See Neil J. Diamant, *Embattled Glory: Veterans, Military Families, and the Politics of Patriotism in China, 1949-2007* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

46 We doubt that this rhetorical pose persuades many officials or civilians to support their cause. In contemporary China, neo-liberal discourse, market competition and individualism are nearly hegemonic. See Marc J. Blecher, “Hegemony and Workers’ Politics in China,” *China Quarterly* 170 (June 2002): 283-303. Veterans, too, may remind many people not of the glory days of collectivism and sacrifice, but questionable wars (such as Vietnam and Korea), the “bad old days” of the command economy, and bloated, inefficient organizations that have little place in today’s China.

47 Rising post-service expectations are also found elsewhere. For African-Americans after World War II, see Christopher Parker, *Fighting for Democracy*. On Russian veterans, see Joshua Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War and Mass Politics, 1905-1925* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 5, 50. On Australian and Soviet veterans, see Martin Crotty and Mark Edele, “Total War and Entitlement: Toward a Global History of Veteran Privilege,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 59, no. 1 (2013): 15-32.

48 Shi Nanjing, “Tuiwu junren jiti shangfang wenti tansuo;” *Mishu* 7 (1991): 42.

49 For photographs, see “China Detains Hundreds of Veterans Ahead of Third Plenum,” *Radio Free Asia*, November 5, 2013; “Veterans Converge on Beijing Over Social Support,” *Radio Free Asia*, July 25, 2013; http://wqw2010.blogspot.com/2011/10/blog-post_8127.html; <http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/jun-01052010100319.html>; <http://www.epochtimes.com/gb/13/11/18/n4013892.htm>; http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/45_1.shtml. All accessed on March 10, 2014.

50 See, for example, Hamish McDonald, “Veteran’s Protest Unsettles Beijing,” *The Age*, April 16, 2005.

51 Chen Caiyou, “Jiti fang,” p. 34. Unlike many countries, China does not have a Veterans’ Day. August 1st is the only military holiday on the calendar.

52 “Tuiwu junren he zhuanye shiguan zhi Hunan shengwei”; “Zhejiang sheng qiye tuiwu junguan shangfang shensu tuan,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/63_1.shtml. Accessed March 10, 2014. “Veterans Protest over Welfare,” *Radio Free Asia*, June 29, 2011.

53 Veterans protest often, but probably less than every day, in a country that had over 180,000 “collective incidents” (*qunti shijian*) in 2010. For this latter figure, see Yongnian Zheng, “China in 2011: Anger, Political Consciousness, Anxiety and Uncertainty,” *Asian Survey* 52, no. 1 (January-February 2013): 30.

54 See “Sichuan 160 duo min fuyuan junguan ji jiashu wei zai shengcun dao sheng zhengfu qingyuan,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/28_1.shtml. “Hunan Changsha fuyuan junren Liu Nanzheng xiang Wen Jiabao zongli kongsu ziqi shangfang bei An Yuanding ouda guanya,” http://blog.boxun.com/hero/201107/voiceofveteran/34_1.shtml. Accessed March 11, 2014. Ng Tze-wei and Minnie Chan, “Old Soldiers Fading Away,” *South China Morning Post*, August 3, 2007; “China Detains Hundreds of Veterans Ahead of Third Plenum”; “Yantai junzhuan ganbu yaoqiu zai shiqi da fanying zhuanye hou kunjing,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 23, 2007; “Veterans Protest over Welfare”; “Veterans Converge.”

55 “Quanguo 162, 183”; Ng and Chan, “Old Soldiers”; “Gansu fuyuan junguan.”

56 “Veterans Detained over Protest”; “Call for Army to Fight Graft.”

57 Ellis Joffe, “Party-Army Relations in China: Retrospect and Prospect,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 146 (June 1996), pp. 300, 305.

58 Amos Perlmutter and William LeoGrande, “The Party in Uniform: Toward a Theory of Civil-Military Relations in Communist Systems,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76, no. 4 (1982), pp. 786, 779. They write that “the party's position as sovereign authority, combined with the strict discipline of democratic centralism, assures that the first loyalty of dual-role elites will almost always lie with the party. . . serious conflicts, whether personal, ideological, or bureaucratic in genesis, *are resolved within the party*, not between the party and nonparty institutions or nonparty elites.” Emphasis added.

59 Even during the heyday of state planning it was impossible to provide employment for all officers. Well-before the reform era began, veterans engaged in political activism to secure higher status and respect. With increased professionalization during the 1950s and after the Cultural Revolution, PLA officers have been willing to question and even resist CCP policies. As noted by Joffe, the PLA is “not a Party stooge.” See “Party-Army Relations,” p. 300.

60 In contrast, Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan all have bureaucracies devoted to veteran affairs or national-level veteran organizations, which is the Western pattern as well.

61 For sub-groups of the weak and vulnerable, as defined by a director in the Labor and Social Security Ministry, see Lee, *Against the Law*, p. 201.

62 On the importance of “third parties” in Chinese protest, see Justin V. Hastings, “Perceiving a Single State: Escalation and Violence in Uighur Protests,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 52, 1 (January-February 2005): 28-38; Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Hualing Fu and Richard Cullen, “*Weiquan* (Rights Protection) Lawyering in an Authoritarian State: Building a Culture of Public-Interest Lawyering,” *China Journal* 59 (January 2008): 111-27; Lianjiang Li, “The Magnitude and Resilience of Trust in the Center: Evidence from Interviews with Petitioners in Beijing and a Local Survey in Rural China,” *Modern China* 39, 1 (January 2013): 3-36. For a dissenting view, see Ethan Michelson, “Justice from Above or Justice from Below? Lessons from Rural China for the Study of Disputing,” *China Quarterly* 193 (March 2008): 43-64.

63 Edna Lomsky-Feder, Nir Gazit and Eyal Ben-Ari, “Reserve Soldiers as Transmigrants: Moving between the Civilian and Military Worlds,” *Armed Forces and Society* 34, 4 (July 2008): 594.