



C H I N A A E R O S P A C E
S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

Political Commissars of the People's Liberation Army Air Force



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Preface

Knowing one's counterparts, who they are, how they got there, and who their replacements might be, is important to both leadership and organizations alike. This report provides an overview of the political commissars of the PLA Air Force and is a companion to CASI's report on the commanders of the PLAAF.

In July 2015, Lieutenant General Yu Zhongfu became the 13th Political Commissar (PC) of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force (PLAAF) since 1949. He also concurrently serves as the Secretary of the Standing Committee of the PLAAF's Party Committee. He received his third star with the rank of General in July 2017.ⁱ His current grade is Theater Command leader. He is expected to remain in this billet until summer 2021, at which time he will meet his mandatory retirement age of 65.

This report provides an overview of his predecessors, his career, how PCs are selected, and the role that the PLA Air Force Political Commissar plays. It also identifies the nine PLAAF officers who are eligible to replace him in 2021; however, a current non-Air Force officer could also be selected.

In addition, it provides examples of the types of meetings that Yu Zhongfu has attended since becoming the PC, which include meetings that focus on Communist Party-related issues and meetings that do not focus on Party issues, such as visits to units and participation in training conferences. Finally, the report discusses the PLAAF PC's involvement in military diplomacy.

The bottom line is that nothing is simple in the PLA and there are no clear patterns to becoming the next PC. However, it is important to understand the history of how the thirteen PLAAF PCs reached that position, which at least provide some grounds for speculation.

We hope you find this report useful as we continue to try and better understand the People's Liberation Army, who they are, what they want, and what makes them tick.

Dr. Brendan S. Mulvaney
Director, China Aerospace Studies Institute

ⁱ As of 2021, the PLA does not have a four-star General rank.

Laying the Foundation

There are no clear patterns to becoming the next Political Commissar (PC) of the PLA Air Force. As such, this section discusses the overall career paths for PLAAF officers (aka cadres) in general since 1949, to include joining the PLA, becoming a political officer, education, the PLA's 15-grade and 10-rank system, and changes to the mandatory retirement age.

Joining the PLA and Academic Education¹

In order to understand where the PLA's and the PLAAF's personnel system is today, it is important to identify the educational levels for PLA officers during several different periods.² Specifically, in the period between the founding of the Red Army in 1927 and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, only a small portion of officers were extricated from illiteracy while the majority of them were still illiterate. When the PRC was established in 1949, the PLA had 5.5 million troops. At that time, the enlisted force consisted primarily of illiterate peasant volunteers, and the ratio of officers to enlisted members was about 1:1.³

In 1950, the PLA had 57 officer institutions, a number that rose to 246 by 1956.⁴ During the 1950s, most officers were still illiterate or barely literate.⁵ Therefore, at that time, the main content of the training classes set up by the units was teaching people how to read and write.⁶ Starting in 1950, most officers only studied for six months to two years before they received a high-school equivalent certificate, which focused on reading and writing as well as Communist Party ideology. They then assumed their operational billet with only a little specialty training. The PLA shut down a high proportion of its academic institutions, including technical schools, during the Cultural Revolution (1956-1966). The number of academic institutions was reduced from 246 in 1957 to 116 in 1965.⁷ In the late 1960s, 93.4 percent of officers had lower than a high-school educational level. In December 1978, there were still 91.9 percent of officers with less than a high-school level of educational.

Until 1982, a high proportion of officers joined the PLA voluntarily and began as enlisted personnel for up to three years (ages 15-17), at which time they received a direct promotion as an officer based on political reliability rather than operational capabilities, doing so without any formal education.⁸ The PLAAF ceased this program in 1982, such that all officers had to graduate from one of the PLA academic institutions with a secondary, post-secondary, or bachelor's degree. Even so, a high proportion of officers still came from the enlisted ranks, but they had to attend an academic institution before they received their officer promotion. The situation underwent quite a tremendous change in the late 1980s, when 42.3 percent of officers had received education in program at or above the level of college, i.e., a two- to three-year post-secondary program or a

four-year bachelor's degree.ⁱⁱ In 2000, that figure had risen as high as 71.8 percent. The PLA did not stop offering high school equivalency degrees for officers at its academic institutions until 1995.

Under Deng Xiaoping's guidance, distrust of educated officers began to fade in the early 1980s. For example, during an interview in 1985, PLAAF Commander Zhang Tingfa, who was a career political officer and who had served as the PLAAF PC before becoming the commander, discussed changes by saying, "People throughout our country are talking about respecting knowledge and talented people, and taking loving care of intellectuals. So is the PLAAF, because knowledge and talented people are indispensable for the modernization of our troops."⁹ By 1986, the PLA as a whole had increased the number of academic institutions from 115 in 1977; however, the system was downsized yet again to 67 in 1998. That number was further reduced to 34 in 2017.¹⁰

Functional and Administrative Political Departments and Divisions

Within the PLA, the highest functional and administrative political organization was the General Political Department (GPD) until 2016 when it was renamed the Central Military Commission (CMC) Political Work Department (PWD). Below the GPD / CMC PWD level, there have been Political Departments (now PWD) at the service, Military Region (MR) (now Theater Command (TC),) corps, division, and brigade levels. At the regiment level, there are Political Divisions and now Political Work Divisions. Together, these organizations are identified as 1st-level functional and administrative "departments", each of which have 2nd- and 3rd-level "departments" (bureaus, divisions, offices, or branches). There are not any functional and administrative "departments" below the regiment level.

Officers who fill the leadership billets (i.e., director or deputy director) in each of these "departments" begin their career as cadets in a political academic institution. They then work their way up their career as staff officers or leaders in the 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-level "departments" at the regiment and above level. Very rarely do any of them become the political instructor at the company level, political director at the battalion level, or political commissar at the regiment and above levels.

Becoming a Political Officer¹¹

A high percentage of political officers who serve as commanding and deputy commanding officersⁱⁱⁱ at the company and battalion level are selected from company-grade officers who have

ⁱⁱ The PLA uses the term "university/college graduate" (大学毕业生) as a generic term that includes personnel with a three-year, post-secondary diploma (大专 / 大专毕业生) or a four-year bachelor's degree (本科 / 本科毕业生).

ⁱⁱⁱ The PLA uses the term "commanding officer" for anyone in a leadership position. This is distinct from a unit "Commander". So, the head of the Training Department would be called a "commanding officer" but is not a commander".

been Communist Party members since they were cadets and are already serving in the military/command track; however, some political officers also come from the logistics, equipment, and special technical track. As a result, new political officers already have some operational experience at the “grassroots” level (e.g., battalion and below). They continue to build on this experience as members of the unit’s Party Committee and Standing Committee throughout the rest of their careers.

As a general rule, political officers who become unit political leaders or deputies at the company level have not received any formal education or training to become a political officer. Based on a review of biographic information for the PLAAF PCs who joined the PLA after 1949, the only formal political officer professional military education they receive occurs through either an in-residence course at one of the political colleges/academies or an in-residence or correspondence course from the Central Party School for officers at the regiment-level and above. Political officers at the level of division and above also attend an in-residence, joint-service course at the PLA National Defense University, but the focus of the course is not on political work.

Meanwhile, almost all political division/department directors and deputy directors, as well as political staff officers at every level, begin as cadets in one of the services’ political colleges/academies and then receive their intermediate-level education there as well. The Air Force Command College also has undergraduate cadet programs for political staff officers. While these officers move up their career path in the Political Department (now Political Work Department) as a staff officer or the deputy director or director of a second- or third-level functional and administrative department, they rarely become a PC.

Military Diplomacy

The PLA’s GPD, which is currently the CMC PWD, did not become actively involved in the PLA’s foreign exchange program until 1988, when the GPD Director, General Yang Baibing, traveled to East Germany and the PLAAF’s PC, Lieutenant General Zhu Guang, followed immediately thereafter with a trip to the United States.¹² One of the primary reasons for this lag is that officers visiting abroad from the GPD system presented a challenge to the foreign relations program. Specifically, except for visits to other communist countries that also have a PC system, it has been difficult determining who the PCs’ counterparts are and what they would discuss.

A unique situation arose in November 1988 when the PLAAF’s PC, Zhu Guang (1985-1992), who was PLAAF Commander Wang Hai’s co-equal in grade (military-region leader), but one rank lower, visited the United States.^{iv} Because the USAF doesn’t have a direct counterpart, Zhu’s host was the Secretary of the Air Force, Pete Aldridge, who had visited China in September

^{iv} During the visit, the author of this report was one of the escorts and had the opportunity to have lengthy one-on-one conversations with him at night and learned a lot about how the Political Commissar System works.

1987 along with the USAF Thunderbirds.¹³ In September 1988, the PLA re-instituted its rank system for the first time since it was abolished in 1966, so Zhu wore his new rank of lieutenant general.

As shown in the table below, although PLAAF PCs have traveled abroad to 16 countries since 1998, they apparently have not traveled every year.¹⁴ The only countries visited more than once are Russia (three times) and Cuba (two times), both of which are communist countries with military PCs, while no visits were made to any Asian countries. The last trip noted was in 2007. One reason Deng Changyou may not have traveled in 2008 was because of his involvement during the Sichuan earthquake and the Olympics; however, he did not travel at all during the last three years of his assignment either.

Although General Tian Xiusi became the PC during the 18th Party Congress in 2012 and General Yu Zhongfu became the PC in 2015, neither of them has traveled abroad. There is also no information indicating that they have hosted any foreign leaders.

PLAAF Political Commissar Travel Abroad: 1988-2021

PCs	Dates	Travel Abroad
Xiao Hua	Oct 1949-Apr 1950	None
None	Apr 1950-Feb 1957	
Wu Faxian	Feb 1957-May 1965	
Yu Lijin	May 1965-Sep 1968	
Wang Huiqiu	Sep 1968-May 1973	
Fu Chuanzuo	May 1973-Nov 1975	
Zhang Tingfa	Nov 1975-Apr 1977	
Gao Houliang	Apr 1977-Jul 1985	
Zhu Guang	Jul 1985-Nov 1992	
Ding Wenchang	Nov 1992-Feb 1999	Russia, Cuba (1996) Portugal, Turkey (1998)
Qiao Qingchen	Feb 1999-May 2002	Italy, Russia (2000) Cuba, Mexico, Venezuela (2001)
Deng Changyou	May 2002-Sep 2012	Greece, Russia (2003) Egypt, Tanzania (2004) Argentina (2006) Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe (2007)
Tian Xiusi	Oct 2012 – Jul 2015	None
Yu Zhongfu	Jul 2015 – Present	

Profiles of the Previous Thirteen Political Commissars

This section provides profiles of the PLAAF's 13 Political Commissars (PC) since 1949, including Yu Zhongfu, who became the 13th PC in July 2015. The information includes the following information in each profile: date of birth, date of death, place of birth, when he joined the PLA, his career path, when he received his rank promotions, and when he served as a member in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Party Congress and National People's Congress (NPC).^v Table 8 in Appendix 1 shows how they fit into the structure during the PLAAF's Party Congresses, which occur every five years. As a result of inconsistent career paths, it is difficult to predict in advance who future PLAAF PCs will be, but this report provides a list of the most probable contenders to replace Yu Zhongfu in mid-2021, when he will reach his mandatory retirement age of 65.



1. Xiao Hua (萧华): 1916-1985; Xingguo, Jiangxi Province. He joined the Red Army in 1930. He served in various political officer positions in Red Army and PLA units until the PRC was formed in October 1949. He then served as the PLAAF's first PC for only six months from October 1949 to April 1950 (age 33). From 1950 until he retired in September 1983, he served as an Army officer in various positions in the General Political Department, the Academy of Military Science (AMS), and the CMC. He was a CMC member from 1956 to 1967. He received the rank of General in 1955, when ranks were implemented. He was a representative at the 8th Party congress (1956), and a Member of the 8th, 11th, and 12th Party Central Committees (1956, 1977, and 1982).¹⁵



2. Wu Faxian (吴发宪): 1915-2004; Yongfeng, Jiangxi Province. He joined the Red Army in 1930; served as a political officer in the Eighth Route Army and New Fourth Army; participated in Long March; served as a Deputy PC and Director of the Political Department in the 14th Bingtuan (14th Army), which became the core of the PLAAF in November 1949. In May 1950, Wu became a PLAAF Deputy PC and concurrently Director of the Political Department. For all practical purposes, he served as the PC, since Xiao Hua was transferred to the General Political Department (GPD) in April 1950. Wu officially became the PLAAF PC in February 1957 (age 42). In May 1965, he became the Commander and, in December 1967, was simultaneously assigned as a Deputy Chief of the

^v The PLA had a rank system from 1955 to 1965, at which time it was abolished. It did not implement a new rank system until 1988. Under the current system, there are only 1-star Major Generals (MGEN), 2-star Lieutenant Generals (LGEN), and 3-star Generals (GEN). There are no 4-star Generals.

General Staff and Deputy Director of the CMC's General Office. In April 1969, he became a Member of the CCP Politburo. He was a member of Defense Minister Lin Biao's clique during the Cultural Revolution and was arrested the day Defense Minister Lin Biao's aircraft crashed in Mongolia in September 1971 (age 56). He was kicked out of the Party in August 1973 and was sentenced to 17 years in prison in January 1981. He received the rank of Lieutenant General (LGEN) in 1955 when ranks were implemented. He was a representative at the 2nd and 3rd NPC (1959 and 1964) and a Member of the CCP 9th Party Congress' Politburo (1969).¹⁶

Note: The PLAAF did not have a Commander following Wu Faxian's arrest in September 1971 until Ma Ning became Commander in May 1973.



3. Yu Lijin (余立金): 1913-1978; Daye, Hubei Province. He joined the Red Army in 1928. Besides participating in the Long March, he served in various Red Army and PLA political officer positions through the late 1950s or early 1960s, when he was selected to be the PC of the Nanjing Military Region Air Force (MRAF). He then became a PLAAF Deputy PC while concurrently serving as the Nanjing MRAF PC. In May 1965 (age 52), he replaced Wu Faxian as the PLAAF's PC. In 1968 (age 55), he became the PC of the Civil Aviation Administration of China. He received the rank of LGEN in 1955 when ranks were implemented. He was a representative at the 8th and 11th Party Congress (1956 and 1977), and a representative at the 4th and 5th NPC (1975 and 1978).¹⁷



4. Wang Huiqiu (王辉球): 1911-1994; Wanan, Jiangxi Province. He joined the Red Army in 1928. Besides participating in the Long March, he served in various Red Army and PLA political officer positions through 1952. From January 1953 to March 1960, he was the Director of the PLAAF's Political Department and a Member of the Standing Committee of the PLAAF's Party Committee. From March 1960 to September 1968, he was one of the PLAAF's Deputy PCs and was concurrently the Director of the Political Department until July 1964. September 1968 (age 57) to May 1973 (age 62), he was the PLAAF PC and Deputy Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. In May 1973, he became the PC of the Shenyang Military Region (MR). He received the rank of LGEN in 1955 when ranks were implemented. He was an alternate representative at 7th Party congress (1945), a representative at 9th Party Congress (1969), and a Member of 9th Central Committee.¹⁸



5. Fu Chuanzuo (傅传作): 1914-1982; Shishou, Hubei Province. He joined the Red Army in 1930. Besides participating in the Long March, he served in various Red Army and PLA political officer positions until 1950. From September 1950 to September 1955, he was the Commander of the Southwest (Xinan) MRAF. From August 1958 to September 1955, he also served concurrently as a Deputy Commander of the South Central (Zhongnan) MRAF and Commander of the Guangzhou command post.

From September 1955 to May 1973, he was the Commander of the Wuhan MRAF. From May 1973 (age 59) to October 1975 (age 61), he was the PLAAF PC and first Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. He received the rank of Major General (MGEN) in 1955 when ranks were implemented. He was an alternate Member of 9th Party Central Committee (1969), a representative at the 10th Party Congress (1973), a Member of 10th Party Central Committee, and a representative at the 4th NPC (1975).¹⁹



6. Zhang Tingfa (张廷发): 1918–2010: Shaxian, Fujian Province. He joined the Red Army in 1933. He participated in the Long March. During the 1930s and 1940s, he served as a platoon Commander, the Director of a communications regiment, Chief of Staff in a brigade, and the Director of communications and operations departments in various headquarters. After the PRC was established, he served as a Deputy Army Commander before being transferred to the PLAAF in 1951. After transferring to the

PLAAF, he served as a Deputy Chief of Staff (1953 to 1958), Chief of Staff (November 1958 to March 1962), Deputy Commander and concurrently Chief of Staff (March 1962 to September 1966), Deputy Commander (September 1966 to October 1975), PC (November 1975 to April 1977; age 57-59), and then became the Commander from April 1977 until July 1985 (age 67). As PLAAF Commander, he was also a CMC Member from August 1977 to September 1982, and was a Member of the CCP Politburo from August 1977 until September 1985. He received the rank of MGEN in 1955 when ranks were implemented. He was a representative at the 10th, 11th, and 12th Party Congresses (1973, 1977, and 1982), a Member of the 11th and 12th Party Central Committee and Politburo, and a representative at the 5th NPC (1978).²⁰



7. Gao Houliang (高厚良): 1915-2006; Xinxian, Henan Province. He joined the Red Army in 1932. He served in various Red Army and PLA political officer positions until 1950. In 1950, he became the PC of the PLAAF's 3rd Pursuit Brigade and then the PC of the 3rd Air Division. From 1952 to 1959, he served as a Deputy Commander and Commander of an Air Corps and concurrently as a Deputy Commander of an East China (Huadong) PLA Air Defense Force unit. From 1959 to 1966, he was a Deputy Commander of the Nanjing MRAF. From 1966 to 1973, he was the Commander of the Chengdu MRAF Command Post. From May 1973 to April 1977, he was a deputy PC of the PLAAF and, until October 1975, he was simultaneously Director of the Political Department. From April 1977 (age 62) to July 1985 (age 70), he was the PLAAF PC. He received the rank of MGEN in 1955 when ranks were implemented. He was a representative at the 11th and 12th Party Congress (1977 and 1982), an alternate Member of the 12th Party Central Committee, a Member of the 11th CMC (1977), and a representative at the 4th and 5th NPC (1978 and 1983).²¹



8. Zhu Guang (朱光): 1922; Changqing, Shandong Province. He joined the Eighth Route Army in 1939. He served in various Red Army and PLA political officer positions until 1970. From 1970 to 1974, he was a Deputy Director of the Shenyang MRAF's Political Department. From 1974 to 1978, he was the PC of an Air Corps. From 1978 to 1980, he was a Deputy PC in the Shenyang MRAF and simultaneously the Director of the Political Department. From 1980 to July 1985, he returned to the army and was a Member of the CMC's Discipline Inspection Commission and concurrently Director of the General Political Department's Cadre Department. From July 1985 (age 63) to November 1992 (age 70), he again became an Air Force officer and was the PLAAF PC and the Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. He received the rank of LGEN in 1988 when ranks were reimplemented. He was a representative at the 12th and 14th Party Congress (1982 and 1992), a Member 12th Party Central Committee, and a representative at the 8th NPC (1993).²²



9. Ding Wenchang (丁文昌): 1933; Suzhou, Anhui Province. He joined the PLA in July 1951. From July 1951 to January 1954, he was a cadet at the 16th Infantry School, at the PLAAF 5th Preparatory *Zongdui*, and the PLAAF's 10th Aviation School. From January 1954 to March 1966, he served as a mechanic in an air division, an inspector in an air division's Political Department's Organization Office, and a Deputy PC in a flight group. From March 1966 to October 1970, he was a Secretary in the PLAAF Political Department's Secretary Division. From October 1970 to May 1980, he served in an Air Corps as

a Deputy Director and then the Director of the Political Department's Cadre Division, and then as a Deputy Director of the Cadre Department in the Shenyang MRAF's Political Department. From May 1980 to July 1981, he was a Deputy PC in an air division. From July 1981 to May 1983, he was the Director of the Shenyang MRAF's Political Departments Cadre Department. From May 1983 to November 1985, he served as a Deputy PC in an Air Corps (from September 1983 to January 1984, he was on temporary duty as a student at the Central Party School). From October 1985 to April 1988, he was a Deputy Director of the PLAAF Political Department. From April 1988 to November 1992, he was the Director of the PLAAF Political Department and a Member of the PLAAF Party Committee's Standing Committee (From March to May 1989, he was a student at the National Defense University). From November 1992 (age 59) to January 1999 (age 66), he was the PLAAF PC and the Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee. He received the rank of MGEN in 1988 when ranks were reimplemented. He was promoted to LGEN in July 1990 and General in January 1996. He was a Member of the 14th and 15th Party Central Committee (1992 and 1997) and a representative at the 7th NPC (1987).²³



10. Qiao Qingchen (乔清晨): 1939; Zhengzhou, Henan Province. He joined the PLAAF in July 1956 and attended the 2nd Aviation Preparatory School until June 1958. He was a cadet at the 1st Aviation Preparatory School from July 1956 to February 1959 and joined the Communist Party in May 1960. From February 1959 to June 1962, he was a cadet at the 6th Aviation School. From June 1962 to December 1965, he was a regimental pilot. From December 1965 to June 1970, he was a pilot in an independent flight squadron.

From June 1970 to May 1971, he was a Deputy PC in an independent flight group. From May 1971 to July 1978, he served as the PC in an independent flight group. From July 1978 to September 1979, he was an aviation division Deputy Commander. From September 1979 to May 1983, he was an Air Division Commander. From May 1983 to October 1985, he was the Director of the Political Department and a Deputy PC of the 4th Air Corps in Shanghai. From October 1985 to January 1990, he was the Director of the Political Department in the 8th Air Corps in Fuzhou. From January to June 1990, he was the Deputy PC of the 8th Air Corps. From June 1990 to January 1993, he was the PC of the Xi'an Command Post (from March to July 1990, he attended a course at the Central Party School). From January 1993 to January 1996, he was a Deputy PC in the Jinan MRAF. From January 1996 to October 1997, he was concurrently the commander of the Beijing MRAF, a deputy commander of the Beijing MR, a Member of the Beijing MR Party Committee's Standing Committee, and Deputy Secretary of the Beijing MRAF Party committee. From October 1997 to January 1999, he was a PLAAF Deputy Commander and Member of the PLAAF Party committee's Standing Committee. From January 1999 (age 60) to May 2002 (age 63), he was the PLAAF PC and Secretary of the PLAAF Party committee. From May 2002 to October 2007 (age

68), he was the Commander of the PLAAF and Secretary of the PLAAF Party committee. During the 4th Plenum of the 16th Party Congress in September 2004, he also became a CMC Member. He received rank promotions in September 1988 (MGEN), when ranks were reimplemented, July 1997 (LGEN), and May 2002 (GEN).²⁴



11. Deng Changyou (邓昌友): 1947; Pengxi, Sichuan Province. He joined the PLAAF in March 1968. From March 1968 to December 1972, he was an enlisted engineer and was then commissioned as an officer and a platoon leader. From December 1972 to March 1974, he was a staff officer in the Propaganda Office of a PLAAF engineering *zongdui*'s Political Department. From March 1974 to May 1976, he was the Political Instructor in an engineering company. From May 1976 to March 1979, he was the PC for an engineering group. From March 1979 to May 1983, he was the Director of the Political Department in an Engineering Zongdui. May 1983 to August 1986, he was a Deputy PC in a command post in the Kunming MRAF (from September 1981 to July 1983, he was TDY as a student at the PLA Political Academy). From August 1986 to June 1990, he served as the Deputy Secretary in the Wulumuqi Command Post's Discipline Inspection Commission. June 1990 to January 1993, he was the Director of the Wulumuqi Command Post's Political Department. From January 1993 to July 1996, he was the PC of an Air Corps (from August 1993 to February 1996, he completed a correspondence course from the Central Party School). From July 1996 to March 1997, he was a Deputy PC and concurrently the Secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission in the Lanzhou MRAF. From March to November 1997, he was a Deputy Director of the PLAAF Political Department. From November 1997 to May 2002, he was Director of the PLAAF Political Department and concurrently a Member of the PLAAF Party Committee's Standing Committee. From May 2002 (age 55) until September 2012 (age 65), he was the PLAAF PC. While Qiao Qingchen was the Commander, Qiao was the PLAAF Party Committee Secretary and Deng was the Deputy. When Xu Qiliang became Commander, Deng became the Secretary and Xu the Deputy Secretary. He received rank promotions in July 1992 (MGEN), July 1999 (LGEN), and June 2006 (GEN).²⁵



12. GEN Tian Xiushi (田修思): 1950; Mengzhou, Henan Province. He joined the PLA in 1968 as an enlisted member. After becoming an officer and company Commander, he shifted to the political track. He spent his career in the Xinjiang Military District and then in the headquarters of the Lanzhou MR until becoming the PC of the Chengdu MR in 2009. He transferred to the PLAAF to become its PC in 2012. He attended the NDU Basic Course for a year (1994–1995) and a Political Work Course at the Xi'an Political College

for almost two years (2002–2004). Tian assumed his position in October 2012 (62) and retired in 2015 (age 65). He received rank promotions in July 1997 (MGEN), in July 2006 (LGEN), and in July 2012 (GEN).²⁶



13. GEN Yu Zhongfu (于忠福) 1956; Shandong Province. He became the 13th PLAAF PC and Secretary of the PLAAF Party Committee's Standing Committee in July 2015 at the age of 59.²⁷ He joined the PLAAF in 1974 as an enlisted member before becoming an officer and working his way up the career ladder as a political officer with various leadership positions in subordinate administrative and functional organizations within the Political Department starting at the regiment level. He then became a PC in various units, including the 19th Fighter Division (Jinan MRAF) and the 24th Fighter Division (Beijing MRAF), before becoming a Deputy Director of the Nanjing MRAF's Political Department. He then became the PC of the Air Force Shanghai Command Post, the PC of the Jinan MRAF, and the PC of the Nanjing MRAF. He received rank promotions in March 1994 (SCOL), in July 2007 (MGEN), in July 2014 (LGEN), and in July 2017 (GEN). He was a Member of the CCP's 19th Party Congress and Central Committee and the 13th NPC.

PLAAF Political Commissars' Career Paths

A review of the profiles for the 13 PLAAF PCs found the following patterns and differences:

- Most importantly, there is no clear path to becoming the PLAAF PC.
- It is not clear if any of the first eight PCs started their career as an enlisted member and then got a direct promotion as an officer (cadre) or if they got an automatic promotion when they joined the Red Army.
- The first PC (Xiao Hua) only served for six months after the PLAAF was established, and the next PC (Wu Faxian) was not assigned until 1957.
- The first eight PCs plus Tian Xiusi (#12) all began their careers in the army.
- Once they became a PLAAF officer, only two of them (Xiao Hua and Zhu Guang) shifted back and forth between the army and the PLAAF.
- Four of the last five PCs spent their entire career in the PLAAF.
- Qiao Qingchen is the only PC who began his career as a pilot.
- Only two of them served as an MRAF PC.
- The first four of them served as a deputy PC of the PLAAF. However, none of the last five served in this billet, while two of them served as the Director for the Political Department, which is the same grade as the Deputy PC.
- Five of them shifted between Commander and PC billets at different levels.
- Three of them served as the PLAAF PC and then became the PLAAF Commander.

Career Paths of the PLAAF's Political Commissars

PLAAF PC	Army	Div	Corps CP	MRAF	AF HD	AF PD	AF DPC	AF DCDR	AF CDR	CMC
Xiao Hua	X									
Wu Faxian	X						X		X	X
Yu Lijin	X			PC			X			
Wang Huiqiu	X					DIR	X			
Fu Chuanzuo	X		CDR	CDR						
Zhang Tingfa	X				DCS CS			X	X	X
Gao Houliang	X		DCDR CDR	DCDR		DIR	X			
Zhu Guang	X		PC	DPC						
Ding Wenchang			DPC	PD		DIR				
Qiao Qingchen		DC DR/CDR	DPC PD DIR	DPC CDR					X	
Deng Changyou			DPC PC	DPC		DIR				
Tian Xiusi	X			PD						
Yu Zhongfu		PC	PC	PD PC						

CP = Command Post^{vi}; MRAF = Military Region Air Force; HD = Headquarters Department; PD = Political Department; DPC = Deputy Political Commissar; DCDR = Deputy Commander; CDR = Commander; DCS = Deputy Chief of Staff; CS = Chief of Staff^{vii}; and DIR = Director.^{viii}

^{vi} A Command Post is a corps-level headquarters.

^{vii} The Chief of Staff is the Director of the Headquarters Department and is the same grade as a Deputy Commander.

^{viii} The Director of the Political Department is the same grade as a Deputy Political Commissar and are oftentimes concurrent billets.

The following bullets show the years each PC served and their ages during that time. As noted earlier, in the early 1990s, the mandatory retirement age of 65 was implemented for MR leader-grade billets; however, there are always exceptions to the rule.

- Yu Lijin (1965-1968) served from age 52 to 55 but then moved to the Civil Aviation Administration.
- Wang Huiqiu (1968-1973) served from age 57 to 62 and then became the PC of the Shenyang MR.
- Fu Chuanzuo (1973-1975) served from age 59 to 61 and then retired.
- Zhang Tingfa (1975-1977) served from age 57 to 59 and then became the Commander of the PLAAF and retired at age 67.
- Gao Houliang (1977-1985) served from age 62 to 70 and then retired.
- Zhu Guang (1985-1992) served from age 63 to 70 and then retired.
- Ding Wenchang (1992-1999) served from age 59 to 63 and then retired.
- Qiao Qingchen (1999-2002) served from age 60 to 63 and then became the Commander of the PLAAF and retired at age 68.
- Deng Changyou (2002-2012) served from age 55 to 65 and then retired.
- Tian Xiusi (2012-2015) served from age 62 to 65 and then retired.
- Yu Zhongfu (2015-present) served starting at age 59.

The PC normally serves as the secretary for their unit's Party Standing Committee. However, if the commander has ever served as a political officer during his career, then he serves as the Secretary. For example, three PLAAF Commanders (Wu Faxian, Zhang Tingfa, and Qiao Qingchen) who had previously served as the PLAAF PC remained as the Secretary once they became the PLAAF Commander and in those cases, the PC served as the Deputy Secretary until the Commander retired, whereupon the PC then became the Secretary.

Possible Replacements for Yu Zhongfu

Although, as noted in this report so far, there has not been a clear path to becoming the PLAAF PC, a review of available information indicates that there are currently nine PLAAF officers who are potential candidates to replace Yu Zhongfu when he reaches age 65 in mid-2021.²⁸ Of note, all of them except Guo Puxiao are TC deputy leader grade officers with the rank of LGEN. Guo is a TC leader-grade officer with the rank of General (GEN). One other possible contender could be whoever is the current Secretary of the PLAAF Discipline Inspection Commission.

The following profiles are for the nine possible replacements for Yu Zhongfu identified in Table 6 above. Of note, although eight of them are Lieutenant Generals, no current photos showing them with two stars were found for any of them.



LGEN Cai Lishan (蔡立山) (b. unknown) He became the PC of the Northern TCAF Theater Air Force (TCAF) as well as a deputy PC of the Northern Theater Command (TC) in December 2019.²⁹ He previously served as the Director of the Beijing MRAF Political Departments' Organization Division. In 2007, he became the PC of the Beijing MRAF's 6th Surface-to-Air Missile Division (93605 unit). In July 2011, he became a Deputy PC in the PLAAF 15th Airborne Corps. In September 2014, he became the PC for the Fuzhou Command Post (Fujian Province, Nanjing MRAF). In July 2015, he became the Director of the Chengdu MRAF Political Department, which became the Western TCAF Political Work Department in January 2016. He received rank promotions in July 2012 (MGEN) and December 2019 (LGEN).



LGEN Chen Xuebin (陈学斌) (b. 1959, location unknown) He became the PLAAF's single Deputy PC in May 2018.^{ix30} Until he assumed his current billet, he was a career PLA Navy political officer with assignments involving naval aviation. He previously served as the Director of the Political Department in the North Sea Fleet's (NSF) 5th Air Division. He then became one of the Deputy PCs and then the PC in the same unit. In 2009, he then became a Deputy Director of the NSF Political Department. In July 2012, he became an NSF Deputy PC and concurrent PC for the NSF's Naval Aviation Headquarters. In December 2015, he then became the Secretary of the PLAN's Discipline Inspection Commission and a PLAN Party Standing Committee Member before becoming a PLAN Headquarters Deputy PC and concurrent Director of the Political Work Department in January 2018. He received a rank promotion in July 2010 (Rear Admiral) and July 2017 (Vice

Admiral).^x When he switched services in May 2018, he received a “promotion” to Air Force LGEN. He was a Member of the CCP’s 19th Party Congress.



LGEN Du Yuanfang (堵远放) (b. unknown) He became the Director of the PLAAF Headquarters’ Political Work Department in January 2017.³¹ In the mid-to-late 2000s, he served as a Deputy Director and then Director of the PLAAF Headquarters’ Political Department’s Cadre Department. In July 2011, he became the PC of the Air Force Fuzhou Command Post (94788 unit) in the Guangzhou MRAF. In July 2013, he became the Director of the Guangzhou MRAF Headquarters’ Political Department. In September 2015, he became a Deputy Director of the PLAAF Headquarters’ Political Department, which became the Political Work Department in January 2016. He received rank promotions in July 2012 (MGEN) and July 2018 (LGEN). He was a Member of the CCP’s 19th Party Congress.



GEN Guo Puxiao (郭普校) (b. 1964, Shaanxi Province) He became the PC of the CMC Logistic Support Department in December 2019 with the grade of TC leader.³² In 1981, he graduated from high school in Lanzhou, Gansu Province, and joined the PLAAF.^{xi} He later served as the PC for the Ürümqi Command Post (Lanzhou MRAF), the PC for the 37th Air Division (Lanzhou MRAF), and the Director of the 15th Airborne Corps’ Political Work Department. In 2014 he became the PC of the 15th Airborne Corps. In September 2017, he became the PC of the Central TCAF and a concurrent Deputy PC of the Central TC. He received rank promotions in 2012 (MGEN), in July 2018 (LGEN), and in December 2020 (GEN). He was a Member of the CCP’s 19th Party Congress and the 13th NPC.

^x Note: Since all PLA ranks are based on the Army/Ground Force, Navy flag officers are identified as Navy Major Generals, Lieutenant Generals, and Generals. The PLA does not have an official English term for rear admiral, vice admiral, or admiral; however, the PLA often uses these terms in English language articles and when meeting face to face with foreigners. In addition, Air Force flag officers always have the term Air Force in front of their ranks, and are identified as Air Force Major Generals, Lieutenant Generals, and Generals.

^{xi} It is not clear if he joined as an enlisted member and then received a direct promotion as an officer within three years or if he was selected automatically as an officer.



LGEN Jiang Ping (姜平) (b. unknown) He became the PC of the Western TCAF and a concurrent Western TC Deputy PC in January 2019.³³ Starting in March 2013, he served as the PC of the PLAAF Aviation University. In June 2016, he became a Deputy Director of the PLAAF Headquarters' Political Work Department. He received a rank promotion in July 2014 (MGEN) and December 2019 (LGEN). He was a Member of the CCP's 13th NPC.



LGEN Liu Dawei (刘德伟) (b. 1958, Shandong Province) He became a Deputy Director of the CMC Political Work Department in August 2018.³⁴ He previously served as PC in the Air Force Aviation University and then as a Deputy Director of the PLAAF Political Department. In July 2015, he then became the PC of the Nanjing MRAF, which became the Eastern TCAF in January 2016, at which time he also became a concurrent Eastern TC Deputy PC. He received rank promotions in 2010 (MGEN) and July 2016 (LGEN).

He was a member of the CCP's 19th Party Congress Discipline Inspection Commission and the 13th NPC.



LGEN Wang Chengnan (王成男) (b. 1964, Jilin Province) He became the PC of the Central TCAF and a concurrent Central TC Deputy PC in May 2020.³⁵ Starting in the early 2000s, he served as a Deputy Director of the Air Force Aviation University's^{xii} Political Department, the PC for the 1st Air Division (Shenyang MRAF), and then a Deputy PC of the 15th Airborne Corps (Unit 95829). In July 2017, he became the PC of the Airborne Corps.^{xiii} From December 2019 until May 2020, he served as the Secretary of the

PLAAF's Discipline Inspection Commission. He received rank promotions in May 2016 (MGEN) and in December 2019 (LGEN). He was a member of the CCP's 13th NPC and the Hubei Province's 12th People's Congress.

^{xii} The PLAAF Aviation University was created in 2004 as a corps-deputy-leader-grade organization.

^{xiii} Note: In April 2017, the PLAAF dropped the number 15 from the Airborne Corps' designation.



LGEN Xu Xisheng (徐西盛) (b. 1964, Shandong Province) He became the PC of the Southern TCAF and a concurrent Southern TC Deputy PC in June 2017.³⁶ He previously served as the PC in the Fuzhou Command Post (Nanjing MRAF) in the early 2010s. In February 2015, he became the Director of the Beijing MRAF Headquarters' Political Department and its successor, the Central TCAF Headquarters' Political Work Department. He received rank promotions in July 2013 (MGEN) and in July 2018 (LGEN).

He was a member of the CCP's 13th NPC.



LGEN Zhong Weiguo (钟卫国) (b. 1961, Zhejiang Province) He became the PC of the Eastern TCAF and a concurrent Eastern TC Deputy PC in June 2019.³⁷ He previously served in the 2000s as the Director of the Lanzhou MRAF Political Department's Cadre Division, and then the PC of the Ürümqi Command Post (Unit 93886) in the Lanzhou MRAF. In January 2012, he became the PC of the Nanning Base (Guangzhou MRAF). In January 2016, he became a Deputy PC for the Western TCAF. He received

rank promotions in July 2012 (MGEN) and in December 2019 (LGEN). In 2012, he was a member of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region's 11th People's Congress.

Analysis of the Possible Contenders

Based on the information above for the nine possible contenders, the following bullets may help narrow down the pool, but no single name is presented as the definite replacement. Given that Yu's predecessor assumed his billet at age 62 and served for only three years before he reached his mandatory retirement age of 65 implies that all nine of the candidates are most likely eligible based on their age. Given that four of the potential candidates have served in two different billets at the TC deputy leader grade may indicate that they are at the top of the list. All nine of them will be eligible for their third star within one to two years after assuming their billet.

As noted for the previous 13 PCs, serving as a PLAAF Headquarters Deputy PC did not appear to be a criterion, while serving as the Director of the Political Department may have been important. However, only one of the nine possible contenders has served as a Deputy PC and only one has served as the Director of the Political Department. As such, neither of these billets may be a tie-breaker.

The addition starting in 2016 of the Secretary of the Discipline Inspection Commission to the Standing Committee as an equal to the Deputy PC and the Director of the Political Work Department may be an important criterion for selection as the new PC.

The ‘next Miao Hua’ wrinkle- aka Possible Non-PLAAF Contenders

Although the most likely successor for Yu Zhongfu is an Air Force officer, there is always the possibility that an officer from one of the other services could be selected. For example, Lieutenant General Miao Hua, who was a career Army officer, became the PLA Navy’s PC in December 2014 in a special ceremony for his transfer to the PLA Navy and “promote” him to Vice Admiral. He received a rank promotion to admiral in July 2015. When he became the Director of the Central Military Commission’s Political Work Department in October 2017, he retained his Navy uniform and Navy rank and is currently the only Navy officer on the CMC today.

Besides the nine PLAAF officers discussed above, the *2020 PRC Military Personality Directory* has an additional 40 political officers with the grade of TC deputy leader and the rank of LGEN / VADM who are eligible to replace Yu Zhongfu.³⁸ Of course, other issues such as relationships, could also affect the selection one way or the other. An additional five officers only hold the rank of MGEN, so they would not be eligible to replace Yu. As such, one of the 40 officers with the rank of LGEN/VADM could switch from their current non-Air Force organization and become a PLAAF officer in order to fill the billet. The following bullets identify the billets that these non-PLAAF possible contenders hold:

- CMC Political Work Department (2 Deputy Directors)
- CMC Discipline Inspection Commission (3 Deputy Secretaries)
- PLA Army HQ (1 DPC, 1 DIC Secretary, 1 PWD Director)
- PLA Navy HQ (1 DPC, 1 DIC Secretary, 1 PWD Director)
- PLA Rocket Force HQ (1 DPC, 1 DIC Secretary, 1 PWD Director)
- PLA Strategic Support Force (1 DPC, 1 DIC Secretary, 1 PWD Director, 1 Space Systems Department PC, 1 Network Systems Department PC)
- 5 Theater Command HQ (2 DPC each)
- 5 Theater Command Army HQ (1 PC each)
- 3 Theater Command Navy HQ (1 PC each)
- Tibet and Xinjiang MDs (1 PC)
- Beijing Garrison (1 PC).

Appendix 1: PLAAF Party Congresses

This appendix provides a list of all of the key leaders in each of the 13 PLAAF Party Congresses, which have been held since 1956. As shown in the table below, all of the Commanders and PCs already held their position for some time and were not replaced during the Party Congress. Table 8 shows the 12 PLAAF Commanders and 12 of the 13 PCs,^{xiv} when they served, and where they overlapped with the 13 Party Congresses.³⁹ Of note, none of the key leaders were replaced during the 13th Party Congress. The 14th Party Congress will most likely take place in 2024, at which time there will already be a new Commander and PC.

PLAAF 13 Party Congresses, Commanders, and PCs: 1956-2019

#	Date	Commander	Political Commissar
1st	May 1956	Liu Yalou (Oct 1949 – May 1965)	No PC (Apr 1950 – Feb 1957)
2nd	Apr 1959		Wu Faxian (Feb 1957 – May 1965)
3rd	Sep 1962		Yu Lijin (May 1965 – Sep 1968)
4th	May 1969	Wu Faxian (May 1965 – Sep 1971)	Wang Huiqiu (Sep 1968 – May 1973)
		No Commander (Sep 1971 – May 1973)	Fu Chuanzuo (May 1973 – Nov 1975)
		Ma Ning (May 1973 – Apr 1977)	Zhang Tingfa (Nov 1975 – Apr 1977)
		Zhang Tingfa (Apr 1977 – Jul 1985)	Gao Houliang (Apr 1977 – Jul 1985)
5th	Apr 1978		
6th	Nov 1983		
		Wang Hai (Jul 1985 – Nov 1992)	Zhu Guang (Jul 1985 – Nov 1992)
7th	Dec 1988		
		Cao Shuangming (Nov 1992-1994)	Ding Wenchang (Nov 1992 – Feb 1999)
8th			

xiv The first Political Commissar, Xiao Hua, is not included because he only served for six months in 1949-1950 and the PLAAF's first Party Congress did not take place until 1956.

	Dec 1993	Yu Zhenwu (Nov 1994 – Dec 1996)	
9th	Feb 1999	Liu Shun Yao (Dec 1996 – May 2002)	Qiao Qingchen (Feb 1999 – May 2002)
		Qiao Qingchen (May 2002 – Oct 2007)	
10th	May 2004	Xu Qiliang (Oct 2007 – Oct 2012)	Deng Changyou (May 2002 – Oct 2012)
11th	May 2009	Ma Xiaotian (Oct 2012 – Aug 2017)	
12th	Jun 2014		Tian Xiusi (Oct 2012 – Jul 2015)
13th	Jun 2019	Ding Laihang (Aug 2017 – Present)	Yu Zhongfu (Jul 2015 – Present)

Appendix 2: Career path for the nine potential contenders

The table below provides an overview of career path for the nine potential contenders.

Potential Contender Career Paths

Name	Units	CP Base AUAUF	Airborne Corps	MRAF/ TCAF	PLAAF HQ	CMC
Cai Lishan	SAM Div PC	CP PC	DPC	PD DIR TCAF PC		
Chen Xuebin	NA Air Div PD DIR; DPC, PC			NSF PD DIR; DPC	PLAN DIC SEC; PLAAF DPC	
Du Yuanfang		CP PC		PD DIR	PWD DDIR & DIR	
Guo Puxiao	Air Div PC	CP PC	PD DIR PC	PC		CMC LSD PC
Jiang Ping		AUAUF PC		PC	PD DDIR	
Liu Dewei		AUAUF PC		PC	PD DDIR	CMC PWD DDIR
Wang Chengnan	Air Div PC	AUAUF PD DDIR	DPC; PC	PC	DIC SEC	
Xu Xisheng		PC		PD DIR; PC	PD DDIR	
Zhong Weiguo		PC		DPC; PC		

CP = Command Post; AUAUF = Air Force Aviation University; MRAF = Military Region Air Force; TCAF = Theater Command Air Force; PLAAF = PLA Air Force Headquarters; CMC = Central Military Commission; LSD = Logistic Support Department; SAM = Surface-to-Air Missile; PC = Political Commissar; DPC = Deputy Political Commissar; PLAN = PLA Navy; DIC SEC = Discipline Inspection Commission Secretary; DIR = Director; DDIR = Deputy Director; NA = Naval Aviation; Div = Division; PWD = Political Work Department; PD = Political Department;

Appendix 3: Yu Zhongfu's Meetings

A review found that Yu Zhongfu attended over 100 meetings from 2016 through 2019. The meetings can be divided into Party-related meetings, where he was always identified as the Party Secretary and the PC, and non-Party-related meetings, where he was always identified only as the PC. Tables below provide two examples for each year from 2016 through 2019 for Party-related and non-Party-related meetings, such as visits to units and participation in training conferences, respectively. For simplicity's sake, the acronyms YZF are used for Yu Zhongfu, MXT for former Commander Ma Xiaotian (2012-2017), and DLH for Commander Ding Laihang (2017-present). Each table is organized in chronological order. As a general rule, all of Yu's speeches during any of the meetings focused on political issues, with a particular emphasis on Party guidelines laid out by Xi Jinping.

Yu Zhongfu's Party-Related Meetings

Date	Event	Content
2016/01/13	PLAAF Party Committee Central Group Meeting ^{xv}	On 13 January 2016, the PLAAF Party Committee Central Group held concentrated studies on Chairman Xi's discussion on criticism and self-criticism. YZF chaired and gave a speech. ⁴⁰
2016/02/03	PLAAF Creates 5 TCAFs	In early February 2016, the PLA and PLAAF held ceremonies to create the five TCs and TCAFs. YZF and MXT attended the ceremonies and spoke. ⁴¹
2017/02/27	PLAAF 12th Party Committee 5th Plenum Expanded Meeting	On 27-28 February 2017, the "Enlarged Session of the Fifth Plenum of the Air Force's 12th Party Committee" was held in Beijing. YZF gave a report on behalf of the Standing Committee members. YZF and MXT presided over the meeting. ⁴²
2017/12/27	PLAAF Party Committee Meeting	On 27-28 December 2017, the PLAAF Party Committee held its 7th session of the Enlarged Session of the 12th Party Committee in Beijing. YZF and DLH presided over the meeting. YZF delivered the work report while DLH gave a talk. ⁴³
2018/05/21	Mobilization Meeting for CMC 3rd Inspection Tour Team	On 21 May 2018 in Beijing, the CMC's 3 rd Inspection Tour Team held a VTC mobilization meeting. YZF chaired the event and gave a speech. ⁴⁴

^{xv} The Party Committee establishes Central Groups (党委中心组) to lead study sessions on specific topics of political importance.

2018/08/27	PLAAF Party Committee Central Group Meeting	From 24-26 August 218, the PLAAF Party Committee Central Group held meetings to study and exchange ideas about Xi Jinping's key speech given at the CMC Party Building conference. All of the Standing Committee members of the PLAAF Party Committee participated in the study, which was led by Sectary of the Party Standing Committee, YZF. ⁴⁵
2019/11/12	PLAAF Commemorates 70th Anniversary	On the morning of 11 November 2019, the Standing Committee of the PLAAF Party Committee held a meeting to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the PLAAF. YZF spoke. ⁴⁶
2019/11/18	PLAAF Party Committee Central Group Meeting	From 18 to 20 November 2019, the Central Group of the PLAAF's Party Committee held a study session on the topic of "bearing in mind the leader's consideration and great trust and building a world-class air force." It studied Chairman Xi's major speeches from the 4th Plenary Session of the 19th Party Congress. YZF gave a speech. ⁴⁷

Yu Zhongfu's Non-Party-Related Meetings

Date	Event	Content
2016/01/08	Meeting with PLAAF Academicians	On 8 January 2016, MXT and YZF met with that year's two elected PLAAF academicians. ⁴⁸ Since 2011, the PLAAF has annually elected several academicians to support PLAAF programs. For example, the 6th Group of Air Force Academician Advisors in 2017 was composed of 54 Academicians from the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Chinese Academy of Engineering ⁴⁹
2016/02/03	Visit to Central TCAF Units	Pre-Lunar New Year visits to a Central TCAF air regiment, an airfield station's security company, a communications company, and a radar station. ⁵⁰
2016/09/07	Visit to Western TCAF Units	From 7-10 September 2016, YZF inspected a Western TCAF base and the Lanzhou MRAF's Post-Reform Settlement Office. ⁵¹
2017/07/21	PLAAF Academic Institution Reforms Ceremony	In the morning of 21 July 2017 in Xi'an, an establishment ceremony was held for the newly reorganized PLAAF Engineering University. YZF presented a military flag to the leaders. In the afternoon, an establishment ceremony was held for the PLAAF Military Medical University, marking the official transfer of the PLA's Fourth Military Medical University to the PLAAF. YZF presented a military flag to leaders. ⁵²

2017/09/28	Visit to Beijing-based Units	On 28 September 2017, YZF participated and gave a speech at an Inspection and Survey Seminar for Air Force units stationed in Beijing. ⁵³
2017/12/19	VTC for Veterans	On 19 December 2017, the PLAAF held a VTC meeting on implementing reform of the veterans' support and service system. DLH participated in the meeting and YZF gave a speech. YZF noted that, after the reform, provincial military districts would be responsible for veterans' service and support work. ⁵⁴
2018/01/03	CMC Training Mobilization Meeting	On the morning of 3 January 2018, the CMC held a training mobilization meeting. The PLAAF set up a sub-venue at an airfield at a flight training base, where YZF and DLH and other members of the Standing Committee of the PLAAF's Party Committee attended. ⁵⁵
2018/05/24	PLAAF 5 th Annual National Aerospace Safety and Development Forum	On 22 May 2018, the PLAAF Research Academy held the 5th Annual National Aerospace Safety and Development Forum in Beijing. The forum was focused on the issue of "constructing and utilizing a new generation, Strategic Air Force." YZH attended and gave a presentation.
2019/09/30	Air Force Museum Event	On the morning of 30 September 2019, the PLAAF leadership held an event at the Air Force Museum near Beijing to commemorate PLAAF martyrs. DLH and YZF attended. ⁵⁶
2019/10/17	Changchun Airshow	On 17 October 2019, the PLAAF kicked off its 70th Anniversary Open Air Activities – Changchun Airshow at the Air Force Aviation University. DLH and YZF attended the ceremony. ⁵⁷

Appendix 4 Grades and Ranks

Historically, the PLA has had a grade system rather than a rank system.⁵⁸ It established its first 21-grade system in 1952, which was revised five times, including reducing the number to 18 in 1979 and to 15 in 1988. The PLA had a rank system from 1955 to 1965, when it was abolished. A rank system was not reintroduced until 1988. As noted earlier, billets are defined by the grade system, not the rank system. As shown in Table 1 below, every grade up to CMC Member has two assigned ranks: a primary rank and a secondary rank. However, some ranks, such as Major General, can be assigned to four different grades. In addition, grade and rank promotions rarely occur at the same time. As a general rule, from Platoon leader grade to Regiment leader grade rank promotions occur every four years and grade promotions every three years, which defines the primary and secondary rank structure. All promotions up to the division level are local promotions that are approved at the next higher level. Promotions at the corps and above level are overseen by the CMC-level departments. Finally, as shown in the table, every grade has a mandatory retirement age. The age limit for Military Region (MR) leader-grade (now Theater Command / TC leader grade since 2016) billets was not implemented until the early 1990s.

PLA's 15-grade and 10-rank Structure, 1988-Present

Grade	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank	Retirement Age
CMC Chairman (军委主席)	N/A	N/A	*See comment below
Vice Chairmen (军委副主席)	GEN (上将)		
CMC Member (军委委员)	GEN (上将)		
TC Leader (正战区职) Former MR Leader (正大军区职)	GEN (上将)	LTG (中将)	65
TC Deputy Leader (副战区职) Former MR Deputy Leader (副大军区职)	LGEN (中将)	MG (少将)	63
Corps Leader (正军职)	MGEN (少将)	LGEN (中将)	55
Corps Deputy Leader (副军职)	MGEN (少将)	SCOL (大校)	
Division Leader (正师职)	SCOL (大校)	MGEN (少将)	50
Division Deputy Leader (副师职) / (Brigade Leader)	COL (上校)	SCOL (大校)	
Regiment Leader (正团职) / (Brigade Deputy Leader)	COL (上校)	LTC (中校)	45
Regiment Deputy Leader (副团职)	LTC (中校)	MAJ (少校)	

Battalion Leader (正营职)	MAJ (少校)	LTC (中校)	40
Battalion Deputy Leader (副营职)	CPT (上尉)	MAJ (少校)	
Company Leader (正连职)	CPT (上尉)	1LT (中尉)	35
Company Deputy Leader (副连职)	1LT (中尉)	CPT (上尉)	
Platoon Leader (排职)	2LT (少尉)	1LT (中尉)	30

*Since 2002, CMC Members who are 67 or younger at the time of the CCP Party Congress can remain until the next Congress (age 72). Members who are 68 at the time of the Party Congress must retire.⁵⁹

Appendix 5 Key Terms and Acronyms

A list of key terms, acronyms, and their Chinese characters that are noted in the report as shown below:

Academician (院士)

Academy of Military Science (军事科学院)

Air Force (AF / 空军)

Air Force Aviation University (AFAU / 空军航空大学)

Air Force Command College (AFCC / 空军指挥学院)

Air Force leaders (空军领导)

Air Force's 11th Service Members' Congress (空军第十一次军人代表大会)

Cadre (干部)

CCP aka CPC Party Congress (中国共产党全国代表大会/党代表大会/党代会)

Central Military Commission (CMC / 中央军事委员会/中央军委/)

Chief of Staff^{xvi} (CS / 参谋长)

Chinese Communist Party^{xvii} (CCP / CPC / 中国共产党)

Command Post^{xviii} (CP / 指挥所)

Commander (CDR / 司令员)

Deputy Chief of Staff (DCS / 副参谋长)

Deputy Commander (DCDR / 副司令员)

Deputy Director (DDIR / 副部长)

Deputy Political Commissar (DPC / 副政委)

Ding Laihang (DLH / 丁来杭)

Director (DIR / 部长).

Discipline Inspection Commission/Committee (纪律检查委员会/纪委)

Division (Div / 师)

General (GEN / 上将)

General officer rank promotion (晋升将官军衔)

Grassroots Party Committees (基层党委)

^{xvi} The Chief of Staff is the Director of the Headquarters Department and is the same grade as a Deputy Commander.

^{xvii} The Chinese also call this the Communist Party of China (CPC).

^{xviii} A Command Post is a corps-level headquarters.

General Political Department (总政治部)
Headquarters (HQ)^{xix}
Headquarters Department (HD / 司令部)
Lieutenant General (LGEN / 中将)
Logistic Support Department (LSD / 后勤保障部)
Major General (MGEN / 少将)
Military Region or Military Region Command (MR / 军区)
Military Region Air Force (MRAF / 军区空军)
Mobilization meeting (动员会议)
National Airspace Safety and Development Forum (国家空天安全与发展论坛)
National martyrs (国家烈士)
National People's Congress (NPC / 全国人民代表大会/全国人大)
Naval Aviation (NA / 海军航空兵)
Party Committee (党委)
Party Committee Central Group (党委中心组)^{xx}
Party Committee Standing Committee (党委常委)
Party Deputy Secretary (党委副书记)
Party Secretary (党委书记)
People's Liberation Army (PLA / 人民解放军)
People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF / 人民解放军空军)
People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国)
PLA National Defense University (解放军国防大学)
PLA Navy (PLAN / 解放军海军)
PLAAF Party Committee Standing Committee (空军党委常委)
PLAAF Party Congress (空军党代表大会)
Plenary Session (全体会议 / 全会)
Political Commissar (PC / 政治委员 / 政委) (regiment and above levels)
Political Department (PD / 政治部)

^{xix} Note: The PLAAF does not have a term for Headquarters.

^{xx} The Party Committee establishes Central Groups (党委中心组) to lead study sessions on specific topics of political importance.

Political Director (教导员) (battalion level)
Political Instructor (指导员) (company level)
Political Work Department (PWD / 政治工作部)
Rear Admiral (RADM / 海军少将)
Secretary (SEC / 书记)
Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM / 地空导弹)
Theater or Theater Command (TC / 战区)
Theater Command Air Force (TCAF / 战区空军)
Unit (部队)
Vice Admiral (VADM / 海军中将)
Video Teleconference (VTC / 电视电话会议)
VTC on Safety and Stability Work (安全稳定工作电视电话会议)
Xi Jinping (XJP / 习近平)
Xi Jinping's Strong Military Thought (强军思想)
Year of Birth (YOB)
Yu Zhongfu (YZF / 于忠福)

ENDNOTES

¹ Information in this subsection came primarily from Kenneth W. Allen and Cristina L. Garafola, *The People's Liberation Army Air Force at 70: An Overview of Strategy, Organization, Personnel, Education, Training, Military Diplomacy, and Prospects for the Future* (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, February 2021). Hereafter identified as *The PLAAF at 70*.

² Bi Yongjun, ["Master's and Doctorate Degrees—Development Trend in Military Officers Contingent" Is there no Chinese for this?], *PLA Daily* (Internet Version), 11 December 2000, 1; "Chinese Army Officers to be Better Educated" *Xinhua*, (English), 11 December 2000. Is there no URL or access information for this source?

³ "PLA Downsizing History," No Chinese? *Renmin Haijun*, 13 September 2003, 3; "Reduction of 200,000 Troops is Aimed at Paving the Way for Informatization of the Armed Forces," *Hong Kong Tzu Ching*, Number 156, 1 October 2003, 64-65. Again, no Chinese?

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⁵ "Chinese Army Officers to Be Better Educated" *Xinhua* (English), 11 December 2000.

⁶ "Chinese Armed Forces Modernization Marked in National Day Article," *Xinhua* (English), reprinted in *BBC*, 1 October 2001.

⁷ Hu, [Contemporary Military Organizational Reform Research], 307-312 This lacks the usual information that's required in a book citation. It should have the author's full name, Chinese title, publication information, etc.; Yuan and Zhang, [History of the Development of China's Military Academic Institutions], 718-723 Ditto for this one.

⁸ "System of Selecting Cadres" [干部选拔制度] in Xu Yaoyuan, Lin Xianghai, and Mu Song, eds. [*Military Cadre Work*] [军队干部工作], Second Edition, Volume 39, (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2006), 36-37. In most citation systems, like Chicago, the original title is usually followed by a translation in brackets. Hereafter referred to as Xu, Lin, and Mu, eds., *Military Cadre Work*.

⁹ Tsang Hsing, "Zhang Tingfa Interviewed on Air Force Reforms," *Kuang Chiao Ching*, 16 June 1985, reprinted in *BBC*, 21 June 1985. Is the *BBC* the British Broadcasting Corporation? They're a book?

¹⁰ Kenneth W. Allen and Mingzhi Chen, *The People's Liberation Army's 37 Academic Institutions*, (Montgomery, AL: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2020).

¹¹ The information in this section comes from Kenneth Allen, Brian Chao, and Ryan Kinsella, "China's Military Political Commissar System in Comparative Perspective," and Kenneth Allen, Morgan Clemens, Steven Glinert, and Daniel Yoon, "Assessing PLA Navy and Air Force Political Commissar Career Paths," (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation China Brief, Volume 13, Issue 5, 4 March 2013).

¹² The *PLAAF at 70*, Chapter 7.

¹³ The lead author of this book was an escort for both Zhu Guang's and Pete Aldridge's visits. Several late-night discussions were held with Zhu.

¹⁴ *PLAAF 2010*, Chapter 14. No information was found for the remaining years from 2010 to 2019. What is *PLAAF 2010*? It hasn't been cited before, so the citation shouldn't be abbreviated.

¹⁵ [*Dictionary of China's Communist Party Central Committee Members for 1921-2003*] [中国共产党历届中央委员大辞典], (Beijing: Chinese Communist Party History Press, 2004), 862. Identified hereafter as *CCP Dictionary*. Zhu Rongchang, ed., [*Air Force Dictionary*] [空军大辞典], (Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Publishing House, September 1996), 824. Again, too many brackets. Hereafter identified as *Air Force Dictionary*.

[https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/萧华_\(上将\)](https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/萧华_(上将)) Multiple items in a single citation are separated by a semicolon. Online resources must be properly cited with more than just a URL. Wikis are not usually viewed as reliable sources because they are not professionally edited. Checking the sources cited in the wiki and citing those instead is a better research method.

¹⁶ *CCP Dictionary*, 824. *Air Force Dictionary*, 819. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/吴法宪>. See advice re: wikis above.

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- ²⁶ <https://baike.baidu.com/item/田修思>. <http://baike.baidu.com/view/585708.htm>. <http://china.caixin.com/2012-10-30/100454054.html>. <http://china.caixin.com/2012-10-23/100450556.html>. See advice re: wikis above.
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- ²⁸ *Directory of PRC Military Personalities 2020*, (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of Defense, Defense Intelligence Agency, March 2020). Government documents, including our own, usually have agency, title, author, date of publication, page number.
- ²⁹ <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/蔡立山>. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/蔡立山/15858859>. <http://m.china.caixin.com/m/2019-10-18/101446699.html>. See advice re: wikis above. <https://m.sohu.com/n/417684048/>. <http://www.ccmer.org/jizhisha/7611.html>. <http://629152194.blog.sohu.com/164942085.html>. These last three should have more than just URLs.
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- ³⁶ <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2018-07-29/doc-ihfxsxzh4371321.shtml> (四军种 7 人晋升中将 最年轻 54 岁). There should be more than just a URL. www.baike.com/wiki/徐西盛&prd=so_1_pic. See advice re: wikis above. <http://pyoooo.com/junshi/57500.html>. There should be more than just a URL. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/徐西盛>. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/徐西盛>. See advice re: wikis above. <https://www.hotbak.net/key/五大战区空军军政主官配齐徐西盛郭普校到任.html>. As far as I know, hotbak isn't a site so much as a search result aggregator thing.
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- ⁴¹ *Air Force News*, 3 February 2016, 1.
- ⁴² *Air Force News*, 1 March 2017, 1.
- ⁴³ *Air Force News*, 29 December 2017, 1.
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- ⁴⁹ *Air Force News*, 15 September 2017, 1.
- ⁵⁰ *Air Force News*, 4 February 2016, 1.
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- ⁵³ *Air Force News*, 29 September 2017, 1.
- ⁵⁴ *Air Force News*, 20 December 2017, 1.
- ⁵⁵ China Air Force, January 2018, 3.
- ⁵⁶ *Air Force News*, 1 October 2019, 1.
- ⁵⁷ *Air Force News*, 17 October 2019, 1. All of these newspaper citations should include the authors and titles of each article.
- ⁵⁸ The PLAAF at 70, Chapter 1.
- ⁵⁹ Correspondence with Dr. Miller on 28 July 2010. This information was published in See Kenneth W. Allen, "Assessing the PLA's Promotion Ladder to CMC Member Based on Grades vs. Ranks," (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation *China Brief*, Part 1, Volume 10, Issue 15, 22 July 2010, and Part 2, Volume 10, Issue 16, 5 August 2010).