



CASI Commanders Toolkit: PLA Personnel

This article originates from the presentation of the PLA Personnel within the PLA Fundamentals Course. It outlines the evolution of the Chinese people's attitude towards military service throughout Chinese history, with an emphasis on the period since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. It further highlights the impacts of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on societal understanding of the PLA in China. It then analyzes the PLA's personnel structure, focusing on a breakdown of conscripts, non-commissioned officers (NCOs), and officers.

Chinese Attitudes Towards Military Service

A traditional Chinese saying from the Song Dynasty, “Good iron is not used for nails; good men do not become soldiers,” [好铁不打钉, 好男不当兵] illustrates the historical Chinese perspective on military service. This viewpoint was rooted in ancient China's cultural emphasis on literature over military affairs, where soldiery was considered a lowly occupation.

Imperial Chinese dynasties are distinguished by relatively unitary government in which the armed forces were separate and subordinate to the state. Leadership roles within the military were often entrusted to those who passed the civil service examinations. Therefore, in imperial China, power, and the benefits and prestige that came with it, lay in civilian positions in the government.¹ In essence, the saying does indeed reflect disdain for military service and servicemen, but these are disdained because, in imperial China, only “losers” would choose military service.

As societal attitudes towards the military often mirror the military's role, the shift in Western civilization during the 18th century, with the rise of mass politics and nationalization, marked a change in the military's standing. Similarly, Chinese attitudes towards military service have evolved over time, especially after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded in 1949. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has played a crucial role in reshaping these perceptions.

From the 19th and to the mid-20th century, which is also known as the “century of humiliation,” many Chinese citizens sought to strengthen and defend China by joining the armed forces. In the 1930s, the military’s prestige grew significantly during the Second Sino-Japanese War as China defended Japanese aggression.² Furthermore, both the Chinese Nationalist Party and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used military force to secure political power. As a result, military service became a viable path for social mobility, transforming public attitudes towards the armed forces.

In the 20th century, the PLA reached its peak in prestige in the 1950s, driven by its perceived success in the Korean War and subsequent modernization efforts with Soviet Union assistance. However, the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution reversed the efforts to professionalize the armed forces. The commanders of China’s forces in the Korean War were humiliated and tortured in brutal “struggle session,” and many eventually died. The armed forces clashed with the Red Guards, and different units were dragged into wars between Red Guard groups; and to make things worse, the PLA Air Force Commander attempted a coup against Mao.³ By the end of 1970s, the Chinese armed forces faced internal conflicts, factionalism, and a decline in its capabilities, mirroring the chaos and destruction that engulfed China.

Although Beijing resumed efforts to modernize and professionalize the armed forces, its primary focus in the 1980s and 1990s was economic development. The military’s budget was reduced, and it was encouraged to participate in economic activities for its military funding, which led to widespread corruption and engagement in illegible activities including smuggling, drugs, and prostitution.⁴ Besides embezzlement, the military’s suppression of the 1989 protests caused antipathy towards military forces, particularly among urban residents. During this period, military salaries and living standards did not keep pace with the private sectors, and military service ceased to be a path for upward social mobility.

However, the reputation of the Chinese armed forces has rebounded since 1990, coinciding with Beijing’s patriotic campaign to restore the CCP’s image. Several factors contributed to this resurgence, including the PLA’s involvement in disaster relief efforts in the 1998 flooding, 2008 earthquake, and recent COVID-19 response, and the development of advanced military equipment, which boosted the public’s confidence on the PLA.⁵

Since the late 1990s, Beijing has taken actions to improve the military’s standing. The armed forces divested themselves from most illegal commercial activities, and Beijing has increased the defense budget annually since 2000. According to Beijing, approximately 30 percent of its defense budget was spent on personnel, compared to more or less 30 percent on training and 40 percent on weapons and equipment.⁶ Beijing raised military salaries, instituting annual salary increases to keep pace with inflation and private-sector earnings. Additionally, service members and veterans’ benefits have been enhanced, including tuition assistance, increased leave days, and improved living conditions. Xi Jinping’s anti-corruption campaign, initiated in 2012, has sought to create a more meritocratic system within the armed forces. As a

result, military service has become a more attractive career option, offering stable employment and a degree of social mobility.

Despite these improvements to make military service attractive as a career, challenges remain. The Chinese armed forces determine whom service members can marry. Although they don't control dating, officers have to report their girlfriends or boyfriends to the political organizations in their units, service members have to get approval of their marriage from a higher echelon. Housing is extremely limited, and when it is available, it is generally only for senior enlisted and officer ranks, which prevents many service members from living with their families. Beijing has introduced housing allowances that make it easier for family members to move close to the bases where service members are stationed, but this is less than ideal. There are also concerns about the level of respect accorded to military personnel.⁷ One often-cited symptom of this supposed lack of respect is that local government sometimes do not provide legally stipulated benefits to service members and their families. While the PLA actively works to enhance the social standing of its service members, a 2016 survey indicated that military service was only the 11th most well-regarded occupation in China.⁸

The PLA's Personnel Structure

The Communist Party's armed forces have three major components: the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the People's Armed Police (PAP), and the People's militia. The PLA is the military force composed of active-duty forces and reserve units. Its primary mission is to defend the Party.⁹ The PLA is a large and complex organization with a district personnel structure. In 2020, after a reduction of 300,000 personnel in 2017, the total active force of the PLA was 2 million.¹⁰ During this force reduction, the PLA Army (PLAA) was significantly reduced, although it still accounted for nearly 50 percent of the PLA's total force. The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) maintained its size, while the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) moderately increased. There are no official numbers on the PLA Aerospace Force (ASF), the Cyberspace Force (CSF), and Information Support Force (ISF).

The PLA's rank system, initially established in 1955, is modeled after the Soviet system. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, the rank system was abolished, leading to a period of disorder within the armed forces. In 1988, the PLA restored its rank system, which was again drawn from the Soviet model. The PLA structured its rank system, like the Soviet armed forces, under the assumption that a significant portion of its enlisted personnel would be conscripts. This structure is built on a hierarchy where officers lead, non-commissioned officers (NCOs) form the backbones, and conscripts serve as the main combatants. The Chinese government did not provide an official breakdown of the number of personnel in each category. Based on reporting that officers accounted for half of the 300,000-personnel cut, we may estimate that officers and civil cadres now number approximately 450,000 personnel, which is 23 percent of the total force, NCOs 850,000, 42 percent, and conscripts about 700,000, 35 percent.¹¹

In the PLA's enlisted forces, there are nine enlisted ranks but only seven pay grades (See Figure 1). Junior enlisted positions are filled by conscripts who receive an allowance rather than a salary. These junior enlisted personnel are often referred to as “conscripts” in PLA regulations, regardless of their service conditions, and the vast majority actually volunteer to serve. There is no standard translation of PLA enlisted ranks, and the translation showed in Figure 1 basically mirrored the U.S. military rank titles. Keep in mind that this does not imply the responsibilities and degrees of authority correspond.

U.S. Pay Grade	PLA Rank Title (Chinese)	PLAAF Rank Title (English)	PLA Rank Category
E-9	一级军士长 (25-30th year)	Master Sergeant First Class 	Senior NCO
E-8	二级军士长 (21-24th year)	Master Sergeant Second Class 	
E-7	三级军士长 (17- 20th year)	Master Sergeant Third Class 	
E-6	四级军士长 (13-16th year)	Master Sergeant Fourth Class 	Intermediate NCO
E-5	上士 (9th-12th year)	Technical Sergeant 	
E-4	中士 (6th-8th year)	Staff Sergeant 	Junior NCO
E-3	下士 (3rd-5th year)	Sergeant 	
E-2	上等兵 (2nd year)	Airman First Class 	Junior Enlisted Men ("Conscripts")
E-1	列兵 (1st year)	Airman 	

Figure 1: PLA's Enlisted Rank Structure

Military service in China is not the rite of passage that it is in, for example, South Korea or Israel. China's population is so large that the PLA cannot draft every male citizen, and because a young man can gain a deferment by entering university, many poorer, less-educated young men are drafted, but as the technical sophistication of the weapons and equipment that the PLA uses has increased, and as the responsibility and the authority of noncommissioned officers also increases, the technical and intellectual demands on enlisted men, including junior enlisted men, have increased.

Enlisted Conscripts

Conscripts serve for two years. Approximately 400,000 young Chinese men and women voluntarily enter the military for many reasons, such as patriotism, job stability, future educational and financial benefits, family tradition, or an expedite path in joining the CCP or the government system.¹² Prior to 2020, the People's Liberation Army operated with a single annual conscription cycle, in which new recruits, all 400,000 of them, enter service and begin their three-month basic training on September 1, the same day for those senior conscripts to demobilize after serving two years. The period when conscripts are discharged and new recruits are filling in often places the unit at 50 percent personnel, making it a weak period in the unit's combat effectiveness. To address this, the PLA implemented a "two recruitments and two

discharges" policy starting in 2020. This new system involves two intake periods annually, March 1 and September 1. As the recruits finish their basic training, the PLA units can maintain their personnel at 75 percent and slowly rise to 100 percent combat readiness when recruits arrive at their assigned unit and undergo on-the-job training over four to nine months.

After serving for two years, conscripts may be demobilized and return to their hometown. For those who want to continue their service, they make a career decision in their second year. They may become NCOs if they voluntarily go through the NCO selection process or are selected by the unit political committee to become NCOs. They can also compete for, or be selected to attend, military academic institutions to become officers.

Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs)

PLA NCOs are recruited from both junior enlisted ranks and the civilian sector. Junior enlisted personnel pursue NCO promotion either within their unit or by applying to NCO academies after their first year of service. When applying for NCO promotion at their unit, they take a pre-NCO assessment and receive a recommendation from their company-level party branch. Their higher-echelon party committee then selects NCOs based on the slots allocated to the unit. Alternatively, when applying to NCO academies in March, junior enlisted soldiers' applications are screened and approved by the Brigade-level party committee. In 2024, approximately 14,000 soldiers were admitted into 32 NCO academies. Following three years of vocational and technical education, they receive an associate degree and become PLA NCOs with a minimum service obligation to the E-5 (intermediate NCO) level.¹³ Notably, in 2024, the PLA also piloted a program at eight military academic institutions allowing associate-degree-holding junior enlisted soldiers to transition into bachelor-degree-holding NCOs. This two-year program will produce approximately 370 new bachelor-degree-level NCOs.¹⁴

Civilians can enter the NCO corps through either a target training program or a direct recruitment program. The target training program is designed for high school graduates under 20. Admitted students attend a local vocational college for two and a half years, followed by a six-month internship at their assigned unit. Upon competition, they receive an associate degree and become technical NCOs at the E-3 level.¹⁵ The direct recruitment program is open for male bachelor's degree holders under 24. These recruits undergo three months of basic training and then become technical NCOs at E-3.¹⁶ Both target-training and direct-recruitment NCOs receive some preference for long-term careers as technical specialist within the PLA.

Established in 1993, the PLA's NCO rank system has changed significantly over the past three decades. Currently, PLA NCOs are entrusted with less authority and fewer responsibilities compared to their U.S. military counterparts. However, recognizing the need for a stronger NCO corps, the PLA has increasingly emphasized the importance of NCOs, particularly their roles as professional soldiers and technical backbones crucial for PLA modernization.

Officers

PLA officers are primarily trained through the 27 military academic institutions. These institutions, including one directly affiliated with the Central Military Commission (CMC), ten with the PLAA, five with the PLAN, four with the PLAAF, one with the PLARF, one with the ASF, one with the CSF, and four with the PAP, integrated military specialty training with undergraduate education, enabling cadets to directly report to their unit after graduation. High school graduates can apply after their national college entrance examination (Gaokao), and their admission depends on their Gaokao score, physical examination, interview, and political evaluation. In 2024, these 27 military academic institutions admitted 17,343 high school graduates, including 16,308 males and 1,035 females.¹⁷ Active-duty soldiers are also eligible, including junior enlisted personnel with over one year of service and NCOs with two to three years of service. Approximately 3,700 Soldiers transitioned to officer roles through these four-year programs in 2024. Soldiers with associate degrees under 24 can also apply and complete a two-year program to graduate as an O-2 officer at the platoon leader grade.¹⁸ Furthermore, outstanding soldiers with two third-class merits or one second-class merit and party membership can be recommended to direct admission.

Alternatively, direct recruitment offers another pathway to become an officer. The PLARF and PLAN piloted direct recruitment from universities in 2021, and this method now allows all services to directly select bachelor's (under 24), master's (under 29), and doctoral (under 34) graduates, with a preference for Science and Engineering majors from "Double First-Class"ⁱ [双一流] universities, which was a part of Xi's initiative to elevate China's university education to world-class and first-class.¹⁹ This four-month process, consisting of physical examination, political evaluation, and specificity assessment, results in commissioning for bachelor's holders as O-1, master's holders as O-2, and doctoral holders as O-3.²⁰ Soldiers with a pre-service bachelor's degree can also take the "college student soldier-to-officer promotion examination" [大学毕业生士兵提干考试] after completing one and a half years of service and obtaining the party committee's approval.

The PLA officer corps comprises two main categories: command and administrative officers and special technical officers. Command and Administrative officers can be further

ⁱ Double first-class construction [双一流建设] means world first-class universities and first-class academic disciplines construction [世界一流大学和一流学科建设]. It is China's higher education development and sponsorship under Xi Jinping and consists of 147 universities and colleges, such as Tsinghua University, Peking University, and Zhejiang University.

categorized into military officers and political officers based on duties; commanding officersⁱⁱ and staff officers based on responsibilities; and service-specific officers and non-service-specific officers based on professional requirements.²¹ Special technical officers are a relatively recent addition in 2020, originating from civilian cadres. The structure of civilian cadre was abolished in the 2016 military reform, with the last group transitioning to special technical officer status in 2021; others became civilian personnel.

The PLA has a unified officer rank system across all its services, as shown in Figure 2. Rank names are defaulted to the Army, and other services specify their branch before the rank. For example, a PLAN Admiral is actually called a “Navy General” in Chinese. Essentially, the service branch is prefixed to the standard rank to denote the officer’s affiliation. Notably, there are no warrant officer ranks in the PLA. The officer rank system has remained largely consistent since 1988.











PLA Rank Title (Chinese)	PLAAF Rank Title (English)	PLA Rank Category
上将	General 	General Grade (将官)
中将	Lieutenant General 	
少将	Major General 	
大校	Senior Colonel 	Field Grade (校官)
上校 (19-22th year)	Colonel 	
中校 (15-18th year)	Lieutenant Colonel 	
少校 (11-14th year)	Major 	
上尉 (7-10th year)	Captain 	Company Grade (尉官)
中尉 (3-6th year)	First Lieutenant 	
少尉 (1-2nd year)	Second Lieutenant 	

Figure 2: PLA’s Officer Rank Structure

A unique feature of the PLA’s officer system is the distinction between its ten ranks and 16 positional grades (see Figure 3). The top three grades: Chairman, Vice Chairman, and members of the Central Military Commission (CMC), are not included in Figure 3, leaving 13 grades commonly referenced. Officer rank and positional grade promotions are distinct processes and rarely occur simultaneously. Positional grade advancements typically happen every three years, while rank promotions occur every four years up to the regiment level.²² Despite discussions about shifting to a rank-centered system, positional grade remains the most valued metric within the PLA, primarily because it dictates retirement age. Furthermore, officers often remain within the same unit up to the division level before potential reassignment to a different corps-level unit.²³

ⁱⁱ Of note, anyone in a position of authority who is leading some organization is called a “commanding” officer. Thus it is not just the Commander, but also the head of the Training section of the Staff Department, etc.

The Grade is far more important than the rank. The rank serves mainly for pay purposes and dealing with foreigners, PLA officers never refer to each other by their rank. The grade determines the authority, bureaucratic importance, and command relationships. The grade of the Commander, the Political Commissar, and the unit are always the same. For a more detailed discussion of the Grade structure, see “70 years of the PLA Air Force” by Ken Allen, available at the China Aerospace Studies Institute website.²⁴

Retirement Age		Positional Grade	Primary Rank	Secondary Rank
Combat	Non-Combat			
		CMC Vice Chairman (军委委员)	General	N/A
		CMC Member (军委委员)	General	N/A
65	65	TC Leader (正战区职)	General	Lieutenant General
63		TC Deputy Leader (副战区职)	Lieutenant General	Major General
55	60	Corps Leader (正军职)	Major General	Lieutenant General
	58	Corps Deputy Leader (副军职)	Major General	Senior Colonel
50	55	Division Leader (正师职)	Senior Colonel	Major General
		Division Deputy Leader (副师职) (Brigade Leader (正旅职))	Colonel	Senior Colonel
45	50	Regiment Leader (正团职) or (Brigade Deputy Leader (副旅职))	Colonel	Lieutenant Colonel
	45	Regiment Deputy Leader (副团职)	Lieutenant Colonel	Major
40	40	Battalion Leader (正营职)	Major	Lieutenant Colonel
		Battalion Deputy Leader (副营职)	Captain	Major
35	35	Company Leader (正连职)	Captain	First Lieutenant
		Company Deputy Leader (副连职)	First Lieutenant	Captain
30	30	Platoon Leader (排职)	Second Lieutenant	First Lieutenant

Figure 3: PLA’s Officer Positional Grade and Rank Structure

Military civilians

PLA civilian personnel possess their own distinct uniform, separate from military attire, and do not wear any military ranks or grades. PLA civilian personnel can be regarded as special state employees whose duty location is in the military but are not active duty and will not directly participate in combat. Their contracts are generally for three years, either for management (nine levels) or technical-skill (13 levels) positions. While they undergo a basic military training period, often around one month, concerns have been raised regarding its adequacy for highly educated civilians, many of whom reportedly find it challenging to adapt to military lifestyle. Civilian personnel are primarily assigned to positions common to both military and civilian sectors, and their positions don’t directly involve combat. They often offer strong professional support and stability.

Female service members constitute a small percentage of the total PLA force. While the PLA asserts female representation across all roles, they predominantly serve in female-only units

and are often featured for propaganda purposes. For example, the PLA Navy recruited its first squadron of eight female naval aviation pilots in 2023, but no recruitment quota was set for the following years. Two of these pilots were selected as presenters at the 15th China Airshow in November 2024, which the PLA highlighted as a success in achieving female pilots in all services. However, when the presence of female officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) is primarily for public display, their career progression can become dependent on external factors rather than individual merit, potentially limiting their promotion opportunities within the PLA.

Data from 2022 indicates that female personnel comprise approximately 3.8% of the total force, a decrease from roughly 4.3% in 2010 and 5.4% in 2000. Given the relative scarcity of female officers and the prevalence of male officers leading many female work units, the proportion of female enlisted personnel is likely higher than 3.8%.²⁵

With limited exceptions, female personnel tend to be assigned to roles in communications, medicine, engineering, and foreign languages, typically within female-only units commanded by male officers. A 2016 survey of nearly 54,000 PLA service members revealed that over a third of women experienced psychological issues during their service, a significantly higher rate compared to men (36.5% vs. 28.6%).²⁶

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