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**“Dramas Must Feature Goodness”: The CCP Launches
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By John Dotson

“Yanxi Palace” and Other Dramas Run Afoul of the Authorities

In the last week of January, many television watchers in China were surprised and disappointed when two popular historical dramas—*Ruyi’s Royal Love in the Palace* (*Ruyi Zhuan*, 如懿传) and *The Story of Yanxi Palace* (*Yanxi Gonglue*, 延禧攻略)—were both abruptly withdrawn from the line-up on state television channels ([South China Morning Post](#), 29 January). Both dramas feature prominent female characters and lavish production values, and depict ruthless court intrigues during China’s last imperial dynasty. These and similar programs have grown in popularity in recent years, to include broad success with international

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Chinese audiences. However, the new restrictions on such programming herald a renewed effort by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propaganda authorities to impose the Party's preferred narratives on popular entertainment.

Prior to its sudden disappearance from television in late January, *Yanxi Palace* had appeared to enjoy some measure of official favor. State media noted in late 2018 that it was the world's most searched-for drama program on Google (ironic praise, as the use of Google's search engine remains restricted within the PRC), and praised the "toughness, independence, and determination" of the show's principal female protagonist ([People's Daily Online](#), December 27 2018). As late as January 22nd, the show was further praised for its "traditional cultural elements [that] create a new historic angle for foreign audiences to know more about Chinese history... [offering] creativity and passion into historical scenarios with inspiration from modern reality" ([People's Daily Overseas Edition](#), January 22).



A still image from the popular Chinese television program The Story of Yanxi Palace, which was abruptly removed from state television in late January 2019.

However, this official approval experienced a *volte-face* with the publication of a January 25th editorial in the official *Beijing Daily News*. The editorial, titled "With 'Yanxi' and 'Ruyi' and Other Such Court Dramas, Negative Influences Cannot Be Ignored," attacked such programs on five counts:

- The dramas "make it a popular fashion to hanker after an imperial lifestyle;"
- They "depict detailed plots of 'court struggles,' [which has] worsened contemporary society;"
- They "unstintingly glamorize the emperor and his servants, while ignoring the glories of today's heroic models;"
- They "spread the ways of extravagance and pleasurable living, thus affecting industriousness and frugal virtue;"
- And they are guilty of "narrowly pursuing commercial interests, while weakening positive spiritual guidance." [1]

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A subsequent editorial in *China Daily* reiterated the dangers that such dramas present to impressionable young people, asserting that “dramas must contain goodness,” and that they “should not simply entertain people, they should also lead them up the right path, which is the cornerstone of social progress” ([China Daily](#), February 20).

The Sensitive Place of History in Popular Entertainment

Historical dramas have long been subject to controversy and censorship in the PRC, especially when their content has had allegorical connections to contemporary issues. The play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (*Hai Rui Ba Guan*, 海瑞罢官), for example, which depicted a virtuous official being sacked for bringing unwelcome truths before the emperor, was made subject to official criticism in a political campaign that kicked off the Cultural Revolution in 1966. This has continued into more recent times under Xi Jinping: official directives in 2017 and 2018 clearly indicated that dramas must conform with the CCP’s approved versions of history, avoiding “vulgar and falsified plots” and “historical taboos” that might conflict with officially-sanctioned themes ([Xinhua](#), July 5 2017; [Radio Free Asia](#), June 19 2018).

The reason for late January’s sudden official shift against *Yanxi Palace* and similar dramas is unknown. However, it may be connected in part to a broader political campaign launched by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping in a series of speeches and meetings in January. In these meetings, Xi and other senior leaders directed CCP officials working in the security and propaganda bureaucracies to take more forceful and proactive efforts to prevent social unrest, and to further increase the Party’s control over public discourse. As a component of this, Xi stated on January 21st that officials managing media and propaganda must ensure that “all the people [are] tightly united by [the correct] ideals, beliefs, values, concepts, and moral principles” ([China Brief](#), 20 February).

It is unknown whether senior-echelon CCP leaders ordered the affected programs off the air, or whether nervous mid-level officials in the media sector were seeking to demonstrate their ideological zeal and compliance with general directives coming from above. The fact that the drama series are reportedly still available on popular internet streaming platforms such as iQiyi ([Channel News Asia](#), January 29) suggests that it may be the latter. But whatever the case, it is clear that these historical dramas—which depict Chinese political circles as filled with Machiavellian scheming, and portray arrogant elites who bully those below them in the social hierarchy—contain themes that are making at least some in authority nervous, and which run afoul of Xi’s drive to inculcate Neo-Maoist ideology throughout modern-day Chinese society ([Journal of Democracy](#), July 2016; [China Brief](#), March 5 2018).

“The Wandering Earth” is Promoted to International Audiences

In contrast to official condemnation of Qing Dynasty historical dramas, the recent roll-out of the Chinese science fiction film *The Wandering Earth* (*Liulang Diqiu*, 流浪地球) has demonstrated a story much more to

the liking of PRC propaganda authorities. The film, adapted from a novella by Hugo Award-winning author Liu Cixin, tells the story of a future effort to move the Earth to another solar system when it is threatened with destruction by the expansion of the sun. In the story, the international effort to save the world is spearheaded by heroic Chinese scientists and astronauts. The film, with a reported budget of over 50 million dollars, represents one of the most ambitious efforts yet by a Chinese studio to produce the sort of big-budget, special effects-intensive blockbusters that have been a mainstay of Hollywood in recent years ([Hollywood Reporter](#), January 30). The film opened to big box office receipts in China, and has also received a release in 29 North American cities through China Media Capital ([Xinhua](#), February 15). The film has received mixed but generally positive reviews in its limited U.S. release. [2]



A promotional poster for the science fiction film The Wandering Earth, which opened to both domestic and international audiences in February 2019. In the film, heroic Chinese scientists and astronauts lead an international struggle to save the world from destruction.

PRC state media outlets have been effusive in praising and promoting *The Wandering Earth*, on grounds that it has “amazed moviegoers with its bold imagination” and high-quality visual effects ([Xinhua](#), February 15). However, the most striking element of official coverage has been decidedly unsubtle commentary to the effect that the film demonstrates China’s superior vision of international order. A *China Daily* article headlined “The Choice Between Chinese and Western Values” notes that the film displays “the collective political and social spirit of the Chinese people—which is conducive to building a community with a shared future for humankind” ([China Daily](#), February 12). A commentary in the *Global Times* noted that the film presents the common concerns of all humanity for the fate of the Earth, and that “Different from the U.S. sci-fi blockbusters which advocate individual heroism, *The Wandering Earth* proposes China’s collective spirit... This is in line with how people see today’s global affairs... China is making contributions to global development with its own strength and its own way” ([Global Times](#), February 18).

Conclusions

The starkly contrasting official treatments of these two different forms of popular entertainment are revealing of the narratives that the CCP wishes to present to the world—as well as the anxieties that preoccupy PRC leaders at home. *The Wandering Earth*, which presents courageous, selfless, and tech-savvy Chinese characters at the forefront of global leadership, is apparently very much the narrative that PRC media and propaganda officials wish to promote both at home and abroad. By contrast, the historical dramas that vanished from television in late January may have held up an uncomfortable allegorical mirror (whether intentionally or otherwise) to continuing problems within both the party-state hierarchy and Chinese society writ large. PRC media institutions continue to function as the mouthpieces of the state, and they tack their sails according to winds that blow from above; as the Xi administration continues to tighten the screws ever-more firmly over public discourse in China, popular entertainment is likely to feel increasing pressure to “feature goodness” as defined by the propaganda apparatus of the CCP.

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Notes

[1] See: "With 'Yanxi' and 'Ruyi' and Other Such Court Dramas, Negative Influences Cannot Be Ignored" [《延禧》《如懿》等宫廷剧霸屏 负面影响不容小觑], *Beijing Daily News* (北京日报), January 25, 2019, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2019-01-28/doc-ihqfskcp1161992.shtml>. The five categories in which the shows are allegedly at fault are: "Making it a popular fashion to hanker after an imperial lifestyle" [热衷追崇皇族生活方式, 使之成为流行时尚]; "By depicting detailed plots of 'court struggles,' [they have] worsened contemporary society" [精心演绎“宫斗”情节, 恶化当下社交生态]; "Unstintingly glamorizing the emperor and his servants, while ignoring the glories of today's heroic models" [不吝美化帝王臣相, 淡化今朝英模光辉]; "Spreading the ways of extravagance and pleasurable living, thus affecting industriousness and frugal virtue" [宣扬奢华享乐之风, 冲击克勤克俭美德]; "Narrowly pursuing commercial interests, while weakening positive spiritual guidance" [片面追逐商业利益, 弱化正面精神引导]. The translations offered here, which could be subject to slightly differing interpretations, are solely the responsibility of the author.

[2] As of March 3rd, the film review aggregation website *Rotten Tomatoes* registered a 77% positive rating for *The Wandering Earth* in both the critic and audience categories.

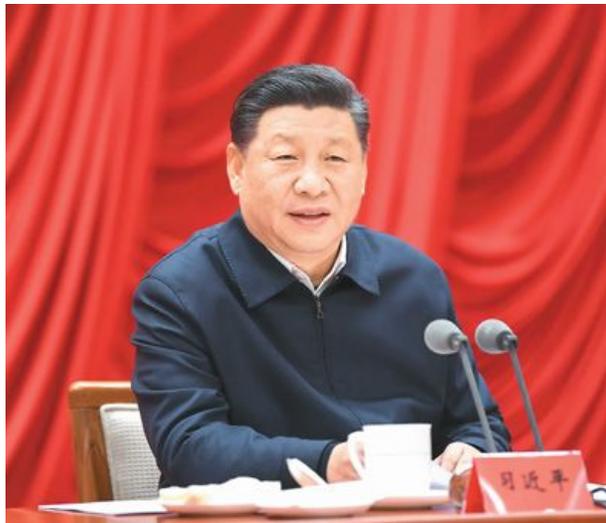
Xi Jinping Warns Against the “Black Swans” and “Gray Rhinos” of a Potential Color Revolution

By Willy Lam

Introduction

During the Lunar New Year holidays, political circles in Beijing were abuzz with this question: “Who, or what, are ‘black swans’ and ‘gray rhinos’?” This followed a major speech given by President and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General Secretary Xi Jinping at the Central Party School (CPS) last month, in which the the 65-year-old leader raised the highest alert for Party officials to “be on guard against black swans and keep watchful for gray rhinos” (*jingti hei tian'e, fangfan hui xiniu* / 警惕黑天鹅, 防范灰犀牛) ([People's Daily](#), January 22).

Noting that China's national security and stability were under multiple threats from within and without, the “core leader” warned: “We must keep our highest alert about ‘black swan’ [*i.e., unforeseen*] incidents and take steps to prevent ‘gray rhino’ [*i.e., known risks that are ignored*] incidents.” Xi further added that “[We are] confronted with unpredictable international developments and a complicated and sensitive external environment... Our task at hand is to maintain stability as we continue our reform and development.” The instructions given by the paramount leader amounted to a tall order: “We must fight well with pre-emptive warfare so as to prevent and withstand risks, and at the same time fight well the war of strategic initiatives [so as] to convert danger into safety and turn threats into opportunities” ([CCTV.com](#), January 23; [People's Daily](#), January 22).



Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping speaking
at the CCP Central Party School (Jan. 21, 2019).

“Unpredictable” International Challenges for the PRC

To what threats was Xi alluding? Given the emphasis on an “unpredictable” and “complicated” global situation, many thought that Xi was referring to the ongoing trade dispute with the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump. In the face of the aggressive tactics of Trump's trade negotiators, the Chinese team

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has been obliged to make one concession after another. Thus, even before the possible striking of a deal by March 1st, Xi's representatives have already offered to buy \$1 trillion worth of American goods and to cut tariffs on imports of American automobiles. During his recent trip to Washington, Vice-Premier Liu He further signaled Beijing's willingness to purchase an additional 5 million tons of soybeans in the near future. At a meeting with Trump in the White House on February 1st, this key economic adviser to Xi even made a glaring mistake by saying that China would buy 5 million tons of soybeans "per day" ([Ming Pao \[Hong Kong\]](#), February 2; [Radio Free Asia](#), February 1).

The Chinese leadership has also been shocked by an alarming series of events on the global scene. The Trump administration has been able to further synchronize the China-related policies of its allies in Europe, Asia and Australasia: this is evidenced by the number of countries that have followed Washington's advice not to use Huawei equipment, or which have drastically reduced business dealings with the company in the wake of Washington's accusations of large-scale espionage ([CNN](#), February 12; [The Associated Press](#), February 11).

More countries have also joined the United States, Australia, and New Zealand in alleging that the PRC state-security apparatus has enhanced spying activities within their borders. Countries that have recently made charges of Chinese espionage have included Norway, Germany, Lithuania and Poland. The latter two nations used to be considered especially friendly to the PRC, due to trade and investment benefits emanating from the Asian giant ([Reuters](#), February 7; [The Baltic Times](#), February 5). However, Lithuania's government recently identified PRC intelligence as a threat, and Poland has taken steps to distance itself from the PRC and align more closely with Washington ([Eurasia Daily Monitor](#), February 19; [China Brief](#), February 15).

Additionally, the United States and allied countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have also beefed up "freedom of navigation" trips by naval vessels and jet fighters close to military bases that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has established on several South China Sea islets whose sovereignty is disputed by neighboring ASEAN countries ([VOA](#), January 9; [Oriental Daily \(Hong Kong\)](#), October 3, 2018).

All of this contributes to a sense among the CCP leadership that China faces a hostile international environment. However, while these events negatively impact Chinese security and developmental interests, they could hardly count as either "black swan" or "gray rhino" incidents. They are more like elephants in the room, which have elicited the attention of Beijing's security experts for several years or more. A policy of containment directed against China – supposedly spearheaded by Washington and followed by American allies – has been a consistent theme of Washington's foreign policy at least since the George W. Bush administration. Moreover, challenges to Beijing's sovereignty claims over the South China Sea have been made frequently in the past few years.

"Black Swans" and "Gray Rhinos" on the Homefront

The true meaning behind Xi's warning about "black swans" and "gray rhinos" is found in China's own domestic affairs. Since 2012, the CCP leadership has devoted enormous resources to preventing disruption to political stability emerging from the so-called "five new black categories" (*xin heiwulei*, 新黑物类): human rights attorneys; underground churches; dissidents; leading commentators on the Internet; and members of disadvantaged sectors in society ([Apple Daily \[Hong Kong\]](#), August 5, 2012; [Deutsche Welle Chinese](#), August 2, 2012). However, Xi and his top aides are also increasingly focused on political and ideological risks—particularly destabilization resulting from dissatisfaction with the "core leader" and his increasingly

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pronounced embrace of Maoism ([China Brief](#), December 4, 2018). Xi, who last year changed the PRC Constitution to enable himself to rule for life, is scared about threats to his own authority. As well-known political commentator Li Datong has pointed out, regime security is an obsession for Xi: “They [Xi and his cronies] see the risks of rebellion... as the economy becomes worse, people from all walks of the society can become opponents [of the administration]” ([Guardian](#), January 22).

Evidence that the dangers worrying Xi originate from within China can be found in Xi’s January 21st speech, in which he said that the CCP faced “seven major risks, including [factors relating to] politics, ideology, economics, technology, society, the external environment and party construction” ([Gov.cn](#), January 21). Xi’s paranoia about the subversive impact of dissident intellectuals, NGO activists, and house church members was also demonstrated by the fact that four days after his CPS speech he held a Politburo “study session” on the premises of the *People’s Daily*. Xi, who heads the CCP’s Central Commission on Cyberspace Affairs, said the party must tighten control over the Internet, which has become perhaps the most potent weapon of the regime’s opponents. He called upon ideological and media cadres to ensure that “all the people must be tightly united by [the correct] ideals, beliefs, values, concepts, and moral principles” ([China News Service](#), January 26, [Xinhua](#), January 25). In explicating Xi’s CPS speech, Xia Kedao, a popular commentator for *People’s Daily Overseas Edition* noted that “ideological struggle at the present moment mostly takes place on the Internet, whose main users are young people.” Xia further asserted that “Many forces in and out of China are using the Net to nurture sympathizers of their value systems, and even opponents and subverters of the current administration” ([V.China.com.cn](#), January 27).

Ironically, the phenomenon of alleged trouble-making elements such as the “new black categories” undermining political stability belongs in the “gray rhino” category—largely because Xi’s 24-hour, multi-dimensional, AI-enabled police state apparatus has been remarkably successful in keeping rebellion at bay ([China Brief](#), July 21, 2017). That is why the CCP leadership held an extraordinarily large number of meetings in January geared toward warning cadres—especially those in charge of internal security, ideology and propaganda departments—not to lower their guard. For example, on January 16th Xi convened a national meeting on the subject of reinforcing the *zhengfa* (“political and legal”) apparatus. Officials working in local police forces, the Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of State Security, the Supreme People’s Court, and the Supreme People’s Procuratorate have all been tasked to “be brave in shouldering responsibilities, keen in reform and innovation [so as] to do well the job of safeguarding the nation’s political security, and protecting the stability of the overall social [situation]” ([People’s Daily](#), January 16; [Xinhua](#), January 15).

Xi’s foremost fear seems to be a qualitative mutation in the nature of popular resistance to the authoritarian regime he leads—a shift that could pave the way for a “black swan” occurrence. The president’s concerns were revealed in a meeting of senior national and regional police officers convened on January 24th by Politburo member Zhao Kezhi, who doubles as Minister of Public Security and Head of the Central Political-Legal Commission. While this conference of top cops was largely called to follow up on instructions given by Xi in the *zhengfa* conference nine days earlier, Zhao revealed the depth of anxiety among the top leadership over the possible break-out of a “color revolution” (*yanse geming*, 颜色革命). This term refers to the series of pro-democracy “revolutions” that took place in the mid-2000s in former Soviet states (including Georgia, the Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan), as well as the Arab Spring of the early 2010s. The standard CCP interpretation is that these cataclysmic developments occurred due to the collusion of pro-Western dissident forces in these countries with American “ideological infiltration” and material assistance ([Qstheory.cn](#), January 17, 2016; [Xinhua](#), October 10, 2015).

While there have been repeated references in the official PRC media throughout the past decade to the specter of a color revolution, this is the first time since Xi came to power in 2012 that the possible demise of the CCP regime via a *yanse geming* has been raised at the highest level. In response to Xi's demand that police officials raise their wariness even against unlikely eventualities, Zhao noted at the conference that "the entire wisdom and the entire power of the police must be focused on preventing and countering 'color revolutions'." He further added that "We must fight well the battle of managing public safety... We must resolutely fight well the overall battle of the *fangkong* ["prevention and control"] of social [upheavals]" (MPS.gov.cn, January 15).

Seeking to Strengthen Loyalty to the "Core" of the CCP

As with other battle cries issued by Xi, the aspiring president for life has not offered clear solutions for the social, political and economic problems facing the nation. As veteran historian Zhang Lifan has pointed out, "[statistical] curves relating to politics, economics and social sentiments have reached the breaking point." However, it is also not accidental that Xi's admonition to CCP cadres to uphold stability has been linked together with a demand of utmost loyalty to Xi himself: as Zhang has further noted, "On the one hand, the Communist Party's sense of crisis has increased due to force of circumstances... On the other hand, Xi Jinping has taken advantage of the crisis to continue to boost his own power" (Radio Free Asia, January 23). At the CPS meeting, Xi urged all cadres to enhance their "fourfold consciousness" (*si ge yishi*, 四个意识): political consciousness, consciousness about the big picture of party dominance, consciousness about following the instructions of the "core" leadership of the party, and consciousness about seeing eye to eye with the core. Moreover, Xi instructed, party members must "self-consciously remain at the highest level of unity with the party *zhongyang* [i.e., central authorities] in their thoughts, politics and action" (People's Daily, January 22). As Xi has declared himself to be the "core" of the party, professing fealty to the core and the *zhongyang* actually means declaring undying loyalty to Xi himself.

As though Xi's unchallenged power was not already evident to all, in a January 25th meeting the Politburo approved three regulations on "party construction," whose themes again relate to strengthening the decision-making authority of the *zhongyang*. For example, the "Regulations on Seeking Permission and Filing Reports on Major Issues of the CCP" simply means that no new policies can be conceived or implemented without Xi's imprimatur (Xinhua, January 25). As police chief Zhao Kezhi made it clear at the national meeting of top law-enforcement officers, "we must ceaselessly strengthen our loyalty to the core...and remain at a high level of unity with the party *zhongyang* with comrade Xi Jinping as its core" (MPS.gov.cn, January 15).

As the world watches with anxiety the unfolding series of crises shaking up China, more questions are being asked as to whether simply enhancing loyalty to the top leadership will effectively solve the country's problems. As long as these problems persist, Xi and other leaders in the CCP's top echelons will continue to watch nervously for the potential emergence of those mysterious and frightening beasts known as "black swans" and "gray rhinos."

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**Islamic Countries Engage with China Against the
Background of Repression in Xinjiang**

By Roie Yellenik

The Silence of the Muslim World Regarding Repression in China

Throughout 2018, a steadily growing body of evidence revealed the existence of a vast network of detainment facilities in China's western Xinjiang Province, in which hundreds of thousands of Uighurs—a Turkic-speaking and majority Muslim ethnic group—are or have been confined for extended periods of time ([China Brief](#), May 15 2018; [China Brief](#), November 5 2018). Many of these facilities function as “transformation through education” centers, in which detainees are made subject to abusive treatment and severe psychological pressure to proclaim loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ([China Brief](#), February 1; [Freedom House](#), February 13). Even outside such facilities, the Chinese authorities have created a pervasive surveillance regime in Xinjiang that is one of the most repressive in the world ([Human Rights Watch](#), September 9 2018; [Congressional Executive Commission on China](#), July 26 2018).

The repression against the Uighurs has been accompanied by a broader campaign in the People's Republic of China (PRC) to suppress Islamic culture and religious practice. In 2018, the PRC issued bans on giving newborn children Islamic-themed names ([Arab News](#), April 26 2017). Uighurs have reportedly been forced to drink alcoholic beverages and eat pork during Lunar New Year celebrations, or else risk arrest ([Yeni Safak](#), February 8). In 2018, PRC citizens traveling to Mecca for the *hajj* pilgrimage were made to wear GPS-based personal tracking devices ([Muslim Council of Hong Kong](#), August 4 2018). Throughout 2018, the government has even conducted a broad campaign of demolishing mosques, on the flimsy pretext of protecting the public from the dangers of dilapidated buildings ([Gulf News](#), August 11 2018; [Radio Free Asia](#), September 7 2018).

This state-directed repression and harassment directed against Muslims in China has drawn broad international condemnation throughout the Western world. However, what has been the reaction from the Islamic world itself? Although reactions among major states have varied (*as discussed below*), the reaction throughout the Islamic world has largely been one of deafening silence—and when voices are raised, they have been faint. The Independent Human Rights Commission of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) provides a representative example: following meetings in December to 2018 to discuss the plight of the Uighurs, the Commission issued a tepid statement in which it “expressed concern on these disturbing reports on the treatment of Uighur Muslims and expressed hope that China, which has excellent bilateral relations with most OIC countries as well as the OIC, would address the legitimate concerns of Muslims around the world” ([Twitter](#), December 11 2018).

Egypt and Saudi Arabia Set the Tone for Sunni States

Egypt and Saudi Arabia, two pillar states for the Sunni Arab world, have long prioritized their relations with the PRC over any concern for Muslim minorities in China. The two countries have even acted to shield the PRC from criticism: following violent riots in Xinjiang in 2009, Egypt and Saudi Arabia both assisted the PRC by helping to block a draft resolution critical of China that was under debate in the OIC. [1] In 2017, Egypt went further by rounding up dozens of Uighur students residing in Egypt, and sending them back to China—without explanation, and without the men being able to meet with lawyers or their families ([Radio Free Asia](#), July 7 2017).

In February 2019, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) made a high-profile visit to the PRC, in which he committed to strengthening his country's relationship with China, and offered no public comment about the Uighurs or other oppressed Muslims ([Sputnik News Arabic](#), February 20). In the course of his trip, MBS reportedly signed 35 economic cooperation deals worth a total of \$28 billion U.S. dollars ([Khaleej Times](#), February 22; [Annahar](#), February 22). PRC state press hailed the visit as proof that Saudi Arabia “attached great importance to the comprehensive strategic partnership with China... [and] firmly supported China's efforts to safeguard its sovereignty, security and stability, and opposed external forces interfering in China's domestic affairs.” The prince's Chinese hosts further asserted that the two countries would “push forward anti-terrorism, law enforcement and security cooperation, while enhancing experience exchanges on de-radicalization” ([Xinhua](#), February 22).

Non-Arab Sunni states have generally followed the same course. When the plight of the Uighurs was raised in Indonesia's Parliament in December 2018, Vice President Jusuf Kalla commented that his government wished “to prevent any human rights violations,” but that “we don't want to intervene in the domestic affairs of another country” ([ABC](#), December 22 2018). In Pakistan—arguably the most pro-PRC of any major Muslim state, and a major recipient of Chinese investments—Prime Minister Imran Khan has professed ignorance of the situation in Xinjiang ([Express Tribune](#), January 8), and the Foreign Ministry has claimed that the entire situation has been distorted by a “faction of foreign media [who] are trying to sensationalize the matter by spreading false information” ([Express Tribune](#), December 20 2018),

The sensitivity of many states in the Islamic world regarding their own human rights records has made these governments unwilling to criticize China for its anti-Muslim repression: these countries are willing to sacrifice the Uighurs for their own interests, and they comply with China's preference for “non-interference in domestic affairs” ([Middle East Institute](#), January 22). Furthermore, China is Saudi Arabia's largest customer, and the Saudi economy (as well as that of other countries in the region) relies on exporting natural resource products. Economic dependence on China is a common factor in the Middle East, and in order to maintain the market access, cheap loans, and consumer goods that benefit their own economies, these nations must keep their relations with China positive.

Additionally, there is speculation amongst America's traditional Sunni allies that the United States might sooner or later withdraw from the region; this contributes to a belief in some quarters that time is on China's side. PRC state media has sought to play up this theme: commenting on the visit to China by MBS, *Global Times* stated that "Riyadh used to rely on the West... However, having realized that Western countries are not always dependable, the Saudi Prince is banking on [a] 'Look East' policy" for his country ([Global Times](#), February 24).



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman poses for a publicity photograph during a visit to the Great Wall of China, February 21, 2019.

A Divided Iran Continues to Side with China

Although Iran—the leading Shia state of the Middle East—is at loggerheads with its arch-rival Saudi Arabia on a broad range of issues, the two share a common approach in prizing diplomatic and economic relations with the PRC over concern for China's Muslims. Iran chafes under significant economic sanctions, and depends to a large degree on trade with China; furthermore, the Islamic Republic has long sought to cultivate China and Russia as counterweights to American influence in the region. This has led Iran to remain largely silent regarding China's anti-Muslim repression ([The Diplomat](#), September 18 2018). Iran's government, like its Sunni counterparts, also shares sensitivities regarding its own human rights record, and concerns that human rights could be invoked by outside powers as a justification for intervention in its domestic affairs. [2]

In the past, statements of concern for China's Muslims have been made by some dissident figures in the clerical hierarchy. In the course of Iran's contested 2009 elections, reformist clerics made an issue of the PRC's treatment of the Uighurs, and of Iran's own silence in response: Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamedani and Ayatollah Yousef Sanei issued separate statements that criticized China's violent suppression of unrest in Xinjiang, as well as China's efforts to dominate the markets of Muslim countries ([Tehran Times](#), July 14 2009; [New York Times](#), July 14 2009). Similar criticisms were later repeated by members of the Iranian

Parliament and the Tehran City Council ([The Diplomat](#), September 18 2018). However, these criticisms have not changed the policy orientation of the regime, which continues to prioritize relations with the PRC above other concerns.

Turkey as an Isolated Voice of Criticism

Turkey, which shares ethno-linguistic ties with the Uighurs, has been the one major Muslim state to speak out against the repression of Chinese Muslims. Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has appealed to a sense of common heritage with Uighurs and has positioned himself as their protector. In response to the riots in Urumqi in 2009, Erdoğan said: "These events in China are genocide and we request the Chinese government to not play a spectator's role... It is clear barbarity" ([Hurriyet](#), April 9 2012).

However, even Turkey's policy has been volatile, and subject to shifts over time. By the end of 2017, the Turkish leadership shifted in a more pro-PRC direction. Following a meeting between China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, and his Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish minister stated that "Turkey's security is related to China's security." This was accompanied by restrictions on media coverage of the Uighur issue, which was intended to silence criticism of PRC policy ([Reuters](#), August 3 2017; [Besa Center](#), September 2017).



Demonstrators in Istanbul protest against the treatments of Ughurs in China (November 2018).

In 2019, Turkey has changed its stance again. On February 9th, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs published an announcement condemning the "arbitrary arrests, torture and political brainwashing in the internment camps throughout Xinjiang." The Turkish announcement called the camps "a shame for all humanity" and called on the Secretary General of the United Nations to take action. This change was precipitated by the reported death in a Chinese internment camp of the renowned Uighur poet and musician

Abdurehim Heyit, who had been imprisoned due to the ideas expressed in his poems ([Turkish Foreign Ministry](#), February 9). [3]

The roller coaster nature of Turkey's stance towards China and the Uighurs has three apparent reasons. The first is Turkey's need to maintain expanding ties with China. Turkey's society has radicalized during Erdoğan's rule, which has contributed to rising Turkish nationalism that rejects Europe and the West; and when denied membership in the European Union, Ankara began seeking allies elsewhere. Additionally, the PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) introduced an economic incentive that reinforced Turkey's alignment with China: the price Turkey paid for BRI investment was silence on the Uighur issue.

The second major reason is the Turkey-Qatar bloc's struggle with Egypt and Saudi Arabia for the leadership of the Sunni world ([Al-Jazeera](#), January 13). Taking a stance on the Uighurs allows Ankara to assume the role of defender of Muslim rights in the world—a stance made all the more striking by the pervasive silence from Riyadh ([Al-Jazeera](#), February 10). The third reason is domestic pressure: as a Turkish columnist has noted, “Dozens of similar protests and events have taken place in the recent months in various corners of Anatolia, which increased the pressure on Erdoğan's party.” This included a major protest on January 24th, in which Erdoğan's political rivals called on the Turkish government to act on and investigate the violation of Uighur rights in China ([Hurriyet](#), February 11).

Even amidst this criticism, Erdoğan's government has sought to avoid excessively harming its ties with China: notably, it was the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and not the president himself, that issued recent condemnations of China. Despite this, there has been a chill in Turkish-Chinese relations. On February 28th, the PRC announced the closure of its consulate in the city of Izmir ([Hurriyet](#), March 1); the reasons for this were unspecified, but it is likely a symbolic move to express Beijing's displeasure over Ankara's recent criticisms.

Conclusions

In addressing other international Muslim issues—such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, or the plight of the ethnic minority Rohingya in Myanmar—Islamic governments have expressed concern regarding the human rights of their Muslim brethren. This being so, why do they remain silent about abuses against the Uighurs and other Muslims in China? The short answer to this question is the economic and diplomatic influence now wielded by China around the globe. Looking ahead, the attitude held by Arab states towards the Xinjiang issue is not likely to change: for these governments, relations with China are far more important than supporting the Uighurs. As China's economic and geopolitical power in the international arena continue to increase, the interest of Muslim countries in dealing with the Uighur issue will likely decrease.

Taking this into account, Western countries must use all the means at their disposal to stop immediately the violations of the basic rights of Muslims throughout China, and press the PRC to immediately close the

network of “transformation through education” camps spread throughout Xinjiang. American representatives should raise these issues and other violations of human rights, in both open and private discussions with Chinese leaders. Showcasing strong leadership on the matter will present the world with value-based power that will not only serve to make the world a better place, but will also strengthen the position of Western countries in terms of moral influence. Courageous figures from within the Muslim world, too, must speak up—or else the abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere will continue with impunity.

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Notes

[1] “Xinjiang: PRC Scrambles to Avoid Anti-Islam Image Abroad and Kill OIC Declaration,” U.S. Diplomatic Cable dated July 17, 2009. https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BEIJING2041_a.html.

[2] Large-scale protests erupted in Iran in June 2009, and continued through the period of the violent riots in Xinjiang in July 2009. On July 28, 2009, Iran’s delegation to the United Nations issued a statement that domestic repression “by no means whatsoever, may imply permit to use force against another State under any pretext such as humanitarian intervention,” and that primacy must be given to “respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence of States as well as the principle of non-use of force in international relations and non-interference.” See: Statement of the Islamic Republic of Iran Permanent Mission to the United Nations (July 28, 2009). <http://www.globalr2p.org/media/files/iran-2009-r2p-debate.pdf>.

[3] Since the reported death of Abdurehim Heyit, Chinese authorities released a video dated February 10th that showed the poet to be alive, and presenting a statement—under seeming duress—that he had not been subjected to any abuse. Heyit has been sentenced to eight years in prison for “violating national laws” ([Guardian Video News](#), February 10).

Rivalries and Relics: Examining China’s Buddhist Public Diplomacy *By Sudha Ramachandran*

In October 2018, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) hosted over 1,000 Buddhist scholars and representatives from 55 countries and regions at the Fifth World Buddhist Forum (WBF) in Putian, in China’s southeastern Fujian Province ([Xinhua](#), October 28 2018). First held in 2006, and since convened every three years, the WBF has become a prominent event intended to promote China’s stature and influence in the Buddhist world. Buddhist monks and scholars representing different branches of Buddhism participate in WBF gatherings, and prominent international Buddhist leaders from across the world are invited to participate.

The officially atheist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has adopted religion for diplomatic purposes: Buddhism's central tenets of non-violence, peace and tolerance make it a rich source of potential soft power, and the cultivation of Buddhist communities is emerging as an important component of the PRC's initiatives in public diplomacy. In addition to hosting the WBF, China has cultivated Buddhist leaders, sent Buddhist relics on tours through Asian countries, and sought to use Buddhist ties to forge closer social linkages in Taiwan and Hong Kong (*see below*). The PRC has further promoted Buddhist public diplomacy efforts in countries impacted by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), hoping that Buddhism will soften China's image in the eyes of local populations, and convince other nations that its rise as a global power is a peaceful one.



Attendees at the Fifth World Buddhist Forum held in Putian (Fujian Province) in October 2018. (Xinhua)

Seeking Positive Publicity in Hong Kong and Taiwan

A major part of the PRC's Buddhist diplomacy is directed at Hong Kong and Taiwan, and seeks to emphasize themes of shared history, heritage, and culture. The WBF had its origin in joint discussions among monks from the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong in 2005; since then, the Forum has met at Hangzhou (2006), Wuxi and Taipei (2009), Hong Kong (2012), Wuxi again (2015), and Putian (2018). The sharing of the 2009 WBF events between the Chinese mainland and Taiwan had political significance, as it occurred amidst improving relations between the CCP and Taiwan's then-ruling Kuomintang Party ([Hindustan Times](#), March 27 2009). Furthermore, in a dramatic contrast to the destruction of temples during the turbulent Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), in recent years PRC authorities have supported the renovation of temples in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Beijing hopes that such efforts will allow it to present itself as a preserver of China's Buddhist heritage, and that this in turn will strengthen support for reunification (or closer reintegration) among the people of Taiwan and Hong Kong. [1]

“Relic Diplomacy”

In some Buddhist communities, the veneration of holy relics—most frequently human remains claimed to be those of the Buddha or other revered monks and scholars, as well as items they may have used—have been a part of popular religious devotion. Since the 1950s, the PRC has sent Buddhist relics for display in other countries—a practice known as “relic diplomacy,” which is aimed at winning public goodwill. In 2011, when protests over the Myitsone Dam project unleashed a wave of anti-Chinese sentiment in Myanmar, China dispatched a Buddha’s tooth relic on a 48-day tour of Myanmar ([Myanmar Times](#), August 15 2011). This paved the way for establishment of ties between Lingguang Temple in China, where the Buddha’s tooth relic resides, and the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon ([People’s Daily Online](#), February 23 2012). This was the fourth time since 1955 that this relic had been sent to Myanmar. China has also gifted or loaned Buddhist relics or their replicas to other countries, including Thailand, India and Sri Lanka.

The PRC’s relic diplomacy with Hong Kong is particularly strong. Hong Kong is the only place in the world to which China has sent three Buddha relics—his tooth, finger bone and skull bone—for display. In April 2012, Beijing sent a fragment of the Buddha’s skull bone to Hong Kong, the first time this relic was sent outside the mainland. The relic display was sent to honor Hong Kong’s hosting of the third World Buddhist Forum and the Buddha’s birthday (April 28)—and not coincidentally, the 15th anniversary of Hong Kong’s “return to the Motherland” ([China Daily](#), April 26 2012).

Dealing with the Dalai Lama

For Beijing, the single most important motivation behind its Buddhist public diplomacy is the effort to counterbalance the global popularity of Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama and the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Seeking to exert strict control over Tibetan political, social, and even religious life, senior CCP officials have vilified the Dalai Lama as a “wolf in monk’s robes” intent on “splitting up China and wrecking ethnic unity” ([China Daily](#), March 12 2010; [China Daily](#), March 7 2011). The Dalai Lama has been pointedly excluded from the WBF and other PRC-hosted Buddhist events. This is aimed at isolating the Tibetan spiritual leader and weakening his global stature. Many Tibetans fear that Beijing will also leverage the WBF in a future effort to interfere in the Dalai Lama’s succession, using the Forum to seek endorsement of the CCP’s appointee as 15th Dalai Lama ([The Diplomat](#), March 27 2009).

The CCP has also attempted to use the WBF to advance its position in the struggle over designation of the Panchen Lama, the second-ranking figure in Tibetan Buddhism. Most of the Tibetan exile community continues to recognize Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, who disappeared into state custody (along with his family) in 1995 after the Dalai Lama recognized him as the 11th Panchen Lama ([Central Tibetan Administration](#), May 17 2018). PRC authorities have designated a rival candidate, Gyaltzen Norbu, and have used the WBF as a mechanism to seek greater acceptance for him as the rightful holder of this position ([The Diplomat](#), October 29

2018). Gyaltzen Norbu has appeared at WBF and other state-sponsored events, where he has called on audiences to support the CCP and “religious theories that go with socialist core values” ([Xinhua](#), April 27 2012; [Xinhua](#), March 11, 2017).

Buddhism and the Belt and Road

In centuries past, the Silk Route played an important role in Buddhism’s transmission to Central Asia and Han China. Is China now turning to Buddhism to promote its own modern Silk Route?

One prominent example is visible in Sri Lanka, where China is constructing a 350-meter-high “Lotus Tower” in the capital city of Colombo. Named in deference to the Lotus Sutra, the design of the building draws inspiration from Buddhism, the religion of Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese majority. The Lotus Tower serves as a reminder to Sri Lankans of the two millennia-old Sino-Sri Lankan bonding through Buddhism—as well as their shared destiny through China’s ambitious BRI program ([Colombo Telegraph](#), June 13 2018). The PRC’s linkage of BRI and Buddhist soft power was made evident at the 2018 WBF, where the use of Buddhism to promote BRI was among the issues on the agenda ([Global Times](#), October 17 2018).

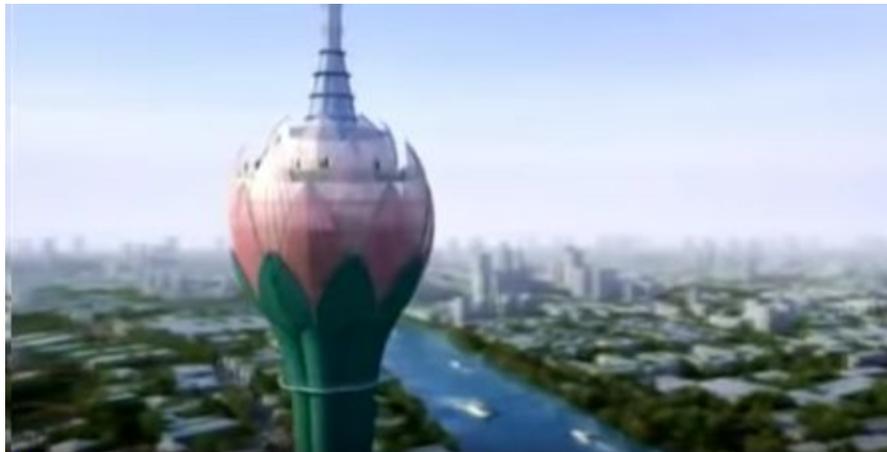


Image: An artist’s conception of the completed Lotus Tower rising over the Colombo city skyline. (Source: Youtube)

“A very conscious and coordinated governmental action to use Buddhist diplomacy in support of BRI” isn’t in place yet, says Malaysian scholar Ngeow Chow Bing. However as BRI gathers momentum and China accelerates its people-to-people exchanges along the trade routes, it can be expected “to increasingly mobilize Buddhism.” This is especially likely since several of BRI’s Asian member states are Buddhist and “strongly religious.” [2]

China may be expected to step up its Buddhist public diplomacy in cases where BRI projects encounter opposition in countries with large Buddhist populations. Sri Lanka’s experience is instructive in this regard: unable to repay huge loans it owes China for BRI projects, Sri Lanka has handed the Hambantota Port over to

the Chinese ([China Brief](#), January 5). This has triggered unease in the island, especially among the Sinhalese majority. The Lotus Tower project must be seen in this context: it plays into Buddhist-Sinhalese cultural pride, and the PRC hopes that this will convey a message of peaceful intentions in Sri Lanka. However, whether or not this will reduce Sri Lankan suspicions remains to be seen.

Indian and Chinese Competition for International Buddhist Leadership

India is also a country with a deep Buddhist heritage, and it draws on its status as the birthplace of Buddhism to claim leadership of the Buddhist world. India, like China, has been using Buddhism to seek influence in southeast Asia. This is evident in Myanmar, for instance, where in December 2013 India and Myanmar co-sponsored a competing event with the WBF, a three-day conference of Buddhist scholars at the Sitagu International Buddhist Academy in Yangon. Indian representatives used the event to unveil a five-meter statue of the Buddha—a personal gift from Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh—at Shwedagon Pagoda, Myanmar's most revered Buddhist shrine ([Al Jazeera](#), Jan 11 2013).

The Sino-Indian geopolitical rivalry casts a long shadow over the two countries and their competing exercise of Buddhist diplomacy. India's strong ties with Tibetan Buddhism—the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan government-in-exile, and a roughly 100,000-strong Tibetan exile community reside there—strengthen its Buddhist soft power immeasurably, and provide it with an advantage in the Sino-Indian competition over Buddhism. The Dalai Lama and his world-wide popularity comprise a rich soft power resource for India; for China, India's drawing on this resource amounts to propping up the Dalai Lama. Consequently, India's Buddhist diplomacy that involves the Dalai Lama in any way draws an angry response from the PRC. In 2011, when the Dalai Lama was the keynote speaker at the Indian government-sponsored Global Buddhist Congregation in Delhi, Beijing cancelled scheduled talks with New Delhi on their border dispute ([Times of India](#), December 26 2011).

China's Buddhist projects have, in turn, raised suspicion in India. As part of its Buddhist diplomacy vis-à-vis Nepal, China is developing Lumbini, the birthplace of Buddha, as a major Buddhist site to draw pilgrims and tourists. As part of its BRI projects in Nepal, China proposes to link Lumbini by road and rail to Kyirong on the Sino-Nepal border, which in turn hooks on to the BRI network. Given Lumbini's proximity to the Indian border, there is concern in India that Chinese presence so close to the Indian border will have security implications for India ([Sunday Guardian](#), March 11 2018).

Asian countries are working together on bilateral and multilateral projects to revive ancient Buddhist sites or renovate Buddhist temples. Foremost among these multilateral projects is the revival of the Nalanda University project. Located in eastern India, Nalanda was a seat of Buddhist learning that flourished between the 5th and 12th centuries (Common Era). In March 2006 India mooted the idea of reviving this university; and before long, China, Singapore, Japan, Thailand, Australia, Russia and the United States were among the countries that offered support. China played a prominent role in this initiative by donating \$1 million U.S. dollars towards

a Chinese studies library for the planned university ([Times of India](#), October 10, 2013). However, with India dragging its feet in getting the Nalanda project off the ground, China has gone ahead and set up its own rival institution: the Nanhai Buddhist College, established in 2017 in Hainan Province ([New Indian Express](#), June 5, 2017). What started off as a collaborative effort has now become a competitive one.

Going Forward

Unlike other soft power resources specific to a country—like Bollywood for India, or the Confucius Institutes for China—Buddhism is a soft power resource shared among several Asian countries. However, China is drawing on Buddhist themes in its public diplomacy far more than other countries in Asia. The PRC's use of Buddhism in public diplomacy has seen some successes: for example, it has contributed to greater interaction and cooperation between Buddhist monks and organizations in the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.

However, China's Buddhist soft power has limits. In its most important objective in Buddhist public diplomacy—delegitimizing the Dalai Lama and counterbalancing his popularity—the PRC has not achieved its goals, and the Dalai Lama remains the most well-known and popular Buddhist leader in the world. Neither has Beijing been able to garner broad support in the Buddhist world for its candidate as Panchen Lama. However, the PRC can be expected to maintain these efforts—and to intensify them following the 14th Dalai Lama's passing, when the PRC will seek international endorsement for its decisions relating to the succession.

Beijing's hopes of convincing its neighbors of its peaceful intentions have also not yet been realized. This is largely because of China's aggressive actions on the ground: Buddhism cannot make the PRC seem a friendly neighbor when it continues to act unilaterally to bolster its position in territorial and other disputes. Thus its use of hard power is undermining its soft power diplomacy. Time will tell whether the image of a lotus blossom rising in Sri Lanka, or of militarized islands in the South China Sea, will ultimately prove to be the more compelling symbol of China's rise.

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Notes:

[1] Andre Laliberté, "Buddhist Revival under State Watch," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2011.

[2] Author's interview with Ngeow Chow Bing (Director of the Institute of China Studies in the University of Malaya) in Kuala Lumpur, February 21.

**“Triad” Military Education and Training Reforms:
The PLA’s Cultivation of Talent for Integrated Joint Operations**

By Kevin McCauley

Introduction

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is currently implementing what it calls the “Triad” military education and training reform concept intended to develop more capable joint commanders and staff officers. This reform effort is critical to the implementation of integrated joint operations, and to the transformation of the PLA into an advanced military force. The operationalization of integrated joint and “system of systems” operations is placing complex requirements on joint officers—to include the command and coordination of dispersed forces, employment of joint modular task forces down to the tactical level, employment of informationized weapons and equipment, and the introduction of innovative operational concepts ([Jamestown Foundation](#), January 2017).

Although military educational reforms began more than two decades ago, the PLA continues to identify numerous and significant problems in cultivating joint talent. Communist Party General Secretary and PLA Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping has stated that the development of joint command officers is an urgent priority for addressing the shortage of qualified personnel. [1] The PLA has identified numerous problems in its military educational institutions: outdated faculty and courses; fraud and corruption that pollutes the academic environment, and diverts funds and resources; poor coordination between military educational institutions and units; as well as poor planning and management in implementing military education reforms. Xi has accused the military academic institutions of the “four winds” (*si feng*, 四风)—namely formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and waste—and has asserted that reforms will be a difficult struggle that must be won. [2]

The PLA is also addressing the information revolution in its cultivation of joint talent, improvements in joint training, and overall modernization. The cultivation of joint talent reforms is primarily focused on adapting to the information technology revolution in military affairs, and building an “informationized” (*xinxihua*, 信息化) warfare capability. Now PLA theorists are discussing the next revolution in military affairs based on “intelligent” (*zhinenghua*, 智能化) technologies, which they believe can have a significant impact on all aspects of the military. These theorists believe that the intelligent technology revolution could provide an opportunity to leapfrog in front of the advanced militaries that have already incorporated information technologies ([China Military Net](#), January 4 2018; [China Brief](#), February 15). While military educational institutions are beginning to incorporate intelligent technology issues into the classroom, the focus remains primarily on informationization. The PLA will need to rapidly catch up with the last revolution in military affairs, or else risk falling behind in the new revolution ([China Military Net](#), January 22).

“Triad” Military Education Reforms to Cultivate Joint Talent

The PLA has researched the education of joint operations officers beginning as early as the mid-1980s, with an increasing focus from the 1990s to the present. In early 2016 the Central Military Commission (CMC) issued a formal “Opinion on Deepening National Defense and Military Reform,” with the current reforms scheduled to be completed between 2017 and the end of 2020. The “Opinion” proposed deepening the existing “Triad New Military Talent Education System of Systems” (三位一体新型军事人才培养体系) composed of three program areas: military academy education, unit training practice, and military professional education ([State Council Information Office](#), May 2015).

None of the three components of the “Triad” system are new, but the ongoing reforms are updating and fusing the three systems to create a synergistic effect. This new educational system of systems is intended to further integrate military educational institutions with unit-level training in order to provide cross-fertilization across multiple skill sets and mental disciplines. PLA analysis concludes that new quality military talent— especially joint talent—will play an increasingly important and decisive role on the informationized battlefield. Importantly, the PLA continues to believe that the human factor is the most decisive for victory on the battlefield, reinforcing the importance of developing quality joint personnel ([Sina](#), December 30 2008). [3]

“Military academy education” (*jundui yuanxiao jiaoyu*, 军队院校教育) is the main channel to improve the quality of military personnel, as well as to teach basic professional knowledge and skills. Military academic institutions need to promote innovative minds and thinking abilities, laying the foundation for long term talent development. Cultivating faculty personnel with both military experience and advanced degrees—along with the parallel creation of solid faculty evaluation systems—are important components of the reform process ([Xinhua](#), April 10 2018). The PLA considers the National Defense University to be its premier joint military educational institution (although the National University of Defense Technology and service colleges also provide some joint courses). The theater commands have also initiated on-the-job training and certification programs for joint personnel. Additionally, the PLA intends to create a virtual joint command college with online courses and learning resources ([China Military Net](#), September 12 2017; [China Military Net](#), November 2 2015; [Sina](#), December 30 2008; [State Council Information Office](#), December 2004).

“Unit training practice” (*budui xunlian shijian*, 部队训练实践) is critical to enhancing the capability to fight and win, as well as an important basic program to develop command officers. [4] Joint exercises provide officers with experience in the complexities of joint operations: comprehensive exercises integrate personnel and equipment, transform theory into practice, and place the classroom in the battlefield. The PLA believes that in order to improve joint education, military education needs to move closer to unit training, focus on actual combat training, and form a seamless linkage between military educational institutions and units ([Xinhua](#), April 10 2018).

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“Military professional education” (*junshi zhiye jiaoyu*, 军事职业教育) is seeking to leverage information technology to provide PLA officers with continuing web-based education opportunities outside of brick-and-mortar institutions. The PLA is introducing Western educational concepts in the interactive, massive open online course (MOOC) program for online learning and the sharing of resources. A pilot project within the PLA has been implemented within 24 units. The online course program includes leveraging civilian educational resources, as well as continuing assessment and revision of the program on an ongoing basis ([Xinhua](#), November 25 2017; [Xinhua](#), November 16 2017).

Although not one of the three main elements of the “triad,” PLA reforms also embrace a fourth category: “joint teaching and training” (*lian jiao lian xun*, 联教联训), which leverages the teaching and research resources of military education institutions to support unit-level training. The PLA considers the “Joint Teaching-2012 Queshan” (*Lian Jiao-2012 Queshan*, 联教-2012 确山) Exercise as the first multi-dimensional joint teaching and training exercise that integrated military education institutions with units in the field ([Jamestown Foundation](#), January 2017).

Some PLA sources assert the goal of achieving military educational reforms by 2020, but this appears unattainable due to continuing problems. The official PLA goal for completion of the overall reforms in joint education is 2035—a target that appears reasonable if key objectives are met. These include: controlling corruption that adversely affects military education; constructing quality joint faculties and curricula; improving pay, benefits, and rewards in order to attract and retain quality faculty; establishing effective evaluation methods for students and instructors; and integrating the new military revolution based on intelligent technologies into existing coursework.

However, the lack of progress in military education reforms over the past twenty years leaves ultimate success in doubt. There appears to be an inability or institutional impediment derailing military educational reforms that the CMC needs to overcome ([China Military](#), October 30 2018). President Xi’s speech at a national education conference in September 2018 addressed these challenges: while noting that the military educational system has improved, he acknowledged that work remains: the traditional mindset persists, and military professional education reform is still in the initial exploratory stage ([China Military Net](#), September 14 2018).

Conclusions

The current reform effort in military education is focused on developing integrated joint capabilities, and a “system of systems” operations capability, in order to significantly boost the PLA’s warfighting capability. Improvements in military education focused on the development of joint talent are a critical element for the successful implementation of these twin capabilities. The PLA has identified numerous problems related to joint talent development that could cripple President Xi’s “Triad” reform plans if not adequately resolved. While the outline of reforms for developing joint operations talent in military educational institutions are provided in

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PLA publications, many details are not clear—particularly those regarding the extent, quality, and effectiveness of the reforms' implementation.

The broader implications of the “Triad” PLA educational transformation are significant. Successful implementation and continuing refinement of reform efforts are both critical for the development of joint talents. Development of joint talents throughout the PLA at the strategic, campaign and tactical levels is a key requirement for the implementation of an integrated joint operations capability. The PLA appears to be attempting to address identified operational requirements and problems. However, by the PLA's own admission, serious problems remain—including corruption and bureaucratic inertia. This inability to expediently implement required military educational and training reforms will extend the time required to implement an advanced joint operations capability. The leadership successfully overcame bureaucratic obstacles that delayed the creation of the joint theater commands; now the leadership needs to break the impediments to cultivating joint talent in order for PLA transformation to be successful.

A fully-developed integrated joint operations capability would make the PLA a dangerous opponent in any regional conflict—as well as in potential global conflicts, as China's interests extend further abroad. Even the PLA has stated that the development period for a significant cohort of joint commanders and staff will be lengthy; however, incremental improvements in military education will gradually increase the PLA's combat effectiveness as it builds toward its goal of becoming a world-class military force.

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Notes

[1] Yao Jianing, “Senior Official Urges Deeper Military Graft Inspections,” *Xinhua*, 16 Jul 2014; General Political Department, 习近平关于国防和军队建设重要论述选编 (*Selection of Important Expositions of Xi Jinping on National Defense and Army Building*), Beijing: PLA Press, 2014, pp. 120 and 188; Ma Qingtao and Liu Huating (马清涛 刘华亭), “以习近平强军思想为引领大力培育高层次复合型军事人才” (“Vigorously Cultivate High-Level Inter-Disciplinary Military Talent under the Guidance of Xi Jinping's Thought on Strengthening the Military”), *中国军事科学 (China Military Science)*, Issue 1, 2018, p. 36.

[2] *General Political Department Editor*, 习近平关于国防和军队建设重要论述选编 (*Selection of Important Expositions of Xi Jinping on National Defense and Army Building*), Beijing: PLA Press, 2014, pp.

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119-123, 159-161, 182-194 and 224; Hu Limin (胡利民) et al, 军事人才联合教育论 (*On the Joint Education of Military Personnel*), Beijing: National Defense Industry Press, 2017, pp. 139-140 and 169.

[3] Wu Qingli (吴清丽), 基于信息系统的体系作战能力理论探索 (*Exploration of Information Systems Based Operational Capability Theory*), Beijing: Military Science Press, 2011, pp. 6-7.

[4] The PLA states that “unit training practice” has acquired a specialized meaning, although there is not a consistent definition. “Practice” in this context signifies that the training possesses a conscious transformative nature.