

Chi Haotian: A Political Biography¹

James Mulvenon

Chi Haotian has a unique profile among the current military leadership, combining combat experience and military professional skills with a long career in political work. As a result, he embodies the PLA's seemingly contradictory goals of politicization and professionalization.

Chi Haotian's Military Career

Chi Haotian was born in 1929 in Zhaoyuan County, Shandong Province. He was the third of seven children in a peasant family. In 1944, Chi joined the Eighth Route Army's Zhaoyuan County Qishan District Squadron, working as a copy clerk, signalman, and squad leader. In 1946, Chi attended and graduated from the Anti-Japanese Political and Military College. Between 1946 and 1949, Chi served in a series of political officer positions in the Third Field Army, participating in the Laiwu, Manglianggu, Jinan, Huaihai, Yangzi River Crossing and Shanghai campaigns. Following the Shanghai campaign, he was recognized as a "First-Class Model Soldier" and awarded the "Third-Class People's Hero of East China."

In 1951, Chi was sent to Korea with the Chinese People's Volunteers, serving as a battalion instructor and deputy director of a regimental political department. He reportedly received a "Class-One" commendation for valor. After returning from Korea, Chi continued to rise through the political ranks of the Third Field Army, following the standard promotion track for political officers in ground force units. By the end of the 1950s, he had reached the position of regimental political department director. At this point, Chi was sent for intermediate-level professional military education, attending the Advanced Infantry School from 1958-59 and the Combined Arms Department of the PLA Military Academy from 1959-60.

Following this educational rotation, Chi returned to his regiment, serving successively as deputy political commissar, political department director, and then regimental political commissar in 1964. Three years later, Chi moved up to the next level, occupying a series of positions at the corresponding division and army level. By the early 1970s, Chi had reached the position of division political commissar and was poised to assume posts at the military region-level in Beijing.

After reaching division-level command, Chi began to take part in media work at the central level. Between 1971 and 1973, he was ordered to join the core leadership group of *Liberation Army Daily*, where he handled some "unjust, false, and erroneous verdicts" against both "young revolutionaries" and "veteran cadres." As a result, Chi was criticized by the leftists during the 1973 "campaign to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius" as the "plenipotentiary of the bourgeois reactionary line," "the leader of the verdict reversing group," "the disciple of Confucius," and "the daring vanguard of restoration and retrogression."

Between 1973 and 1976, Chi served as deputy political commissar of the Beijing Military Region. After Tangshan was devastated by a magnitude 7.8 earthquake, Chi was appointed deputy commander of the Tangshan Earthquake Relief Headquarters, helping region Deputy

Commander Xiao Xuanjin and Deputy Political Commissar Wan Haifeng to direct a hundred thousand PLA soldiers providing relief to the earthquake victims. Summoned back to Beijing one day after the arrest of the “gang of four”—the cluster of Cultural Revolution radical leaders associated with Mao Zedong, Chi was appointed deputy chief editor of the *People's Daily* in charge of day-to-day operations. Though unconfirmed authoritatively, multiple sources assert that Chi also assisted in the arrest of the “gang of four.”

When Deng Xiaoping became chief of the general staff in 1977, he appointed Chi as one of his deputies as well as director of the political department of the General Staff Department. Chi held these positions until 1985, when he was sent to the strategically important Jinan Military Region to serve as political commissar. In 1987, General Chi returned to Beijing to become Chief of General Staff and a member of the Central Military Commission. As a result, he oversaw military operations during the 1989 Tiananmen protests, and he subsequently was a strong defender of the PLA's use of force against the demonstrators. Following Tiananmen, Chi developed an intense rivalry with the growing power of the "Yang family village," led by Yang Shangkun. Not surprisingly, Chi reportedly had a particularly nasty battle with Yang's younger brother and fellow political officer Yang Baibing, who had sought to dominate the portfolio for political affairs within the PLA. In 1992, Chi served as a key backer of Deng Xiaoping's successful effort to oust the Yangs and their supporters.

Chi moved from the General Staff Department to become Minister of Defense and a State Councillor in March 1993 at the Eighth National People Congress. Though the ministry position is largely ceremonial, involving protocol activities and liaising with foreign military dignitaries, Chi initiated a dramatic rise in the PLA's military diplomacy. As a result, he engaged in extensive foreign travel and interaction with foreign military and civilian leaders. He made a controversial visit to the United States in December 1996, and he attended the Macao hand over ceremony in 1999 as a member of the Chinese government delegation.

In September 1995, Chi Haotian and Zhang Wannian replaced Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen as vice-chairmen of the Central Military Commission. According to Hong Kong sources, Zhang was placed in charge of "internal affairs," including military operational areas, while Chi was given the portfolio for "external affairs," including the defense budget, scientific research and development, foreign affairs, and government work for "harmonizing" the relationships between the PLA and central and local governments. At age 72, Chi is widely expected to retire at the Sixteenth Party Congress in 2002, and he will likely be replaced by Xu Caihou as the top political officer in the PLA.

Analysis

Chi Haotian has a unique profile among the current military leadership, combining combat experience and military professional skills with a long career in political work. As a result, he embodies the PLA's seemingly contradictory goals of politicization and professionalization. According to knowledgeable observers, this balance has allowed Chi to build close and stable ties with the political elite, beginning with Deng Xiaoping and continuing to Jiang Zemin. While politically conservative on issues related to economic reform and party control of the military, Chi's position as minister of defense has allowed him to travel around the

world, making him the most cosmopolitan and world-traveled of the top military leadership. In this capacity, he allegedly played a key role in developing China's close arms sales and defense-industrial relationship with the former Soviet Union.

General Chi was reportedly a good wrestler in his younger days, and is currently honorary president of the Wrestling Association of China. He reportedly enjoys shooting, horseback riding, swimming, and calligraphy. His wife, Jiang Qingping, is retired from a career as a doctor at the navy general hospital in Beijing.

Westerners who have interacted with General Chi report that he has a good sense of humor, handles people well, and is well briefed. More than one source reports that he is more intelligent, cosmopolitan, and approachable than other senior PLA officers, such as Zhang Wannian. Yet Chi is also a dedicated party cadre and espouses intense loyalty to the CCP and its ideals.

Details of Chi's Career

Military Career

- 1929: born in Zhaoyuan County, Shandong Province.
- 1944: joined PLA.
- 1944-46: copy clerk, signalman, and squad leader, Zhaoyuan County Independent Battalion, Qishan District Squadron.
- 1946: graduated from second training regiment of the Anti-Japanese Military and Political College.
- 1946: joined CCP.
- 1946-47: secretary, 8th Company, 3rd Battalion, 13th Regiment, 5th Brigade, East Shandong Military District.
- 1947-48: secretary, 3rd Battalion, 73rd Regiment, 25th Division, 9th Column, East China Field Army, and officer in charge of cultural affairs in a combat company.
- 1948-49: deputy political instructor, 7th Company, 3rd Battalion, 235th Regiment, 79th Division of the 3rd Field Army.
- 1949-50: political instructor, 7th Company, 3rd Battalion, 235th Regiment, 79th Division of the 3rd Field Army.
- 1950: deputy political instructor, 3rd Battalion, 235th Regiment, 79th Division of the 3rd Field Army.
- 1950-55: political instructor, 3rd Battalion, 235th Regiment, 79th Division, 27th Army of the Chinese People's Volunteers; later, Political Department deputy director, 235th Regiment, 79th Division, 27th Army.
- 1955-58: Political Department director, 235th Regiment, 79th Division, 27th Army.
- 1958-59: studied at PLA Advanced Infantry School.
- 1959-60: studied at Nanjing Military Academy Combined Arms Department.
- 1960-62: deputy political commissar, 235th Regiment, 79th Division, 27th Army.
- 1962-64: political department director, 235th Regiment, 79th Division, 27th Army.
- 1964-66: regimental political commissar, 235th Regiment, 79th Division, 27th Army.
- 1967-69: deputy political commissar, 79th Division, 27th Army.

- 1969-70: deputy political department director, 27th Army.
- 1970-73: political commissar, 79th Division, 27th Army.
- 1971-73: member, leadership core group, *Liberation Army Daily*.
- 1973-77: deputy political commissar, Beijing Military Region.
- 1976-77: deputy editor-in-chief, *People's Daily*.
- 1977-85: deputy chief of the general staff, director of General Staff Department Political Department.
- 1985-87: political commissar, Jinan Military Region.
- 1988: member, Central Military Commission.
- 1987-93: chief of the general staff.
- 1993-2001: minister, Ministry of Defense.
- 1995-2001: vice-chairman, Central Military Commission.

Party and State Positions

- 1982: member, Twelfth Central Committee.
- 1987: member, Thirteenth Central Committee.
- 1992: member, Fourteenth Central Committee.
- 1997: member, Politburo, Fifteenth Central Committee.
- 1993-2001: State Councillor.

Promotions in Military Rank

- 1988: promoted to full general.

Awards and Commendations

- 1949: "First-Class Model Soldier."
- 1949: "Third-Class People's Hero of East China."
- 1953: "Class-One Commendation for Valor."

ⁱ¹ This biography draws heavily from a number of sources, including the excellent biography of General Chi in David Shambaugh's forthcoming University of California Press book, *Reforming China's Military*.