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Xiaobing Li, *A History of the Modern Chinese Army*. Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 2007. Pp. xii, 413. ISBN 978-0-8131-2438-4.

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Xiaobing Li, former soldier in the Chinese army (1969–72), military historian, and professor at the University of Central Oklahoma, has written a book on the evolution of the Chinese army from the 1920s to the present. In addition to extensive Chinese sources, Li has incorporated throughout vignettes from his first-hand interviews with officers and enlisted men, among them his relatives, who have served in the Chinese armed services, as well as several military leaders of the Republic of China on Taiwan. His book is divided into ten chapters. Enhanced by thirteen maps illustrating important campaigns and battles and many photographs, some from the author's personal collection, the book is an interesting and informative read. Seventy pages of footnotes plus an extensive bibliography of works in Chinese and English offer useful resources for students of Chinese military history.

Professor Li states in his introduction that the narrow goal of the book is to trace the origins and evolution of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) between 1949 and 2002. But his wider goal is to study the Chinese military in a broad context of political and social history. His personal interviews also provide insiders' insights into the make-up, strengths, and weaknesses of the Chinese military, the social background of the soldiers, and reasons why they enlisted. Many men, for example, joined the PLA during the 1950s and 1960s to win political favor or avoid victimization. Men continued to volunteer for military service through the 1970s as an avenue to better social status and relocation from the countryside to cities.

Each of the chapters begins with several paragraphs clearly outlining its focus and content. Chapter One, "Peasants and Revolutions," is the book's weakest because its goal—to trace the Chinese army from the Qin dynasty (220–206 BC) to 1928 and to point out the role of peasant revolts in the rise and fall of the many dynasties during those two thousand plus years—is highly unrealistic. The panoramic scope makes for sweeping generalizations and oversimplifications. The chapter consists mostly of pastiches of numerous quotations from general secondary sources. A problem here and throughout the book is the author's very frequent insertion of transliterated Chinese phrases, terms, and even whole sentences, followed parenthetical English translations. These only distract and confuse those who do not know Chinese and annoy those who do. Another pervasive problem is the author's use of the Pinyin system of Romanization of personal and place names without always including their Wade-Giles equivalents.<sup>1</sup> Also distracting is the author's constant use of abbreviations; some forty of them are liberally sprinkled through every paragraph, quickly becoming wearisome and puzzling. In addition, in the early chapters, Li slips in loaded words and terms routinely used in China and not accepted among historians in the West: for example,

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<sup>1</sup> See my footnote 3 at *MWSR* 2008.08.02 <[www.miwsr.com/rd/0829.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/0829.htm)>.

“liberate” without quotation marks, to describe China’s quest to gain control of Taiwan by force, or “imperialist” and “imperialist aggressor” to describe the United States and the Soviet Union and their policies in Asia.

Chapter Two, “The Formative Years,” traces the development of a military force of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) between 1927 and 1949. It recounts the organizing of the first Communist guerrilla bands in the mountains of Jiangxi province in southeastern China after the breakup of the First United Front between the Nationalists and Communists in 1927. After the collapse of the Jiangxi Soviet Republic, we get the Long March, or the flight of the Communists to northern Shaanxi province in northwestern China. The Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) led to a vast increase in Communist regular and guerrilla forces: while the Communist 8<sup>th</sup> Route Army had three divisions and around 20,000 men and the New 4<sup>th</sup> Army had one division and around 10,000 men in 1937 when the war began, they had exploded to forty and seven divisions respectively in 1945. By the fall of that year, the CCP’s regular army numbered 1.27 million soldiers, plus 2.68 million militia-men. In the author’s view, the army (now named the People’s Liberation Army) rather than the CCP was the major instrument in both the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the organization of the new state post-1949.

The remaining chapters review chronologically China’s international relations, involvement in wars, domestic policy shifts and political crises, and the role of the PLA in those events. Chapters Three and Four deal with China’s participation in the Korean War (1950–53) and its aftermath. That war demonstrated the inadequacies of the PLA in modern warfare, which led the Chinese commander in the Korean War and subsequently Minister of Defense, Marshal Peng Dehuai, to institute a program to “Russianize” the PLA. Nearly three million men, ostensibly “volunteers” (out of a military force of 6.1 million) were involved in the Korean War. At its maximum, 1.45 million Chinese soldiers, 25% of its total military, were deployed in Korea. Counting units transferred in and out of Korea during the war, 73% of the PLA, plus 600,000 civilian laborers, saw service in Korea. China’s participation in the war resulted in its scrapping of a planned attack against the Nationalist government on Taiwan so that 800,000 soldiers deployed on the coast facing Taiwan could be transferred to the Korean front. The Korean War consumed between 33–43% of China’s total annual government budget and inflicted over one million casualties, including 152,000 dead and 21,000 POWs. Furthermore, most of the latter chose repatriation to Taiwan after the armistice.

From the Korean War experience, Defense Minister Peng concluded that the PLA needed to be professionalized, that is, restructured from a decentralized guerrilla-style army to one with a centralized command, an upgraded officer corps (67% of the officers were illiterate in 1951), and modern weapons. Aid from the Soviet Union was crucial to Peng’s plans. A large Soviet Military Advisory Group in China played a critical role and thousands of Chinese officers sent to the USSR to study military science rose to leading position in later decades.

Conflicting interpretations of Marxism and rivalry for leadership in the Communist world after 1956 led to tensions between the two Communist powers. Differing ambitions within the leadership of both countries and divergent goals worldwide and within Communist parties exacerbated relations between China and the USSR and culminated in bor-

der conflicts between them. These are among the topics discussed in Chapters Five and Six. Domestically, Peng's quest to advance the skills and professionalism of the PLA, which depended on cooperation with the Soviet Union, clashed with CCP Chairman Mao Zedong's belief in the efficacy of a guerrilla-type military. Mao's quest to surpass the Soviet Union in realizing Marxism, his launching of the Great Leap Forward, and Peng's sharp criticism of the Leap's disastrous failure led to the latter's downfall in 1959. Lin Biao replaced him as Minister of Defense. Lin professed profound deference to Mao and condemned Peng for following the "capitalist military line." He also purged many Peng supporters in the PLA, and, in accordance with Mao's vision, organized 4000 militia divisions totaling 60 million men and women.

Worsening relations with the USSR resulted in the withdrawal of Soviet aid and advisors in 1960. The USSR also reneged on its earlier promise to help China build an atom bomb. Despite this setback, China continued to pursue its nuclear ambitions by making major improvements in its educational facilities to produce the required scientists and engineers and entice Chinese graduate students studying or working in Western countries to return and work for China. The PLA gave privileges and protection to those who returned from the West and to specialists trained earlier in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe even during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), enabling them to work without fear of harassment. China successfully detonated a nuclear device in 1964.

China's policy toward the Nationalist government on Taiwan was a perennial complication in its relationship with both the United States and the USSR. Tensions along the Taiwan Strait and attacks by the PRC on Nationalist-controlled islands along the mainland coast also presented a potential for hostilities between China and the United States. The Soviet Union's unwillingness to support China on the Taiwan issue frayed relations between the two Communist powers even further. While Mao was anxious to seize control of Taiwan, he, like Peng, was aware of China's weakness vis-à-vis the United States and therefore unwilling to test the U.S.–Republic of China (Taiwan) Alliance, in place since 1954, thanks to the Korean War.

The Cultural Revolution, the Vietnam War, and a border war between China and Vietnam are the topics of Chapters Seven and Eight. Just as China intervened in the Korean War to preserve a border state's Communist government, it likewise gave extensive aid to the Communists of North Vietnam in their wars against first France and then the United States. A Chinese force of 320,000 troops fought in aid of North Vietnam between 1965 and 1968, wearing Vietnamese uniforms to camouflage their nationality. All Chinese troops were withdrawn from North Vietnam by 1970, as that country tilted toward the Soviet Union. Chinese-Vietnamese relations deteriorated so dramatically that the former allies went to war in 1979. Chinese forces invaded Vietnam, but stopped sixty-five miles short of its capital Hanoi, though border tensions continued into the 1980s. Although China proclaimed the success of its mission to punish Vietnam, the poor training, antiquated equipment, and low morale of Chinese soldiers shocked its leaders and reflected the damages wrought throughout Chinese society by the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76. Lin Biao consolidated his power when he ordered the PLA into action to restore order in 1967 because the Red Guards that Mao mobilized to oust his political foes had become uncontrollable. He used his enhanced power to purge and kill 80,000 officers opposed to him,

replacing them with his own henchmen. In restoring order, the PLA also replaced the civilian government at all levels, in factories, schools, and universities; it continued to exercise vast powers after Lin's downfall and death in 1970, and during the purge of his protégés in their turn.

Chapter Eight also deals with Deng Xiaoping's efforts to reverse the Maoist course. Deng began turning China toward economic reforms and military modernization, the latter contingent on success in improving an economy grown moribund under Mao. Deng severely strained his relationship with the army by proclaiming martial law and sending troops to put down peaceful student demonstrators at Tiananmen Square in 1989. Some 3,500 commanders were investigated and, in many cases, court-martialed.

Chapter Nine brings the account from 1990 to the present. Expecting to be rewarded for its loyalty in the Tiananmen Square crackdown, the PLA has received double-digit increases in its budget annually, but these have been accompanied by significant reductions in the size of the military—from 4.26 million (1985) to 2.5 million men (1998). However, as the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995–6 showed, China remained far behind the United States in military strength and technology. Consequently, recent reforms have emphasized higher education for officers and improvements in equipment and technology. With better educational opportunities and a one-child-per-family policy in effect since the early 1980s, the PLA is now made up mostly of “one-child soldiers and officers.” These changes lead Li to conclude that China's future success in military reforms is contingent on the progress of its economic reforms. He also asserts that, just as they have from their inception, the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese Communist Party continue their symbiotic relationship.

While there are other works on the modern Chinese military, Li's *A History of the Modern Chinese Army* is enlightening for its use of recently available sources, including personal interviews, and its presentation of the evolution of the PLA in the context of China's recent political, social, and economic changes. The result is an important contribution to the study of modern and contemporary Chinese history.