

[Special Lecture By Visiting Scholar]

## Can the PLA Fight?

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### The Question

It is often said—and it may be true—that Xi Jinping’s policy remains focused on the “China Dream” in spite of the poor state of the Chinese economy, and the discontents of Chinese society.

It is often said—and it may be true—that a conquest of Taiwan remains a necessary condition of achieving the “China Dream.”

Of course there is a possibility that Xi Jinping’s desired conquest would not require significant combat because it will only be attempted if it can be achieved by subversion, as was true of most CCP advances against the KMT in 1948-49, when KMT troops or their commanders changed sides after secret communications, instead of resisting.

Now also the KMT Party in Taiwan openly favors re-unification, and it is possible that senior officers of the Taiwan armed forces with known or unknown KMT sympathies plan to surrender rather than fight if the PRC attacks.

But if that is not so, and if the “China Dream” does therefore require fighting, the question arises: can the PLA fight? Can it engage in real combat with its inevitable casualties? Or more simply, does the PRC have a sufficient supply of *expendable* combat manpower to conquer Taiwan?

The present author introduced the concept of “post-heroic warfare” in 1995<sup>1</sup> in an attempt to account for the sharply diminished tolerance of the casualties of war in advanced secular societies—a diminished tolerance that already become the leading

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1 Edward N Luttwak *Foreign Affairs* July/August 1994: “Where Are the Great Powers? At Home with Their Kids.” Idem: May/June 1995: “Toward Post-Heroic Warfare.” Idem July/August 1996: “A Post-Heroic Military Policy.” Secondary literature includes: U.S. Army War College/ University of Oxford/Australian Land Warfare Studies Centre *Colloquium Brief: Post-Heroic Warfare?*. Strategic Studies Center [AUS] *Articles and Editorials* June 17, 2011, Vol. 52, No. 5 <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/2011/pubs/article/colloquium-brief-post-heroic-warfare>. And Kristian Frisk *Post-Heroic Warfare Revisited* *Sociology*, Vol. 52, No. 5 October 2018.

constraint on the conduct of their military operations.

This constraint meant that actually-usable military strength was much below the level of ostensible military capabilities, at least in regard to wars of choice, not fought in immediate self-defense. (But in Ukraine a majority of men of military age have not been conscripted and have not volunteered to defend the country).

The “post-heroic” theory explained the diminished tolerance of casualties (notwithstanding increased populations) as the consequence of diminished fertility and diminished average-family size, *in effect hypothesizing that the wars of history were largely fought by “spare male children”* whose death, while undoubtedly tragic, did not cripple nuclear families materially or emotionally, and still less extinguish them, as it would in the case of families with only one male children, which were rare.

Insofar as the above causal link between family size and casualty tolerance is accepted in principle, *and it is also deemed relevant in its case* (a question specifically addressed in what follows), the People’s Republic of China must be especially afflicted, especially in the case of deliberate offensive operations.

That constraint will remain in effect over the next two decades at least, because of the uniquely restrictive birth control measures that were very stringently applied until very recently.

In 1979 the PRC authorities introduced a “one-child policy” for the majority Han population that was strictly enforced from January 1, 1980 with a variety of punitive measures for offenders, in addition forced abortions.<sup>2</sup>

The policy was not relaxed until thirty-six years later when a two-child policy came into effect on January 1, 2016.

But the actual birth rate continued to fall and after prolonged deliberations, the CCP Politburo announced a “three-child policy” that came into effect on June 21, 2021. Concurrently the fines and other penalties that had previously been imposed for exceeding the one-child limit were abolished, and so was the requirement *to apply for permission to continue pregnancy till birth*, in lieu of involuntary abortion.

The Party’s presumption that the people’s obedience would suffice to increase the

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2 The 55 recognized nationalities were not subject to the one-child limit but have, on average, higher child mortality levels. Isabelle Attane “China’s Family Planning Policy: An Overview of Its Past and Future.” *Studies in Family Planning* 2002. 33 (1): 103–113. doi:10.1111/j.1728-4465.2002.00103.x. ISSN 0039-3665.

birth rate has so far proved to be wrong. The birth rate for China in 2023 was 10.6 births per 1000 people, a 2.36% decline from 2022, when it was 10.9 births per 1000 people, a 2.3% decline from 2021.<sup>3</sup>

*Fertility rates* (the number of live births per female) have risen with the abolition of the one-child policy—but not enough to matter: the current 2023 fertility rate of 1.705 births per woman amounts to a very slight 0.18% increase over 2022, when it was 1.702 births per woman, which was itself a 0.18% increase from 2021 when the fertility rate was 1.699 births per woman itself a 0.18% increase from 2020.

But any rate below 2.2 must result in population decline, or rather in population ageing and then declining, and there is no supply of “expendable” male children with less than two live births per female.

Moreover, the reliability of such sensitive statistics is very questionable: in 2022 the fertility ratio was *officially counted at 1.09* and not 1.705, according to National Health Commission data that was revealed probably in error by the Chengdu’s *National Business Daily*.<sup>4</sup>

The reason for misrepresenting China’s fertility data is that 1.09 births per woman imply a population that is rapidly ageing as it shrinks—which is not consistent with Xi Jinping’s central objective of “rejuvenating” the Han nation (on which more below).

*In fact Han nationality births are distinctly fewer than the PRC-wide birth/woman averages*, which include data for the 55 recognized minorities which account for 8.1% of the population. Their women were allowed multiple births all along, and still remain much more fertile on average.

Within the Han population, males now find it very hard to breed because of the acute shortage of females: the strong preference for male births (to continue the family lineage) resulted in the disproportionate abortion of females while the one-child limit lasted and may still persist. As of 2023 the sex ratio was 116 males under the age of 25 per 100 females,

The overall result is that a soldier in his twenties normally has two parents and four grandparents who have no other descendant to care for, and later to care for them in their

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3 UN data 2022: Revision of World Population Prospects. <https://population.un.org/wpp/>

4 Liyan Qi “China’s Fertility Rate Dropped Sharply, Report Shows” *Wall Street Journal* August 19-20, p. A7.

old age, and to perpetuate the family lineage—a highly valued continuity for normal people anywhere in the world but declaredly so in China’s popular culture.

If that soldier dies, six people will be left bereft, or twice that many if the dead soldier has a spouse.

In the past, and certainly as late as the Korean War when some 180,000 PLA soldiers died, a paternal grandfather, then still a highly authoritative figure, who might have as many as twenty grandchildren could send one or more to fight in war without fear of remaining without adequate labor for the family’s land, and for generational continuity.

If any of those boys returned home as war veterans, or were listed among the courageous dead, they could bring glory and prized material benefits to the family, whose members would all benefit—a powerful incentive to serve in war.

The war dead of the Korean war were especially important—and even essential for sheer survival—in the case of families compromised and endangered by *Kuomintang* affiliations such as the army service in KMT forces by a husband or son.<sup>5</sup>

If a member of a KMT-connected family died in combat, every member of his family would be transformed from a “black” reactionary deserving nothing—in the sharing out of ex-landlord land for example—to a “red” in good standing. ( In 1950-53 it was not yet known that a “red” family identity gained by service in Korea might save a family from starvation during the 1958-1962 Great Leap Forward).

Obviously none of the above applies today.

There are neither spare children of military age nor grandparents with the authority to send them to war for the sake of the family. Therefore PLA operations in the Korean war—the only time when Chinese troops fought hard—is irrelevant to the question of whether Chinese troops will fight *hard* to conquer Taiwan.

*The more recent 1979 Vietnam war data very clearly indicates that the PLA will not persist in combat if there are significant casualties. Having invaded Vietnam to force the Vietnamese*

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5 Prisoner interrogations revealed that the PLA 50th Army soldiers that had fought very hard in the Korean war until their destruction by Matthew Ridgeway’s *Operation Thunderbolt* of February 1951, were mostly former KMT 60th Army soldiers who had a very strong incentive to remove the KMT taint on their entire family by recognized valor in battle, or better a combat death. Roy E. Appleman, Chapter 39 in *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu*. United States Army Center of Military History p. 190.

*army to withdraw from Cambodia to save the PRC-allied Khmer Rouge, it was the PLA that withdrew, allowing Vietnam to complete the destruction of the Khmer Rouge.*

The post-heroic hypothesis is especially relevant at present because the current PRC leader Xi Jinping has displayed far more bellicose attitudes and used far more bellicose language than his predecessors. Unlike them, he has often called for “combat readiness” 随时准备战争, *suíshí zhǔnbèi zhànzhēng*, literally: “be always ready for war,” a phrase whose meaning is very different from the current US military definition of “combat readiness” which refers to logistic and training preparedness: the Chinese means “be ready to fight a war,” so that the same characters are also habitually used to translate the Western phrase “martial spirit.”

Xi Jinping has appeared in uniform more often than his predecessors, (they mostly did so only in the context of their Central Military Commission role that made uniforms obligatory), and has himself paraded with the troops when he might more fittingly have remained on the reviewing stand.<sup>6</sup>

More substantively, Xi Jinping has clearly shifted the PRC’s overt diplomatic stance from the conciliatory “Peaceful Rise” of 2004<sup>7</sup> in a sharply more aggressive direction, by issuing peremptory declarations and by promoting diplomats who gained his favor by rudely issuing peremptory demands (even if they backfired) as exemplified most importantly by Wang Yi 王毅.

He had been an unusually cordial, soft-spoken, golf-playing Ambassador to Japan 2004-2007 in pre Xi Jinping days, but was promoted to foreign minister in 2013 after visibly changing even his body language to an abrasive “wolf style,” and was then further promoted director of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission Office in January 2023, after having done much to antagonize his counterparts in the United States, Japan and S. Korea, and to undermine pro-PRC voices

6 [https://www.google.com/search?q=xi+in+uniform+at+military+parade&rlz=#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:52554elfvid:Vxd\\_A-hGEOQ](https://www.google.com/search?q=xi+in+uniform+at+military+parade&rlz=#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:52554elfvid:Vxd_A-hGEOQ). At 0.14 Xi Jinping issues a military order.

7 Officially “Peaceful Development” *Zhōngguó héping fāzhǎn* 中国和平发展, better known under the original title “Peaceful Rise” *Zhōngguó héping juéqǐ*, 中国和平崛起 presented by Hú Jǐntāo’s official senior advisor Zheng Bijian 郑必坚. My personal dialogues with its author over the years induce me to think that “Peaceful Rise” reflected two different purposes: to assuage US concerns and thereby dissuade countermeasures (a purpose that the MSS could back), but also to discourage the PLA’s “runaway horses” who wanted to stage provocative incidents.

in the European Union (whose official attitude to the PRC has shifted radically in response to seemingly deliberate PRC diplomatic provocations.<sup>8</sup>)

Xi Jinping has repeatedly intervened personally to shift PRC foreign policy in a more bellicose direction, most recently as of this writing (June 23, 2023) by going far beyond the long-standing PRC claim to the uninhabited Senkaku islets of Japan (the Diaoyu Islands 钓鱼岛 to the Chinese), to advance an altogether larger claim to the Ryukyu archipelago as a whole including Okinawa, a claim justified *by Xi himself* by the tributary status of the ruler of the Ryukyus to the Ming and Ching dynasties which lasted until the 1609 advent of the suzerainty of the Satsuma clan of Kagoshima, which persisted until their formal annexation to Japan in 1879.

Apart from the absurdity of basing claims on anachronistic historical revindications (if allowed, they would endow Rome's municipal government with sovereignty over twenty Mediterranean states) in the specific case of the Ryukyus, Xi Jinping is revoking the PRC's former denial of any claim whatever to the archipelago, as most recently repeated by the Deputy Chief of General Staff, Lieutenant General Qi Jianguo in Singapore on June 2, 2013.<sup>9</sup>

But perhaps the best evidence of Xi Jinping's very demonstrative, Mussolini-style bellicosity is found in the special honors he has chosen to bestow on a particular PLA officer, Colonel as he then was, Qi Fabao who was actually filmed *by the Chinese side* as he very visibly incited the deadliest China-India border fight in many years at the Galwan river in Ladakh on June 15, 2020 which cost the lives of four Chinese and twenty Indian servicemen.

In two Chinese videos<sup>10</sup>, Qi Fabao ignores the Indian officer meeting him under the long established de-confliction procedures, which presume respectful encounters.

Instead of negotiating Qi is shown shouting peremptory demands and gesticulating imperiously (in a manner perhaps copied from depictions of arrogant Japanese officers in Chinese propaganda films) as he curtly orders the Indians to withdraw forthwith.

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8 After seven years of intense diplomatic efforts, on 30 December 2020 the EU and the PRC concluded negotiations for a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. But Wang Yi responded with contempt to EU legislators who asked for assurances. As of now the Treaty has lapsed.

9 <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-security-asia-okinawa-idUKBRE95101R20130602>.

10 See <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/xtlJof7hxUk>, And, from 0.16 the Qi Fabao as he triggers the fighting Shown that <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zD96tLC8Np0>

Qi's behavior was certainly very different from the normal conduct of Chinese officers in the recurrent frontier encounters that have increased on all three India/Tibet frontier segments in Ladakh, Sikkim and Arunachal.

In those encounters, PLA officers have often argued insistently with their Indian counterparts but even amidst some pushing and shoving by the soldiers with them,

PLA officers have typically persisted in trying to communicate, with some give and take and a degree of civility, and certainly no imperious shouting or gesticulation.<sup>11</sup>

But Xi Jinping evidently prefers the imperiously aggressive style, very much in the manner of Benito Mussolini who constantly exhorting his fellow Italians to abandon their accommodating ways to embrace the martial and heroic life (even decades after his fall, his slogan “better one day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep” remained legible on many walls. And he was forever looking for truly martial subordinates, or at least those who could best simulate martial qualities. For Xi, the tall, strong and decidedly imperious Col. Qi Fabao evidently fits the bill, as a “tough” Chinese role model.

Causing much offense in India (which promptly withdrew its official participation in the opening and closing ceremonies) Col. Qi Fabao was chosen as a torchbearer for the 2022 winter Olympics in Beijing.

Next, Qi was selected for a much greater honor: he was appointed as a delegate (one of 304) of the PLA and the People's Armed Police to the 16-22 October 2022 Twentieth CCP Congress, the most important of all events in the PRC political calendar, which is only held at five year intervals.

Qi had no speaking role in the 20th Congress but an extract of the video showing his imperious gesticulations and the ensuing violence in the Galwan river valley was the center-piece of the opening ceremonies<sup>12</sup>—just about the most official possible endorsement of Qi's high-handed behavior in dealings with the Indian neighbor.

Consequences ensued: India's long-standing accommodationist diplomatic stance on the chronic border disputes with China changed radically.<sup>13</sup>

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11 See, e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wU8Ze4Z27h8>

12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL8XJWBwXdA>

13 Over the years, India had accepted the Chinese distinction between bilateral relations across the board, diplomatic, political, economic, scientific, coordinated between the respective foreign ministries, and the recurrent sequence of border incidents and border negotiations conducted by military officers.

Clearly Xi wants his Chinese to act like Qi, *ie. not in a recognizably Chinese way*, just like Mussolini in his time did not want Italians to act in normal, accommodating, Italian ways but rather as strong, stern Romans and later, when Nazi Germany emerged on the European scene, as stern Germans.

Presumably Xi Jinping was aware of the inevitable consequences when he decided to bestow honors on Qi Fabao: they were bound to evoke PLA imitators on land, at sea and in the air, who would try to advance their own careers by aggressive posturing against antagonists unlikely to strike back forcibly.

That has duly happened, with more deliberate near-collisions at sea with US Navy vessels, and many more aggressive encounters between Chinese vessels and local fishermen in the Gulf of Tonkin and in Philippine waters, and aerial close calls—even the simulated intercept of a US patrol aircraft that came very close to becoming a collision.

In their time, the Soviet armed forces severely condemned military “adventurism” (a specific sin in Leninist ideology) that might even trigger a war without a decision made to that effect by the Politburo. In the USSR, military would-be risk-takers knew that regardless of the outcome, they would be harshly punished rather than rewarded for initiating any incidents. Hence during the five decades of the Cold War there were no military incidents between the US and the USSR that could possibly be attributed to the personal decisions of subordinates.

With the PRC the situation was very different with many incidents even before Xi Jinping’s advent. But the difference is that instead of dissuading adventurism Xi has acted to encourage it with his overall bellicosity, and also by failing to punish those responsible for deliberate near-misses at sea and in the air, as well by so greatly rewarding Qi Fabao, evidently to signal approval for aggressive conduct, regardless of the risk of escalation to armed clashes ( which eventuated in Ladakh in 2020), with their inherent potential of a progression to wider combat, or even outright war.

That is a danger that should have greatly concerned Xi Jinping, *but obviously it did not*, because countless statements and gestures indicate that Xi believes that some form of controllable and successful warfare is inevitable in any case, and in the fairly near term. For this the best and sufficient evidence is the crescendo of Taiwan invasion threats.

There seems to have been a perceptible pause in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine of February 2022, or more precisely once it emerged that the quick-victory Antonov airfield *Coup de Main* and subsequent made-for-TV armored procession through Kiev had failed, with no signs of a Russian plan B to pursue the war successfully.

But the pause is did not last and from the summer of 2023 there was a return to bellicosity, as evidenced by a series of Xi Jinping statements during his “inspection” of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The simplest of these statements contains the essence: “.. China’s strategy is to build domestic economic circulation (= ie. not dependent on imports or exports) to ensure that the economy can function normally “under extreme 极端情况 circumstances.”<sup>14</sup>

That formulation was a further development and escalation of a May 6, 2023 Xi statement before the annual National People’s Congress : “We must be prepared for worst-case and extreme scenarios, and be ready to withstand the major test of high winds, choppy waters, and even dangerous storms 坚持底线思维和极限思维，准备经受风高浪急甚至惊涛骇浪的重大考验.<sup>15</sup>

The above, together with the prior Xi warnings about “black swans” and “grey rhinos”<sup>16</sup> required interpretation, which was duly supplied on June 5, 2023, in *Global Times* by citing the jet-setting and clearly well-connected Jin Canrong of the Renmin School of International Studies<sup>17</sup>:

“...the worst-case scenarios” mentioned in the National Security Commission meeting refers to “challenges such as a massive geopolitical crisis or another

14 William Zheng in *South China Morning Post* 12:02pm, 9 June 2023 <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3223483/dual-circulation-needed-protect-china-economy-extreme-circumstances-xi-jinping-warns>

15 Karson Yiu ABC News March 7, 2023 “Xi blames US for containment and suppression, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/chinas-xi-blames-us-containment-suppression-amid-tensions/story?id=97676556>

16 Neither are local metaphors. The “rhinos” in question are dangers in full view but nonchalantly ignored until they charge. See the interesting interpretation in *The Interpreter* (AUS) by Kelsey Munro Jan 24, 2019: “..President Xi Jinping warned hundreds of top Communist Party officials that China must be on the alert against black swans and grey rhinos. Presumably, they not need fiscal reform or credit restrictions, they need a park ranger”). <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-cabinet-black-swans-grey-rhinos-elephant-room>.

17 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202306/1291938.shtml>

global financial crisis,” but “the extreme-case scenarios,” to be clear, “means the danger of war.”

All of the above results in that great Marxist favorite: a thesis/anti-thesis contradiction: on the one hand, if the post-heroic theorem is valid—and there are mountains of data to confirm it, it must particularly apply to the People’s Republic of China, uniquely bereft as it is of families with “spare male” children. On the other hand Xi Jinping and indeed the Party as a whole cannot repudiate its revisionism, particularly in regard to Taiwan whose return to PRC rule is not an aim that can be renounced, or even delayed *sine die*.

Therefore, to resolve the thesis/anti-thesis contraction, the Party under Xi Jinping’s attentive leadership, has striven to develop *specific policies whose purpose is to somehow overcome the post-heroic syndrome and its derived war-making limitations*, which are meant to complement the longstanding and increasingly refined efforts to build up and upgrade PLA forces so that they can fight and win, and even perhaps do so with not many casualties.

### **How to overcome post-heroic limitations**

The Ladakh frontier fight at the Galwan river of June 2020 provides the only data relevant to casualty sensitivity since the April 2 August 4 1984 Sino-Vietnamese battle of Laoshan 老山戰役 or Vĩ Xuyêñ when some three thousand were killed and some ten thousand were wounded on both sides.

And in the case of China, 1984 data is really old even though only forty years have passed because today’s China is very different not only socio-economically (as is also true of other East Asian nations) but also demographically in a manner that entirely changes the moral economy of its families, as noted above.

The Galwan river clash was preceded by a classic frontier build-up, in the broader context of the persisting, decades-long PLA drive to advance further into India’s Ladakh from the base-line of its 1959 conquest of every part of Tibet.

During April 2020 the Indian authorities noticed the arrival of additional PLA troops forward-deployed in Tibet opposite the Indian forces at the eastern end of the Union territory of Ladakh, just west of the contested lake Pangong ( Pangong Tso).

Confrontations ensued in May 2020 with brawling at the narrow Galwan river just west of the lake that escalated on June 6 as barbed-wire wrapped clubs and steel staves appeared on each side.

Next the two sides met to define a buffer zone in accordance with the very elaborate, multi-level deconfliction arrangements that the two sides negotiated over many years.

But with border talks initiated, instead of stepping back as per deconfliction rules, PLA troops demolished an improvised Indian footbridge across the Galwan river. That was the precipitating event of the ensuing fight.

On June 15, 2020 troops of the Indian army's 16<sup>th</sup> battalion of the Bihar regiment who were escorting Colonel *Bikkumalla Santosh Babu* as he arrived to negotiate with his Chinese counterpart, were attacked by PLA troops under regimental commander Col. Qi Fabao. Although neither side used firearms, attacking each other with clubs wrapped with barbed wire, steel staves and others such, many soldiers were wounded and some were killed on both sides, including 16 Bihar's C.O. Col. Babu.

The bodies of the twenty Indian dead were promptly consigned to their respective families across India, which proceed to bury their dead in funerals variously reported in local and national media, with Col. Babu's funeral in Suryapet, Telangana on June 18, 2020 taking the form of an escorted parade through the city accompanied by the continuous chanting of *Bharat Mata Ki Jai* ("victory for mother India") by familiars, friends and spectators, which was followed by a noon cremation attended by many notables—and all this occurred some sixty hours after his death.

In Indian and other media there were numerous reports claiming PLA casualties equal or greater than India's<sup>18</sup>, but there was no PLA or any other official casualty report from the Chinese side until *eight months* later: on February 19, 2021, after the end of the Lunar New Year celebrations, the official media of the People's Republic of China reported that one PLA officer and three soldiers had been killed in action the previous June.

When this much delayed announcement was made it was not accompanied by any explanation of the inordinate delay.

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18 E.g one, among many: "38 Chinese soldiers died in Galwan Valley Clash, India gave more than a bloody nose," *India Today*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnBzsKRRPIc&ab\\_channel=IndiaToday](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnBzsKRRPIc&ab_channel=IndiaToday)

But the Chinese announcements, unlike India's, came with an abundance of justifications and collateral explanations in addition to the highly personalized recognition of the military valor and particular virtues of each one of the dead.

Evidently a team or teams of Party propaganda experts had been hard at work during the intervening months, to draft, revise, test out, and refine each word of the announcements and each part of the accompanying imagery.

The first article published on February 19, in the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, and that day's announcement by the Central Political-Legal Commission already defined very precisely the contents, and the tone of the subsequent narratives of the clash in all PRC media, starting with the impellent necessity of defending "the motherland's" territory (by then Tibet was not longer mentioned at all, replaced by "the plateau region" implicitly China's plateau region).

To that effect a number of specific claims were advanced.

- the Galwan Valley clash was provoked *entirely* by the Indian officers and men on the scene;
- therefore the four PLA deaths cannot be blamed on any Chinese officer or official at any level;
- the Chinese side exercised utmost restraint but was eventually *compelled* to respond to India's "illegal actions," and in so doing it *obtained a "major victory"* [sic];
- this "major victory" was obtained thanks to the sacrifice of four PLA heroes *who were not afraid to die* Major Chen Hongjun, sergeant Chen Xiangrong, and soldiers Xiao Siyuan and Wang Zhuoran.

Also, Colonel Qi Fabao (the regimental commander who had been filmed provoking the incident) was wounded and had to be rescued from Indian soldiers attacking with clubs ...in fact he was rescued by Major Chen Honjun, who shielded Col Qi from the blows of Indian soldiers with his own body allowing him to retreat safely, while Major Chen turned back to rescue others before himself falling victim to Indian blows even though sergeant Chen Xiangrong shielded him in turn with his own body; the 24-year old Xiao Siyuan also died shielding comrades with his own body..[in other words, three of the

four died because of their own voluntary decisions as self-directed heroes, and not because they were ordered into combat by their superiors. In that sense they themselves were responsible for their deaths—they chose to be heroes.

Finally, it was noted that all four soldiers and heroes, and also Col. Qi Fabao were members of the CCP.

The themes to be subsequently discussed by the media, and the required tones, were clearly indicated in the initial February 19, 2021 article and official announcement.<sup>19</sup>

- a) Personalization: the Galwan four were presented to the public with carefully selected and carefully presented photographic and biographic details to make them into full blown war heroes that might attract imitators—ie. very much heroic, and definitely not “post heroic” figures;
- b) The meaning of military deaths: yes the four were dead, but by dying as model soldiers and self-sacrificing heroes they have become legendary figures that will live on, and are therefore less dead.
- c) But the risk of death is actually low: many Indians may die because the Indian army is ill-equipped (social media propaganda explained that poorly clothed Indian soldiers froze to death when they fell—or were pushed into the frigid Galwan river ) but the PLA is very well equipped, very well-trained, and very well-lead-ultimately by Xi Jinping himself, the originator of Xi Jinping Thought, that brilliant guide to all problems and all decisions...

To gain resonance for all of the propaganda messages, the four “martyrs” were presented in a highly individualized manner with a full-scale for-the media treatment, including a striking video recreation of Major Chen Hongjun with his tearful widow.<sup>20</sup> And then to balance the sorrow, a warm family portrait with his posthumous son<sup>21</sup>.

Chen Xiangrong, the youngest soldier killed in the incident, was the subject of a

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19 PLA Daily Commentator: “Sing the song of heroism and strive for a strong army that wins,” *PLA Daily*, 19 February 2021, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-02/19/c\\_1127113833.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-02/19/c_1127113833.htm); also Zhang Leifeng, Chen Dianhong “Forging the military soul under the Party banner,” *PLA Daily*, 25 July 2022.

20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iVHAAf6IdM>

21 [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA\\_209163/Features\\_209191/10123953.html](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/Features_209191/10123953.html)

highly professional media presentation which included photographic processing to make him appear not only very young but also downright “cute,” thereby making him an instant youth hero.<sup>22</sup>

The somewhat older Xiao Siyuan was presented as an earnest defender “of every inch” of the motherland land. His mother who might have limited herself to expressions of her grief, chose instead to echo the patriotic sentiments attributed to her only son. But apparently she did so over-enthusiastically, evoking social media criticisms of her inadequate motherly sorrow, which necessitated a further, corrective, media intervention.<sup>23</sup>

Wang Zuoran’s presentation was aimed at a more traditional audience. It emphasized his filial sentiments supposedly preserved in a pre-combat letter which was translated, all too idiomatically, for an American-slanted English-language readership as: “Mom and dad, sorry to be an unfilial son. I am sorry that I might not be able to be there for you through the end. If there is an afterlife, [martyrs evidently benefit from a degree of ideological indulgence] I wish I could be your son again and repay your love and care.”

By the time of Wang Zuoran’s official funeral, for which his parents had to express very fresh grief preserved on ice during the intervening months, a permanent Wang Zuoran” exhibit graced the local “Martyr’s Hall.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Life at the front:**

all the attention directed at the Galwan heroes inevitably drew attention to the harsh conditions of life at the front, with the lack of oxygen at the very high altitudes, very cold temperatures, and fearsome storms in winter...but it was emphasized that the PLA minimizes dangers and mitigates discomforts with its constant care for the troops and constant striving to keep perfecting their personal clothing and equipment, while

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22 *Global Times* Feb. 20, 2021 <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1216001.shtml>

23 “Chinese netizens rush to defense of border Martyr’s mother following comments calling her ‘selfish’ and ‘thoughtless,’” *Global Times*, Mar 04, 2021.

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuq2xjaZ93k>; also [https://www.google.com/search?q=Wang+Zhuoran+martyr&rlz=1C1ONGR\\_enUS974US974&sxsrf](https://www.google.com/search?q=Wang+Zhuoran+martyr&rlz=1C1ONGR_enUS974US974&sxsrf)

assuring fresh food, even fresh fruit specially imported into the “plateau region” a.k.a. Tibet, which the PLA prefers not to name as such.

## **The welfare of those left behind**

The personalization of the Galwan dead inevitably drew attention to their grieving parents and the one widow.

Accordingly, after the Galwan deaths press reports uniformly wrote in reassuring terms about the welfare of the four soldiers’ spouses and families.

News and commentaries stressed that the families of the Galwan four were *financially secure*, because they were well taken care of by both the central state organs and their own provincial and local authorities.

Specifically after Wang Zhuoran’s death, his mother Yang Suxiang was hired by the local militia as a civilian instructor. She also received help from Wang Zhuoran’s comrades in her farm work on the family plot. Party-state cadres, and officers from the departments of veteran affairs paid regular visits.

Wang Zhuoran’s father, Wang Hengzhao, received free medical treatment for a meniscus injury. The rest of his family also had their future health-care costs paid for by the local hospital. Because the PRC does not have “socialized medicine” nor private health maintenance organizations, while private medical insurance both costly and limited, paying for health care is a major preoccupation for the rapidly ageing population, hence the Party and the PLA could count on the resonance of their provision of free health care..

Wang Yuanyuan—Wang Zhouan’s sister and a high school student, was helped by a specially appointed teacher who gave her academic and psychological counseling.

When Major Chen Hongjun died, his wife Xiao Jianwen was pregnant and unemployed.

Both the Gansu Province Military Command and the local authority arranged her prenatal check-ups, despite the Covid-19 restrictions that were still in place at the time.

Then, as the widow of a war hero, Xiao received special assistance from the military affairs departments of two provinces Shaanxi and Gansu, and because she had a (junior level) degree in music, she was appointed to a professorial position in the region’s

highest-ranking musical institution, the Xi'an Conservatory of Music. Gansu officials also arranged a well-appointed domicile for and her infant son in Xi'an<sup>25</sup>.

All of the above are expressions of national gratitude but they are also calculated to overcome “familist” refusals to serve and fight (“sorry I have a family to take care of, hence I cannot risk..”).

It is obvious that the sum total of the commemorative efforts (of which more below) and publicized family-support activities went far beyond any reasonable and normal expression of official gratitude for the four men who died in fighting against the widely despised Indian enemy, especially amidst the massive distraction of the pandemic.

Given that the Party's many shortcomings do not include negligence in extracting political advantage from the march of events, it seems likely that the overall effort to turn the combat deaths into a net gain for the PLA and the Party was carefully planned and carefully directed

## **Conclusion:**

It seems likely that a Xi Jinping directive was issued to harness the Galwan fight and its heroes to promote the current overarching objective of all PRC policies: national rejuvenation—even if it required some combat.

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25 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chen\\_Hongjun](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chen_Hongjun)