

A Comparative Analysis of Military Education between Chinese Universities and the West: A Marxist Perspective

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Abstract

As global security dynamics intensify in the post-Cold War era, the ideological foundations of military education diverge sharply between China and the West. This article analyses the Chinese model in universities through the lens of the Marxist theory of war, arguing that its military education system, rooted in the proletariat's revolutionary tradition, transcends the Western capitalist orientation. Not only does Chinese military education take on the task of military skills training, but it also fosters a strong identification with the national system and socialist core values among the younger generation by incorporating ideological education into the curriculum. By integrating political education with military skills training, Chinese universities cultivate national identity and socialist values, in contrast to Western military academies' emphasis on individualised professionalism and imperialistic narratives. Despite the challenges of globalisation and civil-military integration, Chinese military education resists capitalist influence by reinforcing the Communist Party of China's leadership and people-centred values. The study highlights the dual function of military courses as tools for ideological reproduction and strategic modernisation, providing critical insights into the structural tensions between socialism and global capitalism.

Keywords: military education; curriculum ideology; Marxist theory of war; ideological reproduction; socialism with Chinese characteristics



Education as Change
Volume 29 | 2025 | #18365 | 9 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/18365>
ISSN 1947-9417 (Online)
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Introduction

The world today is not at peace, with localised conflict yet to be solved. War has never been an isolated technical act. “War is the highest form of struggle for resolving contradictions ... between classes, nations, states, or political groups”, said Tse-tung Mao (Mao 1967, 180), the first president of the People’s Republic of China. Military education is by no means merely skill training, but constitutes an important field for the reproduction of political ideology (Ford 2024). In both capitalist and socialist systems, it serves as a tool for ideological reproduction. As the global security landscape becomes increasingly complex, the importance of military education in universities has grown more prominent (Genevaz 2017). The Chinese military education aims to use the framework of the Marxist theory of war to reveal the class nature underlying modern warfare and to conduct an in-depth analysis of China’s unique path.

In the current context of globalisation, the Western military-industrial complex, led by the United States (US), continues to consolidate its hegemonic position through military expansion, technological export, and educational infiltration (Moniz Bandeira 2019). In contrast, Chinese military education has always adhered to the principle that “the Party commands the gun”, serving the fundamental interests of the working people (Brown and Zanardi 2012). Socialism with Chinese characteristics has introduced a market economy with public ownership as the mainstay and private ownership as a supplement. However, in military education, China still treats it as an important line of defence for ideological security.

Since the mid-20th century, military education in Chinese universities has gradually developed into a structured system. The military theory course is an integral part of this education, highlighting the unique role of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA), which is deeply rooted in Marxist theory. Since its establishment, the PLA has been positioned as a force to defend proletarian interests and advance social justice. Historical undertakings, such as the War of Resistance against Japan, the Korean War, and socialist construction, as well as contemporary actions, including anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions, all reflect the continuity of this ideological vision. President Xi Jinping’s vision for building a “world-class military” highlights the PLA’s dual role as both guardian of the socialist system and promoter of global governance reform.

In recent years, the strategic significance of military education has become increasingly prominent, playing a key role in building China’s modern defence system (Hughes 2017). The military theory course serves as the core component for imparting military knowledge and enhancing students’ patriotism, sense of responsibility, and security awareness. It emphasises that national security requires societal collaboration rather than relying solely on military strength (Naftali 2021). These courses aim to deepen students’ understanding of national security, foster their sense of defence responsibility, and improve their ability to respond to security challenges. Furthermore, they emphasise developing comprehensive qualities such as independent thinking and teamwork skills,

which are essential for cultivating well-rounded defenders in the new era. While Chinese courses highlight historical narratives of the PLA's role in liberation struggles, Western military academies often focus on technical training for what they frame as global security missions.

This article focuses on the ideological-political dimension of Chinese military education and attempts to answer the following questions: Under the context of socialism with Chinese characteristics, how does military education construct national identity through its course design? What are the essential differences between Chinese and Western military education, particularly regarding the latter's orientation towards capitalist elites? In a society where class divisions have not yet disappeared, should we be wary of patriotism being manipulated into a tool for maintaining the status quo?

Class Nature in Western and Chinese Military Education

Marxist theory views the military as a tool of class domination, with military education serving as the ideological basis for its legitimacy. Consequently, military education has never been a “depoliticised” or neutral space; rather, it functions as a critical mechanism through which the ruling class consolidates its cultural leadership (Shaw 2012). In Western military education systems, such as the United States Military Academy at West Point and the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in the United Kingdom, the curriculum is primarily designed to serve the interests of bourgeois state machinery (McLaren and Farahmandpur 2005). These institutions shape students' worldviews through ideologies of “freedom and democracy” and “national security”, while obscuring the imperialistic logic underlying these narratives. For instance, US military academies often teach a hypothetical enemy model of “the free world under threat”, thus providing ideological justification for foreign interventions.

Historically, capitalist militaries have primarily served the interests of capital, engaging in resource exploitation and colonialism. In contrast, the PLA guided by the Communist Party of China (CPC), is fundamentally dedicated to protecting the interests of the working class and the broader population (Fravel 2020). Since its inception, the PLA has adhered to Marxist military theory through key historical events such as the War of Resistance against Japan, the Civil Liberation War, and socialist construction. Over time, it has evolved from a traditional force into a modern, informationised military (Schurmann 2022). The PLA's transformation reflects the integration of revolutionary ideals with modernisation, ensuring that it remains a revolutionary, politically engaged, and service-oriented military force committed to national security, territorial integrity, and global peace.

Unlike the capitalist orientation of Western systems, Chinese military education emphasises class solidarity. The roots of China's military education system are firmly proletarian, with the PLA originating during the Land Revolution War in China. Its founding purpose was to overthrow the oppressive forces, focusing on the defence of

the working class and the interests of the masses. Even in the new era, Chinese military education continues to uphold the principle of the Party's leadership over the military, instilling this political tradition in young students through military theory courses in universities. This model serves not only as a vehicle for technical training but also as a channel for disseminating socialist ideology (Pedone and Molina 2023), which underscores the indispensability of military courses in China's higher education system.

Ideological Contradictions between Socialist and Capitalist Militaries

Globally, some countries, such as Israel, South Korea, and Switzerland, have adopted universal military service policies, while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea follows a military-first political programme. In contrast, China does not require universal military service, and the majority of Chinese students and teenagers have not served in the military.

Without the pursuit of global hegemony, China's military education emphasises humanitarian care and solid defence capabilities. This approach is evident in the actions of the PLA, such as its participation in United Nations peacekeeping missions, including escorting ships in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters, and providing peacekeeping forces in Lebanon. The PLA also plays an active role in protecting overseas Chinese citizens, as seen in the evacuation of expatriates from Yemen, and supports domestic emergencies such as flood and earthquake relief efforts. The PLA's ideological framework, rooted in socialist core values, distinguishes it from capitalist militaries. Additionally, it helps students understand the PLA's contributions to both China's national defence and global peace and stability.

Currently, China's deep integration into the globalised system, driven by capitalist demands, has given rise to a fundamental contradiction. On one hand, military modernisation efforts, such as informatisation and intelligentisation, are essential for safeguarding national economic security and pursuing global strategic interests. On the other hand, the ideological narrative of "anti-hegemony" and "anti-imperialism" conflicts with the logic of capital expansion. This contradiction is especially evident in initiatives such as the "Belt and Road" project, the protection of overseas interests, and geopolitical competition.

Ideological Divergences in Military Education Curricula

The military theory course in Chinese universities serves dual functions. The first function is as a platform for knowledge transfer, while the second is as part of a broader national ideological construction project. Content such as "inheritance of red gene" and "learning from heroic deeds" presents the history of the PLA as a symbol of justice and liberation. This course also reinforces students' emotional identification with the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the socialist system (Zhao 2024). As an integral tool for ideological indoctrination, it strengthens national identity and bolsters loyalty to the direction set by the CPC.

The curriculum ideology in Chinese universities contrasts sharply with that of Western military education. Western systems typically limit military training to professional domains, emphasising individual qualities such as “obedience to orders” and “professionalism”, while often neglecting deeper reflections on the nature of war and historical responsibility (Kolkowicz 2021). In contrast, Chinese military education seeks to integrate socialist values alongside technical training, aiming to cultivate modern citizens who possess both combat capabilities and political consciousness. The curriculum primarily focuses on the revolutionary history of the army, the establishment of state power by the proletariat, the struggle against foreign aggression, and the protection of national sovereignty, security, and world peace.

With the development of the market economy, Chinese military education faces the risk of infiltration by capitalist logic (Li 2010). While it remains rooted in the ideological mission of preserving the proletarian revolutionary tradition, it faces a fundamental structural contradiction between socialist ideals and the capitalist logic embedded in China’s participation in globalisation (Rolland 2020). For instance, while the “civil-military integration” strategy contributes to the advancement of national defence technology, it may also dilute the class-based character of the military (Herspring 2019). However, this does not imply that Chinese military education has fully “de-politicised”. On the contrary, it resists the erosion of capitalist logic by strengthening ideological and political work and reinforcing the leadership of the CPC in university military training efforts.

The Deficiencies of Western Military Education and the Merits of China’s Alternative Path

The limitation of Western military education lies in the narrowness of its target audience. It primarily serves the security needs of the bourgeois state, rather than the fundamental interests of all people (Wilson 2013). Within this system, soldiers are viewed as “guardians of the state” rather than “soldiers of the people”. This perception of identity severs the class connection between the military and the people, making the military more susceptible to becoming a tool for maintaining the existing social order.

In contrast, Chinese military education has always adhered to a people-centred value orientation, reflecting the deep historical bond between the military and the people. For instance, principles such as “the Three Main Rules of Discipline and Eight Points of Attention” and “Unity between the Army and the People” are fundamental to the discipline of the PLA. In the new era, the goal of the PLA is encapsulated in the motto: “Listen to the Party’s command, win battles, and maintain good conduct”. This relational structure between the military and the people ensures that Chinese military education is not only about preparing for war but also about defending the socialist system itself.

Advantages of Military Education in Chinese Universities

Military education and military theory courses in Chinese universities have several unique advantages. First, China has established a systematic military education framework, supported by clear guidance documents and curriculum outlines at both the national and university levels. This ensures the orderly implementation of military education across the country. Second, Chinese universities continuously enrich the content of military theory courses, which cover topics such as national defence, national security, military technology, and modern warfare. These courses also address emerging security challenges, ensuring their relevance in a changing world.

The military course plays a central role in developing students' basic military skills and enhancing their military awareness. It serves as the foundation for supporting national security and military modernisation strategies. In line with China's national defence law, military service law, education law, and relevant policy documents, the development of military courses aligns with President Xi Jinping's thoughts on strengthening the military and is integrated with the overall national security strategy for the new era. The course aims to enhance students' national security awareness, defence consciousness, and crisis-prevention capabilities. The curriculum includes the history, development, modernisation, and informatisation of the Chinese military, helping students understand the military's crucial role in safeguarding national security and engaging in international affairs. Additionally, it provides students with basic military knowledge and guides them in understanding the diverse responsibilities and missions of the Chinese military, both domestically and globally. This comprehensive approach also fosters strategic thinking and a global perspective among students.

Furthermore, Chinese military education demonstrates greater inclusiveness and adaptability to the times. It incorporates modern military technology such as digital education, virtual reality simulations, and other innovative methods (Alam and Askari 2025). Importantly, these technological innovations are always aligned with the goals of national sovereignty and people's security, rather than the needs of capital expansion.

Conclusion

In comparing military education in Western and Chinese universities, this article has examined differences in the class nature, targeted values, ideological curricula, and the contradictions between capitalist and socialist systems. It further discusses the deficiencies of Western military education and the advantages of China's alternative path. Our study demonstrates the following:

First, the ideological foundation of military education in Chinese universities is deeply rooted in the Marxist theory of war, emphasising the class nature and revolutionary legitimacy of the people's army. In contrast, Western military education is oriented towards capitalist elites, promoting the idea that the army defends Western-style

freedom and democracy, which uphold bourgeois state power and portray the free world as under threat.

Second, Chinese military education is not only a military training mechanism but also a frontline for the reproduction of socialist ideology. It upholds socialist core values and shapes students into modern citizens with basic military skills and political consciousness, whereas Western military education limits training to professional domains while neglecting critical reflection on the nature of war and historical responsibility.

Finally, Chinese military education substantively transcends Western military education through its distinct class stance, systematic ideological construction, and broad popular foundation, consistently adhering to a people-centred value orientation.

By confronting the structural contradictions between socialism and capitalism, military education can effectively balance national security and reshape the political consciousness within a framework of Marxist theory. Furthermore, it can cultivate a new generation of military talent and provide the theoretical and practical paradigms for the global left-wing movement. Future research could explore how China's military education model influences youth political participation, or how it compares to approaches in other socialist states.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the 2023 Guangdong Provincial Undergraduate Higher Education Teaching Reform Project under Grant (879): “Blended Teaching Reform Practice of Military Theory Course under the Background of Education Digital Transformation”.

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