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Disintegrating the Enemy: The PLA's Info-Messaging

Jacqueline N. Deal

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ABSTRACT: The DoD can exploit weaknesses in Chinese military attempts at political warfare, or “enemy disintegration,” most recently observed in PLA media on the subject of the pandemic. Targeted information efforts will signal the United States’ refusal to be intimidated, expose untruths in Chinese government messaging to its citizens, and reassure relevant third parties of US military resolve.

By dividing the United States internally and from allies and partners, People’s Liberation Army (PLA) political warfare aims to deter hostile action against the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and ensure victory in the US-China competition. To be sure, the PLA is just one of several Chinese party-state institutions charged with waging political warfare and disintegrating enemies—from so-called “Wolf Warrior” diplomats to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) United Front agents of co-option and subversion.¹ But the PLA’s mission set in this area is one for which the US Department of Defense may lack an analogue. This special commentary argues as competition with the PRC intensifies, expanding the DoD mandate to engage in political warfare against its Chinese counterpart constitutes an opportunity. The PLA’s involvement in political warfare opens up a competition space that does not favor Beijing.

From late June through early July 2020, two series of articles criticizing the US response to COVID-19 appeared on a special COVID-19-themed page of China Military Online, the official website of the PLA. The website is advertised as being approved by the Central Military Commission of the CCP Central Committee, chaired by CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping himself. Links to the articles with their titles were accompanied by cartoon graphics depicting, among other images, the president of the United States flinging mud at a sign representing China from a house being attacked by the coronavirus, pumping blood out of Uncle Sam lying in a hospital bed, holding a wad

1. See Anne-Marie Brady, “China’s Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping,” Wilson Center, September 18, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>; Alexander Bowe, “China’s Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States,” US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 24, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-overseas-united-front-work-background-and-implications-united-states>; Martin Hala and Jichang Lulu, “The CCP’s Model of Social Control Goes Global,” *Sinopsis*, December 20, 2018; Alex Joske, “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work,” *China Brief* 19, no. 9 (May 9, 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/>; and Joske, “The Party Speaks for You,” Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 9, 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>.

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of cash while being stalked by the grim reaper, and sitting astride the crown of a sinking Statue of Liberty (see figure 1).²

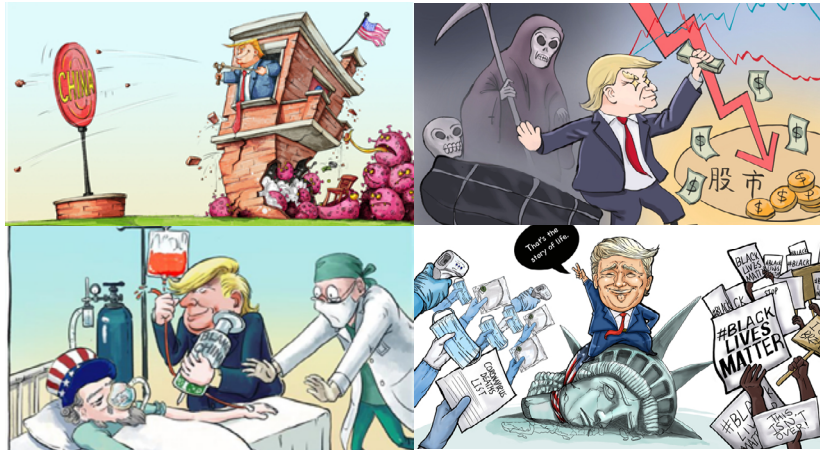


Figure 1. COVID cartoons (Reprinted from China Military Online website sponsored by the PLA newspaper)

Few in the United States seem to have noticed the articles or their nasty illustrations. The episode nonetheless offers an illuminating case study of PLA political warfare. Both series attacked the United States and were thus intended to boost the PLA's spirit and Chinese pride domestically. But beyond this agenda, the series aimed at different audiences in order to advance a common project—what the PLA calls “enemy disintegration work,” conducted in peacetime and in war alike.³ Disintegration consists of degrading the enemy's resolve and impeding its mobilization capacity by sowing divisions within the enemy camp and wooing critical elements over to one's own side.⁴ The first series was designed to exacerbate tension over China policy and to promote dovish voices in the United States; the second series was intended to discredit the United States in the eyes of relevant third parties.

It is possible to reverse engineer the respective political warfare goals of the two series because while both ended up on the dedicated China

2. Images from <http://www.81.cn/2020zt/attachement/jpg/site351/20200615/309c236f8d3c205189d006.jpg>, <http://www.81.cn/2020zt/attachement/jpg/site351/20200615/309c236f8d3c20518ae109.jpg>, http://www.81.cn/2020zt/2020-06/22/content_9840587.htm, and http://www.81.cn/jmywyl/2020-06/25/content_9841138.htm. The first graphic accompanied Jun Sheng, “Sinister Intentions Behind Mud-Flinging at China,” *PLA Daily*, May 20, 2020; the second, Jun, “Beware the Blame Game Will Backfire,” *PLA Daily*, May 23, 2020 (both from the first series). The third graphic accompanied Li Peng, “Behind the US Epidemic Part 1: Save the People vs. Save the City,” (in Mandarin) *PLA Daily*, June 22, 2020, and the fourth, Niu Chenfei, “Behind the US Epidemic Part 4: Anti-Epidemic vs. Protest,” (in Mandarin) *PLA Daily*, June 25, 2020 (both from the second series).

3. Wu Ming, “Deeply Understand the Essence of Political Work is the Lifeline of Our Army,” (in Mandarin) *PLA Daily*, 19 April 2016.

4. “Disintegrate the Enemy,” (in Mandarin) Baidu Baike, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E7%93%A6%E8%A7%A3%E6%95%8C%E5%86%9B/12605412>.

Military Online COVID-19 page, they appeared at different times, in different languages, and offered distinctive messages. Before China Military Online's special COVID-19 page was created, the first series was originally published under an authoritative byline in both English and Mandarin, without illustration, in late May. It ran in Mandarin in the *PLA Daily*, the official newspaper of the PLA, and on China Military Online, the PLA's official English-language portal, where some *PLA Daily* content appears in translated form.

Not all *PLA Daily* content is posted in English on China Military Online, so it is safe to assume translated pieces are intended for foreign consumption. This first, late-May series combined targeted attacks on "some" or "certain" Americans—those "politicians" who accused the PRC of being the source of the novel coronavirus—with threats against the United States.⁵ The message was that if only we expelled our hawks and dispensed with the hard line toward Beijing, then we could avoid painful consequences.

The second, late-June series appeared only in Mandarin. As it was being rolled out in *PLA Daily* without illustration, it was also posted in real time to the special COVID-19-themed China Military Online page where the first, late-May series had also just been posted in Mandarin and in English. Both series were accompanied by offensive graphics (figure 1) on China Military Online's COVID-19 page. The idea behind the second series, and the special page on which the two series appeared adorned with the images, was to humiliate the United States in the eyes of domestic PRC viewers and relevant third parties such as US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region. The latter are supposed to question the credibility of American defense guarantees in light of such vicious attacks against the United States in official PLA media. If these partners have doubts, they may in turn deny access to US forces, complicating or raising the costs of any US action in the region.

The first series was clearly triggered by high-level American criticism of Beijing's handling of COVID-19, especially calls to hold the PRC responsible for damages. Top officials at the White House, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense all made statements to the effect that the virus originated in Wuhan, and that Beijing was not being transparent or forthcoming. The *PLA Daily's* response indicates these statements struck a nerve, which from a competitive standpoint is a good thing for the United States.

The fact that China Military Online's retorts fell on deaf ears suggests a deficit of PLA retaliatory options. Deconstructing the PLA's unsuccessful messaging reveals approaches that if applied by the Department of Defense to the PLA, promise to pay strategic dividends. This case study suggests an opportunity for the Department to expand

5. Jun Sheng, "Sinister Intentions"; Jun, "Burning House Looters Will Get Burned," *PLA Daily*, May 21, 2020; Jun, "What Are the Sources of the Political Virus?" *PLA Daily*, May 22, 2020; Jun, "Blame Game"; Jun, "The Hideous Morbidity in the House of Cards," *PLA Daily*, May 24, 2020; Jun, "Stop Lying Through Your Teeth," *PLA Daily*, May 25, 2020; and Jun, "It's Much Easier to Move Mountains than Shake the PLA" *PLA Daily*, May 27, 2020.

its involvement in whole-of-government efforts to use political warfare or information operations to sow division within China and to humiliate the PLA in the eyes of third parties.

Central Military Commission's Voice

The first, late-May series, which ran from the 20th through the 27th of that month, should be considered particularly authoritative. It was attributed to “Jun Sheng,” a pen-name byline that first started appearing in *PLA Daily* on January 1, 2017 with a promise to analyze global “hot spots,” focus on “world military reforms,” and “transmit a frank and sincere voice” to compete in the “international discourse system.”⁶ The *PLA Daily* is overseen by the Central Military Commission, chaired by Xi Jinping, and pen-name authors are believed to be associated with the Central Military Commission's Political Work Department.⁷ Jun Sheng's charter article concludes:

Here, what needs to be told to the world is that the Chinese army has always been the guardian of world peace and development, the defender of national sovereignty, security and development interests, and will not allow anyone to damage the core interests of the Chinese nation. In order to allow the people to “live in a peaceful environment without destruction,” the Chinese soldiers will be loyal to their ideals, face the storm and be brave, and they will definitely attack when necessary.⁸

In hindsight, this column served notice of the byline's intent to justify and rationalize the PLA's growing international footprint, as 2017 is the year the PLA officially opened its first overseas base, a naval support facility in Djibouti.

Jun Sheng was thus advertised from the start as a megaphone for China's geostrategic goals, transmitting both reassurances and threats. Of the more than 30 articles published under the byline in its first three years of existence, several offered cheerleading for the Belt and Road Initiative, while others warned India about territorial incursions; warned Japan not to cross the PRC over disputed maritime territory or in relations with Taiwan, the United States, Australia, and India; and warned the United States about arm sales to Taiwan.⁹ Unlike other *PLA Daily* pen names associated with coverage of internal matters such as modernization or the anticorruption fight, Jun Sheng has focused on external developments. Though one of Jun Sheng's columns was previously translated and published in English as well as Chinese, it was not until the late-May series that it became clear Jun Sheng aims not only to cover foreign affairs but also to shape foreign views.¹⁰

6. Jun Sheng, “Peace, the Most Beautiful Scenery in the Eyes of Chinese Soldiers,” (in Mandarin) *PLA Daily*, January 1, 2017.

7. See David Gitter and Leah Fang, “The Chinese Communist Party's Use of Homophonous Pen Names: An Open-Source Open Secret,” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 1 (January 2018): 69–112, 92–97.

8. Jun, “Peace, the Most Beautiful.”

9. Jun Sheng, “Resolutely Oppose US Arms Sales to Taiwan,” (in Mandarin), *PLA Daily*, July 12, 2019.

10. See Gitter and Fang, “Open-Source Open Secret”; and Jun Sheng, “Be Wary of Japanese Militarism,” (in Mandarin) *PLA Daily*, March 29, 2017.

Enemy Disintegration Work

Why would this kind of material, essentially diplomatic or political in nature, appear in the *PLA Daily* rather than, say, the *People's Daily*, the PRC's largest newspaper and the official outlet of the CCP's Central Committee? Some of Jun Sheng's stories have been reprinted in the *People's Daily*, but as Mark Stokes has emphasized, "enemy disintegration work" (wajie dijun gongzuo [瓦解敌军工作]—literally, "disintegrate the enemy work") has always been a key PLA mission and continues to be codified in the PLA's "Political Work Regulations."¹¹ The latest political work regulations stipulate enemy disintegration is to be accomplished in peacetime by attending to "the situation of foreign forces, enemy forces, and national separatist forces at home and abroad," and in wartime through "public opinion, psychological, and legal warfare."¹² In addition to providing the muscle behind threats, then, the PLA is a source and executor of the Chinese Communist Party political-warfare strategy.

From the perspective of the Marxist-Leninist way of war, enemy disintegration work is an essential precursor to the use of force. This point would have resonated with Mao Zedong and other early communist readers of the ancient Chinese military classics, which stress the importance of balance between belligerents in cohesion—which side is more resolute and internally unified—as well as the need to prepare the battlefield before fighting.¹³ The first chapter of Sun Zi's *Art of War* opens with a recommendation to assess which side is more in harmony with, or loyal to, its leadership. If you can weaken the adversary's resolve and cohesion in advance, your strikes will have outsized effects. War may even be obviated by successful efforts to shape the enemy's perceptions and behavior in peacetime. While this may sound odd to readers who have to be reminded to consider Phase Zero, from Beijing's perspective, the PRC's historical experiences validate the approach.¹⁴

The lesson the CCP learned while working with the Soviet Union in its founding decades was the party could not expect to win in combat unless it first subverted the opponent. The PLA's August 1 (8/1) birthday, the inspiration for the URL of its China Military Online website (81.cn), commemorates the Nanchang Uprising in 1927, in which the party tried and failed to take the city of Nanchang from the Kuomintang (KMT), the Chinese Nationalist Party. This was itself an act of enemy disintegration, as the CCP commanders who led the operation were formally KMT officers—in 1924 the party had bowed to Soviet pressure to join the KMT in a United Front, which was ostensibly aimed at expelling foreign powers from China but which the Soviets intended to use to pressure

11. Mark Stokes and Russell Hsiao, "The People's Liberation Army General Political Department: Political Warfare with Chinese Characteristics," Project 2049 Institute (October 14, 2013), https://project2049.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/P2049_Stokes_Hsiao_PLA_General_Political_Department_Liaison_101413.pdf; and "Regulations on Political Work of the Chinese PLA," (in Mandarin) March 15, 2012, <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/3743d9d0360cba1aa811da3d.html>.

12. "Regulations."

13. See Sun Zi, *Art of War*.

14. Scott D. McDonald, Brock Jones, and Jason M. Frazee, "Phase Zero: How China Exploits It, Why the US Does Not," *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 3 (2012), 122–35.

the national government in Beijing into ceding disputed territory in Manchuria and Mongolia.

The merger never worked smoothly. Chinese Communist Party members resented having to defer to the KMT and constantly worked to recruit nationalists to their own ranks, while Moscow sought to undermine the KMT's ambition of unifying China and encouraged party members to oppose that course as well. Six months before the Nanchang Uprising, fed up with communist machinations, the leader of the KMT, Chiang Kai-shek, acted to purge the CCP from the KMT's ranks, killing or forcing into hiding hundreds if not thousands of party members in Shanghai and other cities. The degree to which the party then acted on Moscow's orders or of its own accord to seize Nanchang remains contested, but the episode highlights how fundamental enemy disintegration is to the PLA. It is, in fact, the PLA's origin story.

After seceding from the Kuomintang, the PLA would have to wait decades before its intelligence and subversion arms were mature enough to facilitate defeating former nationalist comrades in battle on a regular basis. The PLA's military liaison efforts and underground outreach to the opposition—aimed at wooing potential sources of intelligence and defectors—eventually played a decisive role in the party's triumph in the Chinese civil war. To this day, the PLA boasts its enemy disintegration work led to recruitment of over one-fifth of the KMT army, including more than 1,400 senior officers.¹⁵ The CCP's initial victories in northeast China after World War II were accomplished in large measure by using superior intelligence to surround and suborn KMT commanders.

From the United States and the Kuomintang in the civil war period to the United States and Taiwan today, the CCP's enemy has often been a coalition rather than a single party or state. This means disintegration work must be applied not only within rival states but also across their alliances. Jun Sheng's late-May campaign to blame "some Americans" while warning of the consequences of their behavior in order to promote doves within the US system fits into this playbook, as does the subsequent attempt to make the United States look weak in the eyes of relevant third parties and thus inject doubt into the American alliance structure.

Singling Out American Hawks

Jun Sheng's first appearance in 2020 was in late May, and the series was the first attributed to the byline. To ensure it reached American readers, as mentioned, all eight articles were published simultaneously in Mandarin in the *PLA Daily* and in English at China Military Online. All eight articles also mention "some [or certain] American [or Western] politicians" in their opening lines. The point of "some American politicians" is to imply that if it were not for these troublemakers, US-PRC relations would be on a better footing. By singling out a particular group

15. Wang Zhaoyue, "Uphold Justice to Shake the Enemy Camp: The Red Army's Long March," (in Mandarin) China Military Online, September 19, 2016, http://www.mod.gov.cn/education/2016-09/19/content_4733311.htm.

of officials and excluding others—not to mention financiers, business people, academics, etc.—Beijing tries to encourage finger-pointing in the United States, discredit its opponents and, by default, promote its friends in the United States.

The denunciation of “some American politicians” is the common thread across the diversity of titles in the series—“Sinister Intentions Behind Mud-Flinging at China” (Part 1), “Burning House Looters” (Part 2), “What Are the Sources of the Political Virus?” (Part 3), “Beware the Blame Game Will Backfire” (Part 4), “The Hideous Morbidity in the House of Cards” (Part 5), “Stop Lying Through Your Teeth” (Part 6), “Why Cannot China [Be Allowed to] Provide Better Solutions?” (Part 7), and “It’s Much Easier to Move Mountains than to Shake the PLA” (Part 8).¹⁶ Examples of “some American politicians” in the opening lines include:

- Part 1: “In the face of the poor pandemic response, economic slowdown, bipartisan hostility, and divided public opinion, *some US politicians* are head over heels busy, not battling the outbreak and saving lives, but shifting the blame and putting on one disgusting farce after another [emphasis added].”¹⁷
- Part 2: “As the COVID-19 outbreak continues to rage across the United States, the American people are complaining about the White House’s ‘lack of action’ in the critical period of pandemic prevention and control, to which, however, *Pompeo and his fellow politicians* have kept finding excuses for themselves. . . . [C]*ertain American politicians* have the nerve to reap geopolitical gains where they set fire in the first place [emphasis added].”¹⁸
- Part 3: “While the biological virus is a common enemy of humankind, the political virus born out of *certain American politicians* is equally detestable, for it has damaged the global antiepidemic cooperation and impeded the long-term development and progress of human society [emphasis added].”¹⁹
- Part 4: “The blames [sic] that *certain American politicians* have been trying to shift to China have all backfired on themselves . . . [emphasis added].”²⁰

16. Jun Sheng, “Sinister Intentions”; Jun, “Burning House”; Jun, “What Are the Sources”; Jun, “Blame Game”; Jun, “The Hideous Morbidity”; Jun, “Stop Lying”; Jun, “Why Cannot China Provide Better Solutions?” *PLA Daily*, May 26, 2020; and Jun, “It’s Much Easier.”

17. Jun, “Sinister Intentions.”

18. Jun, “Burning House.”

19. Jun, “What Are the Sources.”

20. Jun, “Beware.”

- Part 5: “Lately, *some American politicians* have been taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic out of pure selfish interests in the 2020 presidential election . . . [emphasis added].”²¹
- Part 6: “We’ve long known that lying through their teeth is the ‘survival skill’ for *some Western politicians*, but we never expected it to become their ‘only skill left’ . . . [emphasis added].”²²
- Part 7: “Whoever speaks well of China would be attacked—this has become a hysterical new normal for *some American politicians* [emphasis added].”²³
- Part 8: “For quite some time, *certain American politicians* have rampantly slandered China through politicization and stigmatization to deflect domestic problems and shirk responsibilities for the poor pandemic response at home . . . [emphasis added].”²⁴

Considering the source is a propaganda writing team of the CCP’s Central Military Commission, those being inveighed against should be honored. Who does Jun Sheng include in the aforementioned “some [or, certain] politicians?” Part 3 offers the most thorough description of the members of this group. Following the initial line about the “political virus” quoted above, readers learn “some American politicians” refers to those who “are so crazily intent on fabricating all kinds of fallacies about ‘holding China accountable’” and who “attack the WHO for being too ‘China-centric,’” as well as those who insist on calling COVID-19 “the Chinese virus.” Most of all, it includes those who exhibit a “Cold War mentality” and:

have the wishful thinking that accusing China of the so-called “mask diplomacy” would offset its influence; vilifying China’s aid to help build the African Center for Disease Prevention and Control as an attempt to “steal genome data” would drive a wedge between China and Africa; and egging other countries to claim reparations from China would pin the “original sin” of the virus on the country.²⁵

The article echoes Part 2 in naming Secretary of State Mike Pompeo a particular offender and seems at pains to imply only a small subset of the American political class cares about Beijing’s initial obfuscation around the virus and subsequent attempts to use it to boost China’s international standing. This is the prelude to threatening the United States about what will happen if that cadre is not sidelined. Of course, one audience is the PLA itself. Chinese military personnel must comprise the majority of domestic *PLA Daily* readers, and their spines would have been stiffened by these broadsides. But again, the pieces also appeared in English, which explains the repeated singling out of “some” or “certain” politicians rather than the issuance of blanket indictments. As discussed below, the second series published only in Mandarin features more

21. Jun, “The Hideous Morbidity.”

22. Jun, “Stop Lying.”

23. Jun, “Why Cannot China.”

24. Jun, “It’s Much Easier.”

25. Jun, “What Are the Sources.”

sweeping language, but Jun Sheng's targeting of a few rotten eggs was clearly meant to influence high-level dynamics in the United States.

Implying Punishment

All but one of Jun Sheng's articles ends with a threat (part 7 ends with a paean to the PRC's rise—"We firmly believe that China will only do well when the world is well, and the world will do better when China is doing well!"—that is only threatening indirectly, in its implication that the world will do worse if the PRC suffers). These threats suggest an incentive for Americans to ditch the troublemakers while leaving the "or else" vague.

The conclusion of the first article is particularly vivid, warning, "*those sinister American politicians* will one day pay a high price for what they did—they will bring miseries to the American people, pave the way for their decline, and ruin their political credibility [emphasis added]." A citation from Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* follows, "[Ask not] for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."²⁶ Aside from displaying impressive fluency in the American canon (Lincoln is quoted in a previous passage), Jun Sheng here goes beyond hinting "the American people" will benefit if only certain leaders are jettisoned.

The Hemingway quotation may be designed especially to be resonant, as the pen name Jun Sheng is a homophone for "Voice of the Military," paralleling the pen name "Zhong Sheng," "Voice of China," which appears in the *People's Daily* newspaper.²⁷ In addition to Voice of China, Zhong Sheng is a homophone abbreviation of "Sounding the Alarm Bell,"²⁸ so by association Jun Sheng may conjure a warning of imminent danger as well, in which case borrowing Hemingway's claxon reinforces the message.

Other threats from the final lines of six of the remaining seven articles in the series include:

- Part 2: "The burning house looters will eventually get burned themselves."²⁹
- Part 3: "Stop the misdeeds and change course before it's too late."³⁰
- Part 4: "Stop making anti-China noises and face up to justice, reason, and public opinion."³¹
- Part 5: "All righteous people of the whole world will firmly oppose them, and the Chinese government and people will hit back hard."³²

26. Jun, "Sinister Intentions."

27. Gitter and Fang, "Open-Source Open Secret"; and "What Do the Zhong Sheng and Jun Sheng Published by the *People's Daily* on 3 August Mean?" (in Mandarin), Zhihu (website), August 5, 2017, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/63397602>.

28. Gitter and Fang, "Open-Source Open Secret."

29. Jun, "Burning House."

30. Jun, "What Are the Sources?"

31. Jun, "Beware."

32. Jun, "The Hideous Morbidity."

- Part 6: “An ancient fable says that a rabbit used to have a long tail, which becomes short because it is bitten off for telling lies. . . . Stop lying through your teeth; otherwise your personal credibility, political career, and the ‘America great again’ you promise the American people will, like the rabbit’s tail, be cut short for sure.”³³
- Part 8: “Focus more on controlling the pandemic at home, and stop flexing muscles at other countries’ doorstep. It’s much easier to move mountains than [to] shake the PLA. . . . No force will ever stop China’s steps forward.”³⁴

For PLA watchers accustomed to turgid accounts of soldiers or units resolutely “holding high the banner of [fill-in-the-blank CCP jargon],” this is unusually stark language. Such direct threats issued by authoritative mouthpieces are relatively rare.

Shaping the Views of Third Parties

Nonetheless the series met with resounding silence in the United States. As far as this author could determine, no one wrote publicly about what was being said or reprinted the material. Jun Sheng was unlikely to succeed in persuading the United States to stand down or to demote politicians inclined to confront Beijing. In the face of this missed salvo, the writing team behind the pen name elected to repurpose the material for a different political warfare purpose. Jun Sheng’s kick save was to post the columns in mid-June on a special, dedicated page advertised with a banner at the top of the China Military Online home page (see figure 2).³⁵ The banner depicts a sickly, sinister-looking man wearing a US flag armband. He has a coronavirus in one hand behind his back and is reaching out with his other hand toward a man dressed like a doctor in white scrubs with a PRC flag armband. The latter is offering a stack of presumably scientific documents to the American, who is spewing coronavirus germs as he accepts the papers.



Figure 2. China Military Online homepage (Reprinted from China Military Online website sponsored by the PLA newspaper)

33. Jun, “Stop Lying.”

34. Jun, “It’s Much Easier.”

35. The banner image appeared atop the China Military Online homepage from June 16, 2020, through the end of the month, and the image including the Chinese language headings at the bottom remained available at <http://www.81.cn/2020zt/110107.htm> through at least July 7, 2020.

Again, for the analyst accustomed to China Military Online's usual depictions of shiny new PLA hardware or of soldiers earnestly striving to live up to Xi Jinping's injunctions, this is striking stuff—probably aimed less at an American audience than at domestic viewers and US allies and partners. Nationalists at home would be buoyed by the combined visual and verbal assault on the US position, and the issuance of such brazen attacks by an official PRC media outlet could cause some foreign readers to question Washington's credibility as a security provider.

Clicking on the banner in mid-June yielded a page including the late-May articles, newly illustrated with the aforementioned offensive cartoons. By the 20th, these articles were accompanied by a new, second series of articles called “Behind the US Epidemic.”³⁶ This second series was also offensively illustrated but not attributed to Jun Sheng, and (as mentioned) not translated into English. In the new, less authoritative series of six articles, the phrase “some American politicians” appeared a few times but was eclipsed by more sweeping indictments of American “cruel capitalism,” “global hegemony,” “systemic racial discrimination,” “political polarization,” and “hypocritical democracy.”

Also unlike the first series, the second did not feature threats, so the intent seems to have been just to accuse the United States of hypocrisy and in so doing, highlight that the *PLA Daily* was authorized to engage in such attacks. Again this suggests the content of the China Military Online special page was aimed at impressing domestic or non-US foreign audiences. While the first series was designed to moderate US behavior toward the PRC by encouraging a shift toward more dovish policy makers, the second was designed to constrain US options for confronting Beijing by peeling away international partners.

Conclusion

Ironically, the CCP, like all autocratic regimes, is convinced US military and intelligence organizations are plotting to take it apart from within. But scratching beneath the surface, one recognizes that the party assigns credit to the United States for emissions that are organic rather than official. No state hand guides the operation of American popular culture or of US business leaders who sympathize with the plight of Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet or whose firms' websites depict Taiwan as a separate state on maps. American or Western human rights activists who decry the CCP's infringements on the basic civil liberties of Chinese citizens do not work with or receive support from the Defense Department. DoD-sponsored freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea do broadcast opposition to excessive maritime claims

36. Li, “Save the City”; Ren Xu, “Behind the US Epidemic Part 2: Cooperation vs. Nonsense,” (in Mandarin), *PLA Daily*, June 23, 2020; Zhang Xiaojun, “Behind the US Epidemic Part 3: Human Rights vs. Hegemony” (in Mandarin), *PLA Daily*, June 24, 2020; Niu, “Anti-Epidemic vs. Protest”; Liu Xing, “Behind the US Epidemic Part 5: Epidemic vs. Election” (in Mandarin), *PLA Daily*, June 26, 2020; and Li Xian, “Behind the US Epidemic Part 6: Work vs. Show” (in Mandarin), *PLA Daily*, June 27, 2020.

there, a useful message, but until very recently, there was an effort not to single out China but rather to proclaim US neutrality across the various local claimants.

As long as the CCP believes the United States is working to undermine it, and as long as the PLA is involved in political warfare, the Department of Defense might as well make use of its resources to join the fray. The PLA's history and example suggest pathways for enhanced DoD political warfare to send direct messages to Beijing and to send tailored messages about Beijing to relevant third parties. In other words, PRC political warfare efforts that fall short of their mark in the United States may nonetheless be used to inspire US options.

There is no reason for American efforts to mirror exactly the PLA's efforts. Where the Central Military Commission seems to believe it can weaken the United States by amplifying disagreements over China policy, DoD messaging might highlight our understanding of PLA weaknesses or problems. For instance, the Defense Department could call attention to the numerous veterans' protests that have reportedly broken out across the PRC in recent years, or the scrapping in 2017 of the PLA's National Defense Students program, which was launched in 1998 to train reserve officers at civilian universities. Could there be issues with PLA recruiting and morale?

Disclosure of PLA issues would signal to Xi Jinping and other CCP elites that for all their bluster, the United States is not intimidated. With economic inequality in the PRC at an all-time high, the CCP justifies its privileges on the grounds that it has advanced the Chinese nation and is uniquely positioned to protect it. The Chinese people have a right to know their sacrifices have been in vain—the party-state's requisitions and repression are not strengthening the country. Finally, the disclosures would signal to relevant third parties that the US military retains its edge and, just as important, its resolve.