

Veterans' Political Activism in China

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Abstract:

This article examines protest, petitioning, lawsuits, open letters, blogging and other forms of activism by Chinese veterans. Moving beyond images of heroic soldiers in the official media, and the near absence of reporting on veterans' problems, we draw mainly on blog posts and military websites where veterans share their experiences of post-army life. We find that, overall, veterans have had difficulty adjusting to the economic, social, cultural and political changes of the reform era, with many of them finding themselves left behind as other groups have leapt ahead. Veterans complain about poverty, unresolved medical problems, and lack of respect for their contributions to the nation. Not a few have experienced terrible indignities at the hands of security officials and a leadership that is bent on preventing any interest group formation that might ameliorate veterans' problems.

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Veterans' Political Activism in China

In the waning months of 2007, Wang Xinshu, a 57 year-old veteran who suffered a head injury during China's 1979 war against Vietnam, was sent to a "study class" (学习班) on account of his petitioning in Xiangshui county, Jiangsu. He escaped, but ended up on the streets for eight months, getting by through begging, taking odd jobs, scrounging food from trash bins, and sleeping along roads and under bridges.

Wang found himself in this predicament because the food company he worked for had appropriated his land. Like many Chinese (O'Brien and Li, 1995; Luehrmann, 2003; Minzner, 2006; J. Chen, 2012; X. Chen, 2012; Wang, 2012), he sought recourse through petitioning—on 24 December 2007, he went to Nanjing to try his luck there. Five days later, having filed his complaint and returned home, an official from the county court and a bailiff drove up to tell him good news: the authorities had agreed to solve his problem; all he had to do was accompany them to court. After he entered their car, however, Wang noticed that they were heading in the wrong direction. Wang was then spirited away to a walled compound in the suburbs. Once inside, officials confiscated his address book, cell phone and certification that he was a disabled veteran. Forced to stay in a dark, cold room with only a thin blanket, no windows and a locked, iron door, Wang was told to write out a pledge that he would stop petitioning.¹

¹ This was part of a nationwide crackdown on petitioning then underway (Li, Liu and O'Brien, 2012).

This facility was more than a jail.² Ten days after he arrived, he was summoned to a “class” with several others. The instructor warned the participants to stop petitioning, taught them “law” and offered an overview of “national conditions” (国情). But being an able student was not the main condition for release—that would cost 10,000 yuan (US\$1600), a letter guaranteeing no more petitioning, and 200 yuan (US\$32) per day for room and board. Of course, none of the petitioners could afford this. Wang decided to escape, and within a few days managed to jump over a low section of the wall when the guards were looking away.

While he was detained, Wang’s wife tried to help him. She contacted the Xiangshui Public Security Bureau and the Bureau of Civil Affairs—which was responsible for disabled veterans—but they refused to admit that Wang had been abducted. Somehow, a reporter from *China Youth Daily* heard about the case. He contacted the Xiangshui Court and Civil Affairs Bureau; the court admitted that they had picked him up, but said that he was being held by Civil Affairs, which denied it. In the meantime, Wang’s daughter lost her job because of her father’s petitioning; his wife was followed when she went to Nanjing and Beijing, and their house was monitored. In March 2008, Wang’s wife traveled to Beijing again and met the reporter. Shortly after she arrived, she was hustled into a car by an official from the Xiangshui Letters and Visits Bureau’s Beijing representative office. The following day, an official from the county trade bureau (the department in charge of the factory that employed Wang) took her home. Two months later, in May 2008, Wang’s wife received an encouraging letter from the Jiangsu Letters and Visits Department and showed it to their county-level representative, but a deputy director

² On local detention centers and “retrievers” (接访人员) in the 1990s, see Cai (2004). For accounts from the 2000s, see Anderlini (2009), Coonan (2009), Jacobs (2009), and Li, Liu and O’Brien (2012).

tore up the letter, telling her that land issues “can only be solved at home” and that she should stop requesting outside intervention.

Wang’s case was never resolved. Months later he returned home “with the help of some good-hearted people” but he still felt compelled to stay in hiding; even his wife was afraid to be seen with him. The *China Youth News* reporter continued his investigation and found that the study class had been held in a former primary school, and that it had been organized by the Procurator, Public Security Bureau, and the Letters and Visits Bureau. When the reporter asked a Civil Affairs staff member about the class, he said that it was authorized by provincial authorities, but there were no documents to back this up (VoV, 2013a; Zhongguo qingnian bao, 2009).

Individual veterans and their families are not the only ones challenging the loss of land, jobs and the government’s failure to provide promised benefits (especially employment, health care and pensions). Despite a great deal of propaganda and high-level attention to veterans around the anniversaries of the War of Resistance against Japan and the founding of the army and the Party (FBIS 2005a,b),³ vows to improve employment prospects for veterans (Xinhua, 2006), and annual expenditures exceeding 2 billion yuan (\$US 317 million) for “consolation subsidies for China’s war veterans, disabled soldiers and families of martyrs” (Xinhua, 2008),⁴ recent years have witnessed thousands of episodes of contention by veterans. In 2010, for example, officers from Zhejiang claiming to represent 20,000 veterans wrote an open letter

³ Since 2004 the government has also supported tourism to revolutionary sites (Perry, 2012).

⁴ According to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, subsidies had increased by 4.2b yuan (US\$ 677 million) annually prior to 2008, so “Red Army veterans could now get an annual pension of 13,680 yuan (US\$ 2171), up 20 percent.” “Could,” of course, is different than actually did receive. Moreover, few pre-1949 Red Army veterans remain alive today (Xinhua, 2008).

demanding social justice (VoV, 2013b). In September 2007, 1,000 to 2,000 rural veterans, mostly enlisted men, rioted at Railroad Ministry job training centers in Baotou, Wuhan and Baoji over poor living conditions, inadequate resettlement funding, and lack of meaningful job training. The government then issued an emergency decree that closed all Railway Ministry schools and ordered veterans back to their “native places” (原籍). Since many of them had joined the army in order to leave their hometowns, this led to more protests (Bodeen, 2007; Ming Pao, 2007). Then there were episodes involving hundreds of army engineers in Guangdong (2008) “complaining that the local authorities have failed to implement Beijing’s orders to pay pensions” (Zhai, 2008), and three hundred veterans, mostly from the Civil War (1945-9) and the Korean War (1950-3), who petitioned for “recognition of their military service and higher pensions” (2010), claiming that the latter were “similar to or worse than those of ordinary laid-off workers in Guangzhou” (Lau, 2010). Farther north in Weifang, Shandong, around one hundred veterans, including officers and enlisted men, appeared at the State Council Bureau of Letters and Visits (2009) to demand that “local authorities enforce central state policy and allow them to get the benefits they deserve” (Radio Free Asia, 2009). These last incidents were small compared to a march through Guilin by 1,000 Vietnam veterans who held banners calling for increased payouts to former soldiers (Radio Free Asia, 2011).

As might be expected given the size and frequency of these protests and many veterans’ expertise with weapons, this activism has drawn the attention of China’s “stability maintenance” (维稳) apparatus. A Chinese military analyst, in one of the few open documents available on the topic, noted in 1991 that while veterans’ protests shared some attributes with contention by other groups, they differed in their level of organization, scope, aggressive tactics

(such as occupying government offices and getting into altercations with public security personnel), influence on society, and focus on concrete and clear objectives (Shi, 1991). A little more than a decade later, the party secretary of the Law School at the University for Political Science and Law noted that veterans' protests were viewed by the leadership as the second most important source of instability; in 2004 alone, he said, some 142 veterans' groups (totaling 2,089 complainants) came to petition at the PLA's General Political Department's Letters and Visits Bureau, which was almost triple the previous year's number (Zhang, 2013). In 2012, according to a source with close ties to the Public Security Bureau, protests by veterans ranked third among causes of social instability, after farmers whose land had been taken and unemployed workers (Interview, Division Level Official, Shanghai, January 2013).

Despite a long history of activism and their potential danger to the regime, veterans as a "status" group" (Edele, 2008) have been missing from scholarly accounts of popular action in China. When veterans make cameo appearances, they have been cast in one role: as leaders of protests for *other* aggrieved groups, especially villagers (Bernstein and Lü, 2003: 148; Yu, 2003; Li and O'Brien, 2008: 13; Wang, 2012: 701).⁵ Evidence suggests, however, that this not is the main mode of activism among veterans, a group numbering in the millions that spans several generations. This article, in contrast, seeks to describe and categorize, as thickly as possible, various types of veteran-focused activism—ranging from public protests to petitions, lawsuits and filing reports against officials (for earlier activism, see Diamant, 2009). Who among veterans is more likely to participate in political activism, and why? How do veterans organize

⁵ Occasionally veterans also figure in discussions of who is likely to participate in contention. Jing Chen (2012) argues that veterans were not more likely than others to take part in collective petitions.

and what sort of claims do they make? What use do they make of political and military channels to put pressure on their targets? Do they have allies in the state or society who help them in their struggles for compensation, recognition and jobs?

Our primary goal is to provide a descriptive overview of a topic that has not received the attention it deserves.⁶ We aim to map the terrain of veterans' activism in the hope that others will develop a finer-grained portrait of the dynamics identified. In particular, we encourage students in search of a dissertation topic to zero in on regional variation and generational differences and their effect on which types of contention are chosen or avoided.

In addition to filling in a gap in our knowledge of groups that participate in collective action, studying veterans' activism offers an opportunity to crack open the "black box" of the state's repressive apparatus. Despite considerable attention to various forms of resistance (Hastings, 2005; O'Brien and Li, 2006; Walker, 2008; Yu, 2008; Hurst, 2009), the majority of protests either fail to launch or, once started, are quickly suppressed. Scholars are only now beginning to move into the state to explore "protest control."⁷ Who, exactly, does the repressing? How are protests prevented? How does the state track down petitioners and what happens to them after they are put on buses to go back home?

⁶ Here we follow John Gerring (2012), who argues that description is no less valuable than causal analysis. Contesting the widespread notion that description is "storytelling," Gerring suggests that description and causation are both types of arguments, with the former aiming to answer important "what" questions. He notes that the "ancient task of describing the social world" is widely accepted in the natural sciences, as well as in many other social science disciplines, with "mainstream political science" as a notable outlier.

⁷ For a call to pay more attention to repression, see O'Brien and Stern (2008). For studies of "hard" repression in China, see Wright (1999), Tong (1999), and Cai (2008). On "softer" forms of protest control, see Stern and Hassid (2012) and Deng and O'Brien (2013).

In tackling both sides of veterans' activism—what they do and how the state tries to stop them—we are both victims and beneficiaries of China's changing media landscape. Unlike farmers whose land has been seized or laid-off workers fighting for their pensions, there is little domestic coverage of veterans' protests.⁸ Moreover, what is reported usually has a happy ending when the benevolent state, with its hard-charging allies in the press, rescues a model veteran from his travails (Lu, 2007), or a committed Civil Affairs official boasts about ever more generous funding for “glorious” disabled or impoverished veterans (Zhongguo minzheng, 2012). Equally problematic, owing to sensitivities surrounding military-focused research, Chinese social scientists and journalists tend to ignore veterans or focus on *policy* issues, downplaying former soldiers' treatment, grievances, organization, petitioning and protests (Mou and Zhang, 2010). Interviews, surveys and field work also remain difficult to arrange, at least for foreign researchers who lack access to classified documents or veterans who are willing to talk.

Fortunately, the internet has opened up new avenues of research. Like millions of Chinese, veterans have taken to the web and microblogs to tell their compatriots about their experiences. There are bulletin boards such as the “Military Spirit Network” (军魂网) that post items about veteran affairs (court proceedings, verdicts, petitioning activity) as well as postings on blogs at Sina.com, many of which are quickly deleted. This article relies mainly on posts on a US-based citizen-journalism website (www.boxun.com), which is banned in China. Boxun has a large section, currently 195 entries, devoted to veterans' affairs, which it calls “The Voice of the

⁸ We conducted a Boolean search of the CNKI database of the PRC press for 退伍军人上访/复员军人上访 and come up almost empty handed.

Veteran” (退伍军人之声) (VoV). We are not entirely sure how these blogs reached the site, but one source tells us that Boxun has many volunteers in China who feed them information. From the look of these posts—many include photographs, images of identity cards, mobile phone numbers, home addresses, official documents, legal texts, hospital records, military citations and the like—it appears that some of these citizen-journalists are posted outside the State Council’s Letters and Visits Office. From an aesthetic perspective—the feel of the materials in terms of language and issues raised—VoV posts strike us as “authentic,” not necessarily in revealing the entire truth of each case, but in providing information and exposing issues that cut across many cases. For example, Henan emerges at the province with the highest number of complaints, followed by Hunan and Guangdong; veterans from central China outnumber those from other regions by a substantial margin (See Tables 1 and 2); among types of activism, petitioning combined with a related activity (such as posting on the web or filing a lawsuit, making an online complaint or writing an “open letter” (公开信) (See Table 3) is most common. As for patterns, 57% of the cases involve peacetime veterans struggling with problems such as land disputes, evictions, inadequate compensation for injuries, unaffordable health care, labor contract violations, bad relations with local cadres, unemployment, too little funding for resettlement and even threats from gangsters. Coping with the challenges of disability (including health care costs, pain, job loss and dependency) is particularly prominent and is mentioned in 35% of the posts.

In using these materials we readily acknowledge selection bias: veterans without problems are unlikely to complain; those who do speak up are likely to spin their story to garner sympathy. At the same time, it is also likely that the issues raised on VoV are merely the tip of

an iceberg. More generally, we can only say that we are aware of the biases in the source material, but that at this point there is no better way to find out what veterans think about their circumstances and how political activism might improve it. We await the day when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Public Security Bureau open their archives or researchers can construct a random stratified sample of veterans based on generational cohort—a common way to capture veterans experiences elsewhere. Until that happens, we can only make the best of what China happens to send our way.⁹

We now turn to veterans who have objected to their treatment by local officials. We first consider combatants in China's conflicts with Vietnam. These men have been especially active on the web and the street, in part because of their war-related experiences and in part because of the government's failure to commemorate their sacrifices in ways they find meaningful, which stands in sharp relief to the celebration of veterans from earlier wars. After this, we consider civilians who served in secret and quasi-military organizations who identify and make claims as veterans, even though they never held formal military position. Whereas Vietnam-era soldiers tend to combine material demands with appeals for official commemoration, these men struggle to get the government to acknowledge that they served at all, even as they deal with poverty and health problems resulting from their work. Military cadres transferred to state-owned enterprises only to lose their jobs during the industrial restructuring of the 1990s are the third group examined. In our discussion, we emphasize several issues: how individuals became a group capable of engaging in collective action; the role

⁹ For a study of public security work based primarily on materials that were purged from an archive and purchased in a flea markets and back rooms of antiquarian book sellers, see Schoenhals (2012).

of law and policy in shaping activism and protest tactics, and the rhetoric different kinds of veterans use to frame their claims. Our last section considers methods for handling discontent, as seen from the perspective of both state officials and veterans.

Vietnam Veterans

Posts on the VoV site and scattered press accounts suggest that many protests by veterans require attention to generations, as well as “biographical availability” (McAdam, 1988). Vietnam veterans are responsible for roughly 25% of the entries (n=49), with significantly fewer from participants in the Korean War (n=6) or the Civil War and the Anti-Japanese War (n=2). Veterans of the earlier conflicts have either passed away or are becoming too old to engage in politics; when they make contact with the authorities, it is usually through relatives claiming benefits on their behalf. Vietnam veterans, by contrast, tend to be 50-70 years old, depending on whether they fought against the United States in the 1960s, Vietnam in 1979, or served during the 1984-86 Laoshan battles. Many of those in their mid-50s are in an especially vulnerable position given the downsizing of China’s state-owned enterprises and prospects for a lengthy retirement. The older among them are long-retired, no longer dependent on a work unit, and available to participate in contention. Vietnam veterans, in short, often have the time and the motive to become activists (Hurst and O’Brien, 2002; Michelson, 2012; Kuang and Göbel, 2013; Deng and O’Brien, 2014).

But there are other factors at work beyond inclination and opportunity, including who Vietnam veterans were before they were recruited, what happened during their service, and how they have been treated since they returned home. Unfortunately, there has been little

scholarship on the soldiers themselves (for example, their family lives, political views or attitudes about the military) (for this elsewhere, see Linderman, 1987, 1997). Nor do we know much about how their mobilization, training and battlefield experiences affected them. And despite a growing literature on the importance of war in Chinese history (for example, MacKinnon, Lary and Vogel, 2007), scholars have yet to examine how the state has positioned itself vis-a-vis veterans of *different* conflicts. Understanding the sources of veterans' activism, both material and symbolic, calls for a multi-dimensional approach that considers soldiers' background, military experience and post-war policy toward them.

As noted by the military historian Xiaoming Zhang (2005: 862), recruitment for the 1979 Vietnam war was haphazard, a "frantic, last minute effort." Led by the Guangzhou and Kunming Military Commands, and supported by four armies and a division from the Wuhan and Chengdu Military Regions, soldiers were recruited mainly from rural areas, and frequently joined because local officials promised them secure state jobs after the war ended. Once drafted, they were sent to training camps, where they learned the basics of soldiering, but little about coordinating with other units, providing effective cover, or maintaining communication between widely-dispersed forces. Operating in mountainous, jungle terrain with no air support, poorly-outfitted infantry were left vulnerable to enemy fire, leading to significant casualties. PRC sources put the number of Chinese deaths at roughly 7,000, with 14,800 wounded, while Western estimates go as high as 26,000 killed and 37,000 wounded—extraordinary numbers for a war that lasted less than a month (Zhang, 2005; Diamant, 2009: 364). Because of this embarrassingly high death toll, the PLA's poor performance, and political sensibilities surrounding China's relationship with its neighbors, the government is largely silent about the

1979 war, sponsoring little research on it and none of the large commemorations surrounding more successful wars, like the War of Resistance against Japan.

From the perspective of contemporary protests, the mobilization, conduct of the war, and state reluctance to embrace it have played a defining role in shaping the geography and sources of veterans' activism. First, although we do not have enough information to conduct a sophisticated quantitative analysis, it is probably not coincidental that a large proportion of people on the VoV site (57%) are from the South, Southwest and Central China (Table 2), the locations of the military commands responsible for prosecuting the war. Second, recruits were mostly farmers, and were expected to resettle in their home towns after they returned from the front. This policy, known as "native-place resettlement" (原籍安置), has been in place since the early 1950s and was frequently challenged by veterans since they often joined the army to escape their villages (Diamant, 2009: ch.2). Third, the 1979 war coincided with the onset of rural reform. While soldiers hoped that their service would be rewarded with a good job, which, among other things, would then help them get married, men who remained behind found ways to take advantage of new opportunities, and had a leg up in finding a wife.¹⁰ Finally, the high number of casualties in a mismanaged war meant that disabilities and other ailments were bound to become an important part of many veterans' post-war life.

Consider some cases reported on the VoV site as examples of how Vietnam veterans have fared and what they have sought from the authorities. Xu Kaisheng, from Lingao County, Hainan, joined the PLA in 1977 and the party two years later. According to his post, he was

¹⁰ In the early 1980s, veterans' marital woes played a part in a large riot in Guangdong (Weisskoff, 1981).

injured in the 1979 war and awarded “level-3 meritorious service” honors. He was among the fortunate soldiers who received a state job after his discharge. For twelve years, he worked at a grain bureau. In 1992, however, he was laid off and was forced to rely on state assistance. He remained unemployed for ten years, finally found a position, but then lost it again when his company went private in 2007. Now, he said, he was “old, infirm, wounded, disabled and often ill” but lacked medical insurance to pay for his injections and drugs. This, in his view, was a violation of the “preferential benefit regulations for veterans” (军人抚恤优待条例). So, he began protesting. Together with Wang Shaoxiong, another veteran, he repeatedly visited the county leadership compound. Soon Xu and Wang found themselves targets of an investigation: their “lawful and normal petitioning” had become “opposing the government and party.” Their case was bumped up the administrative hierarchy and a provincial State Security officer was dispatched to help the county handle it. This official sent Xu and Wang to the county jail. He charged them with crimes ranging from financial fraud to “illegally occupying an official post” to disturbing public order.

This list of offenses was not coincidental. Security officials had been gathering information about their activities for years, which they used to tie them up in legal knots. “Fraud” referred to their efforts to set up a “Service Center for Disabled Veterans.” “Occupying an official post” referred to a 2009 incident in which Xu and Wang submitted a petition at the Central Military Commission (upon arrival they were arrested by Hainan officials, sent back to Lingao, and detained for 24 days). When Xu cited violations of policies designed to protect veterans, the State Security officer said: “We don’t care about enforcement of disabled veteran policy; you having gone to war has nothing to do with us.” The police compiled a case against

him and sent it to the county procurator. The procurator, however, did not authorize his arrest owing to insufficient evidence. Instead, the county public security bureau placed him under surveillance. Xu eventually escaped, and was, at the time of his posting, a fugitive in Beijing, making ends meet by begging (VoV, 2013c).

We do not have enough information to determine how many Vietnam veterans pursue individual solutions and how many assemble in larger numbers to press their claims. On the VoV site, only 6% of the 185 blogs that indicated the type of activism noted participation in a public demonstration, which is understandable given the risk of being arrested or beaten. When group action occurs, however, it tends to be dramatic and awkward for officials who not only are responsible for “stability maintenance,” but also love to crow about how they cherish the PLA and “look after” (照顾) demobilized soldiers.

To pull off collective action, protest leaders need compelling stories and images that stir fellow veterans into action and embarrass the authorities. In Gansu, for instance, photos of a group of roughly 50 veterans of the Laoshan conflict show men wearing their uniforms and medals carrying placards with socialist and livelihood-based slogans: “Long Live the Spirit of Laoshan! Long Live the Communist Party! We want work; we want to eat; we want to provide for our elders; we want to raise our children” (VoV, 2013d). In 2009, on the 30th anniversary of the war’s start, about 1,000 veterans from Yunnan organized a procession in Kunming to commemorate China’s “victory.” Singing military songs and holding banners that said “Long Live Chairman Mao,” as well as ones wishing a long life to the working class, army and party, they complained that it was unfair that many people were prospering and government salaries went up and up, but the “loyal protectors of China remain poor” (VoV, 2013e).

At the root of these claims lay two grievances: inadequate material assistance and the lack of respect for wartime service. Of the material grievances, complaints about “preferential treatment” (优待) stand out.¹¹ In July 2012 more than 500 Vietnam veterans from several Guangdong counties staged a rally inside Guangzhou’s Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall to demand preferential treatment they had been promised. According to national regulations, they told a Hong Kong reporter, their benefits should cover “average local living costs,” but they could not even afford school fees or medical expenses. Lined up in tidy rows of 25, they waved red flags and giant white banners, hoping that they could generate enough publicity to snag a meeting with Guangdong’s governor. The veterans underscored the gap between their contribution and their meager incomes: “We defended our nation and the dignity of our border 33 years ago against Vietnam, but today I can’t even feed my family with a 510 yuan (US\$82) monthly allowance.” This rally, which occurred amid heightened police surveillance prior to a Party Congress, failed to achieve its ends: the governor refused to see them, and a scuffle with police resulted in “at least one veteran being taken away by ambulance” (Lau, 2012).

Not all veterans can take advantage of Hong Kong-based reporters working in nearby Guangdong. Many other veterans have taken to the web to complain about paltry pensions and how little their sacrifices are appreciated. In a 2011 post on the “Anonymous Hero” microblog, “old soldiers” from Chongqing wrote an open letter to the Central Committee and State Council. Identifying themselves as “survivors” who “shed blood and sacrificed” for the country, the

¹¹ These payments are separate from regular pensions, which accrue from urban employment, not military service. The term “pension” is often used as a catch-all term for both types of payments.

veterans asked, “Is participation in war a special contribution or not?” They were particularly incensed because years of petitioning had resulted only in violence at the hands of officials, and because the government frequently bragged about its wealth, but failed to meet their requests for even modest increases in “special treatment” compensation. In their minds, poverty and abuse by local officials were both linked to veterans’ low political status (Xinlang Boke, 2012).

In most protests, claims touch on both the material and the symbolic. In Qingdao, for example, a group of veterans wrote the mayor and asked for more medical insurance, the right to retire early, and cost of living increases, and then added a plea for “dignity,” “the restoration of the voice of Vietnam veterans,” and an end to humiliating phone-tapping. They also asked the state to subsidize travel by “martyrs’ families” to distant cemeteries for grave-sweeping and demanded that the government allow veterans “to go together to Guangxi and Yunnan, or, at least, to congregate locally at a martyrs’ shrine to commemorate the fallen.” They further requested permission to turn every February 17th into a memorial day for the war—not for everyone, but just to be celebrated by veterans (VoV, 2013f). This was not granted, but they still arranged private commemorations. As one man told a reporter, “I will call my old comrades-in-arms to meet for dinner and a drink, and recall the old days” (Zhai, 2009).

Shared grievances bring Vietnam veterans together, and so does ham-fisted repression. Like their counterparts around the world, veterans in Beiliu City, Guangxi, enjoy spending time in each other’s company, discussing old times and common complaints. On once such occasion in 2011, township officials, fearing that their schmoozing was a prelude to a collective petition, quickly mobilized and arrested the presumed ringleaders. While doing so, a scuffle broke out. Several of the veterans were injured when they were shoved into a police van.

After this, a quasi-legal veterans' organization, the Beiliu "Comrade-in-Arm's Society" (战友会), stepped into action. They filed a lawsuit against township authorities under provisions of the Administrative Litigation Law. Then they convinced Mou Guangyu, a local lawyer who was a Vietnam veteran, to represent them. The Beiliu court, however, refused to accept the case, arguing that it did not "satisfy the criteria for litigation."¹² Mou appealed to the Yulin City Intermediate Court, which surprisingly ordered the Beiliu court to take the case. By this time, veterans' websites were overflowing with commentary about the lawsuit and support for the plaintiffs. A photograph shows middle-aged and elderly veterans lined in rows of three, fifteen deep, marching to the hearing, with one man wearing a sign saying "Representative of the old war veterans." An entry on the Military Spirit website noted that the trial was short, but attended by "a thousand people from many cities." At the trial's close, netizens following the case were optimistic that the security officers who roughed up the veterans would be held accountable.

Five months later, bloggers on Military Spirit posted an update. Waving banners, more than a thousand people, including Vietnam and Korean War soldiers, retirees from the nuclear power industry and uranium mining units, as well as representatives of martyrs' and military families had congregated in front of the courthouse and had chosen sixty people to hear the verdict. The news was not good: the court ruled that the plaintiffs had not demonstrated a direct connection between the defendants and their injuries. This was expected—the plaintiffs did not have witnesses or physical evidence. The veterans nonetheless decided to appeal to the

¹² On implementation of the Administrative Litigation Law and criteria for accepting cases, see Pei (1997), O'Brien and Li (2004), and Ang (2005). On accepting other types of cases, see He (2007) and Stern (2013).

Yulin Intermediate Court and filed a report with the political department of the Guangzhou Military Region “asking for a representative to attend the hearing with them.” If this request was ignored, the veterans vowed “to carry Liang to Beijing and let the central government decide” (VoV, 2013g). The trail of the case ended there (MS, 2011a,b,c; Beiliushi renmin fayuan, 2011).

Contention by Vietnam veterans often begins with requests for financial aid, recognition, and rudimentary organization grounded in wartime experience or shared grievances, but the security apparatus, by using household investigations, preventative detention and other intrusive tactics (Gong’an bu bianfang guanli ju, 2012; Radio Free Asia, 2013), can cause it to escalate into much more. This reaction might appear excessive given the protesters’ advanced age and generally peaceful tactics, but disillusioned Vietnam veterans do pose a threat to the party’s project of promoting spectacles of militarized patriotism based on successful wars suffused with male heroism (Lee, 2011). Their protests, lawsuits, open letters and blog postings serve up a counter-narrative to the state’s simplified, epic account of glorious wars presented in textbooks and the media. As we will see below, Vietnam veterans are not alone in challenging this tale of valiant, well-supported soldiers whose contributions have been acknowledged and lauded by a thankful state.

Nor are Vietnam veterans the only ones to recognize that military-related propaganda in China is distributed unevenly, with the lion’s share focused on active-duty soldiers (mostly in civilian operations like flood control and earthquake rescue) and revolutionary martyrs, who represent a symbolic link to the revolution. With the exception of disabled veterans commended on Army Day, ordinary veterans, from the Vietnam era or other times, are nearly

invisible as a group worthy of recognition and state benefits. For this reason, while soldiers and martyr's families have a role in the party's legitimation project, those whose valor and sacrifice took place in the past struggle to play even a bit part.

Men on the Civil-Military Border

Who is a veteran is not always obvious. In Vietnam, militias and "laborers" contributed to the war effort; in Beiliu, nuclear workers regarded themselves to be veterans. Even the Korean War was not formally fought by the PLA, but by a "volunteer" army. Since the late 1990s ever more people have been added to the security apparatus thanks to soaring budgets for the People's Armed Police and militias (Wang, 2006). Among the VoV posts, 10% were written by individuals on the edge of military service. Posters included militiamen, border guards, PLA "volunteers," "soldiers" of the People's Armed Police, railroad workers, engineers and anti-aircraft personnel who in the 1960s and 1970s worked secretly in Vietnam in PLA "logistics units," ordinary policemen, nuclear workers, firefighters, and forces that helped suppress the 2008 Tibetan unrest. Unlike Vietnam veterans, who are concentrated in southwest and central China, many of these claimants to veteran status are scattered around the country. Like Vietnam veterans, their grievances focus on health problems and poverty (often poverty resulting from health problems) and they also feel unappreciated and forgotten. Their unclear status, however, makes their situation more challenging and diminishes the potential for concerted action with "true" veterans." Though some of them join Vietnam veterans in lawsuits and other contention, the two groups still compete for recognition and benefits. The

government actively enhances this divide by having different policies for veterans and these near-veterans.

Take, for instance, former employees of Unit 8023, a detachment responsible for conducting atomic tests at the Lop Nur Test Base in Xinjiang. According to a Japanese physicist, the PRC carried out 46 surface-level nuclear tests between 1964 and 1996, resulting in 190,000 deaths nearby (Das, 2013). While we cannot speak to the accuracy of these numbers, it is a fact that many tests occurred and attention to safety in high-risk enterprises in China is spotty. What happened and its effect on the men involved have been filled in by Unit 8023 personnel in petitions and letters, many of which focus on disabilities resulting from radiation exposure (such as using bare hands to pick up radioactive waste and riding horses toward a mushroom cloud protected only by a gas mask). One 8023 retiree reports that he served for 23 years and his job was to enter the blast zone to retrieve monitoring equipment. His daughter, he notes, “was born with a huge tumor on her spinal cord,” has required medical care her entire life, and “all we get from the government is 130 yuan/month” (Das, 2013).

Judging by their posts, many of these men are too weak to engage in forceful activism, such as the riots some younger veterans have instigated. Instead, open letters, petitions, and lawsuits are the main means they employ to appeal for assistance. In 2011, a letter to central authorities, composed by a large group of former nuclear workers, was uploaded to VoV (VoV 2012a). According to its authors, publicity about the Fukushima meltdown prompted their effort to “protect our rights.” Their health problems, however, had been a concern for many years. In the 1980s, they had learned from an internal PLA “safety publication” (防护材料) that radiation causes damage to a person’s cell structure and function that “can last a lifetime.”

Later—the letter is not clear when—they began petitioning to alleviate their “medical and livelihood problems.”

Perhaps because they were confused about who was responsible or maybe to spread their bets, the nuclear workers went to three offices in Beijing—the State Council Letters and Visits Office, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, and the Letters and Visits Department of the Central Military Commission. Since they were ineligible to be designated “disabled soldiers” (残废军人) or workers who suffered a workplace accident, their demands focused on prodding the Center to create a special unit to determine their disability status, which they hoped would lead to more benefits and compensation. Echoing the “they get more!” rhetoric of Vietnam veterans, they argued that “we shouldn’t get the same benefits as people who were in battle, served on nuclear submarines or in the Second Artillery Corps; ours should be higher” because our medical problems were more extensive, last a lifetime and affect multiple generations. In a separate missive to Wen Jiabao and Hu Jintao, they combined patriotic appeals (“we have no regrets,” we feel “proud” and “glorious”; nuclear weapons “deterred enemies”) with complaints about how their work had hurt them and their families (we “are dead and scattered,” “have high medical expenses” and “wander about homeless”). Medical expenses were bankrupting them, they pointed out, because even the most generous provinces covered only 80% of expenses. They blamed this gap on lack of enforcement of a State Council decision, which supposedly promised them full reimbursement. The Human Resources and Social Security Ministry, they noted, steadfastly refused to classify them as “workers subject to harm and toxicity” (有毒有害). Since they were also not covered as disabled PLA soldiers, they found themselves stranded in a bureaucratic no-man’s land.

Because medical and other benefits can hinge on state-assigned categories, former nuclear personnel and other claimants to veteran status sometimes challenge their designation. During December 2010, a group of nuclear workers sued a district Civil Affairs Bureau in Shenzhen for cancelling their right to preferential treatment. Civil Affairs officials argued that their status was revoked because they were already entitled to pensions, whereas the nuclear retirees claimed this decision violated a 2007 document that guaranteed them 100 yuan/month (US\$13) in aid and official classification as disabled veterans.¹³

News of this case spread on the web. About 500 men—most of them retired or unemployed—descended on the court. The State Security and the Public Security Bureaus counter-mobilized and surrounded the building; they also only permitted ten representatives to witness the proceedings. In court, the nuclear workers, unrepresented by a lawyer, appealed to the court's sense of justice and patriotism. They were furious that low-level officials refused to implement national policy, and called them "old things" (老东西). They asked the court to listen to a "vulnerable group on their last train" (in reference to their advanced age and poor health). Because of their long service, subsequent unemployment (all had been laid-off by a privatized state enterprise) and ill health (they reported various cancers and strokes), they had "never shared in the achievements of reform and opening up, never experienced the superiority of socialism or benefited from letting some people get rich quick; later we will share a common prosperity." China's GDP, they noted, "is among the highest in the world" and the state "provides billions each year to reduce poverty," so are "we, the heroes of defending the

¹³ In fact, this subsidy was only approved for nuclear veterans with chronic illnesses who lacked work units and who were not already receiving assistance owing to disability or poverty (Zhongxuanfa No. 9, 2013).

homeland, not worth helping?” According to the Military Spirit bulletin board, the court, in exchange for withdrawal of the lawsuit, agreed to mediate the dispute. In the end it ordered the Civil Affairs bureau to restore their status and benefits and compensate them for printing, transportation and emotional distress. Civil Affairs staff acknowledged their right to receive 100 yuan/month (US\$16), but refused to provide any other compensation. When the veterans called the court’s settlement office, the official replied that they had not received any paperwork from the judge; two weeks later they phoned again, only to discover that the original offending document was revoked, but no money would be offered, now or in the future (VoV, 2012b).

On top of bureaucratic obstacles, people who served in conflicts or units with ambiguous military status also face neglect. In 2010, 350 people from Taoyuan county in Hunan who participated in China’s secret military assistance to Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 posted an open letter requesting financial assistance, and also official recognition as war veterans. Like other claimants to veteran status, they stressed disability and death (“over 5,000 dead and injured”) as well as unique hardship, noting that the conditions they endured (a “forbidding environment,” “American aerial attacks,” and “terrible climate”) were even worse than those experienced by soldiers in the Sino-Indian conflict, the shelling of Jinmen Island, the suppression of Tibetan riots, the 1979 Vietnam War and the 1969 Zhenbao Island clash with the Soviet Union. Even though their service was a now a “public secret,” they complained, the government refused to admit its existence, explain its significance, or conduct any propaganda about it (VoV, 2013h).

Even those who obtain veteran status, sometimes lose it. A letter written by fourteen retirees from the Xinjiang Construction Corps (most were in the PLA in the early 1960s and were demobilized in 1964-65) (Shichor, 2006) charged that they lost all their benefits when, in 1996-97, corps leaders downgraded their job status to a “special production work” unit and altered their accumulated work years. These actions pushed them into early retirement and cut their pensions. A corps member who was the branch party secretary found himself reclassified as a brick layer; another who served as the factory director and party secretary was transformed into a concrete worker. Fearing an old age in poverty, the men requested assistance from Beijing, citing violations of their “human rights” and “right to know” (知情权), as well as official documents, including Ministry of Labor Circular #8 (1999), Human Resources and Social Security Department Notice #62 (2010), and “Administrative Order #107” (1997) (VoV, 2012c).

Veterans of China’s “Railways Corps 7th Division (Unit 89207) found themselves in a situation similar to Unit 8023, 1960s Vietnam veterans, and the Xinjiang Construction Corps, but with additional problems owing to their rural residency. In accord with the native place resettlement policy, they were sent home after their service. Writing from Hunan and Guiyang, 221 “old soldiers” from the 1970s stressed their revolutionary credentials—we “worked in the middle of the night on the Chengdu-Kunming Line, the West Hubei Line and the Qinghai-Tibet Line. . . . Without enough oxygen we risked our lives for the Party and the people.” Now, they said, “because of the terrible working conditions our bodies are weak,” and their medical expenses were mounting because they were “old men” who could no longer perform agricultural labor. Like other claimants, they also cited China’s wealth: China was no longer

poor and could afford to give them money; their comrades in cities, after all, had pensions linked to their positions, and civil servants had seen salary increases. These railway workers had been petitioning since January 2008, but Civil Affairs “goes through the motions and doesn’t solve the problems of ‘retired old soldiers’: when you petition they use every part of their power to hold you back and organize hooligans and riffraff to suppress you.” Similar to others who combine ethical and legal claims, they evoked “the right to survive” (生存权), “compensation for extra time served,” and benefits provided “in the regulations of the Labor Law” (VoV, 2012d). Whether these efforts bore fruit is unclear. The online trail for the case ends in 2011.

Higher-Ranking Veterans

In our materials, the most vocal, organized, and legally literate veterans are officers whose life circumstances have deteriorated since the 1990s. After demobilization, they were sent to industrial enterprises as “military-transfer cadres” (军转干部)¹⁴ but they lost these positions and their benefits when their factories were restructured. This group includes some Vietnam war veterans (X. Chen 2012: 150-51), but they are in the minority. While many veterans complain about the loss of status, these former officers vigorously engage the state to reclaim their standing as retired military cadres.

The thrust of the claims and the resources they bring to contention also differ from other veterans. They downplay issues such as commemoration or travel to burial grounds and are better positioned to contest poor treatment and policy violations. Most are younger, in better

¹⁴ Sometimes they are referred to as “state enterprise cadres” (国家企业干部).

health and have insider knowledge about how the government operates. What led them into opposition was mainly bad luck: they were sent to factories which were later downsized rather than to administrative positions, which generally were not. Owing to their numbers, frustration and political knowledge, they are seen to be a threat to “stability.”

Over the last decade, disgruntled military-transfer cadres have made their presence felt. In Beijing in 2005, an eyewitness reported that “about 2,000 retired members of the PLA, wearing their old uniforms, gathered outside the PLA’s General Political Department.” Representing 20 provinces, the demonstrators were “mostly officers, including former division commanders.” Always orderly, they sat quietly in rows to “express grievances about pension benefits and post-retirement jobs.” As the journalist noted, “the decline of the state-enterprise system means that management jobs for former officers are scarce” (McDonald, 2005). In January 2009 over 1,000 military transfer-veterans, claiming that their wages were “not fair,” broke into the Shaanxi provincial government compound and demanded to meet the governor. In July that year, several hundred men from Shandong launched a petition drive in Beijing. One protester explained that their main complaint was that enterprises and local officials had violated central policy by “changing their cadre status.” Moreover, efforts to reverse this had been ignored: “the Center sends down documents . . . but nothing is done” (Radio Free Asia, 2009).

Military-transfer cadres also take advantage of anniversaries and official tributes.¹⁵ During the hoopla in 2007 surrounding the 80th Anniversary of the PLA’s founding, they were especially active. In the month prior to the celebration, mass protests broke out in Beijing,

¹⁵ Security officials are aware of veterans’ penchant for exploiting anniversaries, especially August 1st (Army Day) and July 1st, the date the CCP was founded (Chen, 2011).

Guangdong and Shandong, including one in Yantai “involving as many as 2,000 decommissioned officers” (Ng and Chan, 2007).

Officers transferred to factories use the web to try to shame the state into restoring their cadre status. The Yantai veterans wrote an online open letter to seventeen PLA generals pleading for help at the 2008 session of the National People’s Congress (Radio Free Asia, 2007). In Shanghai, 18,000 men, mostly in their 70s, composed an open letter to Yu Zhengsheng, the city’s party secretary, explaining why they deserved more than other veterans—a one upmanship we have seen with other groups. In contrast to other veterans, they stressed their contribution to “construction” and reform after departing the military, and said they could not wait for medical benefits (VoV, 2012e). In 2010, a group claiming to represent 20,000 former officers in Zhejiang posted an open letter charging that one-fourth of all post-1949 officers “had their rights expropriated,” tracing this to the 1990s, when industrial reforms took off.¹⁶ In 2011, 23,000 men in Yunnan composed a mocking “congratulatory message” (献词) for the party’s 90th Anniversary. Following effusive praise, they called the party “imperious and despotic” and a “class of bigwigs” (权贵阶级). Military-transfer cadres, they noted, were “victims of the reforms,” reduced to the level of factory sanitation workers and treated like “beggars.” Claiming they could not afford to “live, get sick or die” (活不起, 病不起, 死不起), they compared their situation to “the cold palace,” where disfavored imperial concubines were banished (VoV, 2012f). In January 2012, over 18,000 former officers from Chongqing penned a detailed letter explaining why a 1993 document (#78) issued by the Ministry of Labor and

¹⁶ This document was at http://www.thegreatwall.com.cn/public/index.php?C_ID=33835&B_ID=11174&action=C_edit, but is no longer accessible.

Personnel that “deprived them of their cadre status” contradicted the Constitution and other laws, and was not authorized by the National People’s Congress (Jiyu Shencha, 2013).¹⁷

Military-transfer cadres also use mock class action lawsuits to draw attention to their situation. Over 162,000 of them from all over China “sued” the Minister of Labor and Personnel for “violating administrative law” and the “rights of veterans who were assigned to enterprises.” Overlaying demands to restore their lost status with the language of “rightful resisters” (O’Brien and Li, 2006), they cited various laws, including the Administrative Litigation Law (Article II, Clauses 11, 5, 8), the Military Service Law (Article 2), the Officers’ Law, the “General Rules of Civil Law” (民法通则) (Article 75, Section 2), and the National Defense Law (Article 61). Their demands were specific: “restore our status and the benefits we deserve” and provide compensation. The bulk of the lawsuit, however, focused on questions of dignity. The officers were upset when the authorities responded to “lawful petitioning” by branding them an “illegal organization” that “incited” and “colluded with foreign hostile forces,” and attributed their protest to “a minority with ulterior motives.” The Ministry, they argued, “goes its own way,” ignoring national veterans’ policy, while “blaming reform for problems, not bad policies” (VoV, 2012g). In 2010, representatives of 6,823 military-transfer cadres filed an administrative lawsuit with the Hubei Supreme Court. As they expected, the court rejected it. Three court officials explained: “We all understand the problem, but we can only accept a concrete not an abstract violation of administrative behavior. . . .We cannot pass judgment on party policies;

¹⁷ The authors of the letter claimed that their pensions were calculated according to years of employment instead of military rank. This resulted in salaries similar to those of low-level contract workers. The Ministry of Personnel drew the ire of veterans throughout the 1950s and 1960s as well, and factories reduced veterans’ wages using similar tactics (Diamant, 2009).

China is not the same as foreign countries that have a tripartite power structure with a constitutional court” (VoV, 2012h).

Not all is bleak, however. In one VoV case, a former Air Force engineer named Yao Guangde petitioned from 1997-2007 and ended up satisfied with the result. The party, he wrote, “did not forget our contributions.” He was neither harassed nor arrested, policy violations were corrected, and he received all the money he requested. Yao’s success, however, was not due to having the law on his side, but rather the intervention of Guo Baixiong, the Deputy Chair of the Central Military Commission, who instructed his subordinates that Yao’s problems “must be resolved soon.” The clincher, it appears, was that Guo threatened “to fire all the main officers of Yao’s division” if Yao’s petitioning did not stop in 2007 (VoV, 2013i). There are likely many other individuals, particularly the educated and retirees from high status units like the Air Force, whose problems are solved through non-institutional means.¹⁸

But few officers have access to influential allies and failure is far more common. Even veterans who appeal to the commanding officer of their former units and gain media attention have not enjoyed much success. In a 2011 action by over three dozen retired officers in Lanzhou, for example, the protesters hoped to meet a top general. At 9 am on May 12th, they gathered at the main gate of the PLA’s regional headquarters and unfurled a banner “strongly requesting the restoration of veteran officers’ cadre status.” Two hours later they were persuaded to pack up their banner and go to a conference room at the Kunlun Hotel. But instead of meeting with the commanding officer, they found themselves seated next to representatives from the Letters and Visit Office, Civil Affairs Bureau, and Housing Bureau. The

¹⁸ It is probably not coincidental that only one Air Force veteran appears on the VoV site.

veterans were incensed that the head of the Military Region refused to meet them, and that the General Political Department of the Central Military Commission did not respond to their demands. Nor did media interest make any difference. That morning the Gansu branch of Xinhua News Agency dispatched a reporter to interview the officers, but after a brief conversation, he was led away by the director of the municipal public security bureau and several policemen (VoV, 2012i).

Handling Veterans' Contention

Veterans who engage in political action often face state reprisal. Even though the new century began with much discussion of inequality and social justice, veterans who agitate for recognition, status, or preferential treatment have confronted a leadership fixated on “harmony” (和谐) and willing to devote virtually unlimited funds to stability maintenance. Using tactics familiar from the Maoist era, and newer ones, too, the authorities combine a certain tolerance for complaining and small-scale gatherings with both “soft” and “hard” repression (see Table 4). Receptiveness one day can be followed by harassment and arrests the next.

Three ways to thwart interest group formation stand out: controlled polarization (for this prior to 1949, see Chen, 1986), limited concessions, and mobilizing security forces. Veterans have sought to set up fraternal organizations since the Maoist era (Diamant, 2009). And just as they have with other groups, the authorities have fostered conflict among similarly-situated people to prevent the creation of a “united front” (统一战线). With veterans, the government has always used job assignments and status differences to divide them. Given the

millions of soldiers demobilized since the 1980s (Diamant, 2009: 357-58) and the scarcity of state jobs, providing employment to some while leaving most to fend for themselves separates people who otherwise share common interests. When veterans do secure jobs—often in the Public Security Bureau or People’s Armed Police—they may also find themselves assigned to crack down on their former comrades.

Rules and regulations are also used to sow jealousy and turn veterans against each other. Rather than having a single statute that lays out a set of benefits for all veterans, the leadership uses a confusing and constantly changing patchwork of laws, regulations, executive notices, decisions, and temporary measures to parcel out more benefits to one group and fewer (or none) to others. These measures often differentiate between veterans on the basis of period of service, unit, war, or status at the time of recruitment (volunteer or draftee, for example) (VoV, 2013j).¹⁹ This is a prescription for envy and resentment.

When controlled polarization fails to head off contention, the authorities sometimes placate disgruntled veterans by doling out material inducements. For example, in Yan’an, Shaanxi, stability maintenance authorities were alarmed by a rash of petitioning by poor Vietnam and Laoshan veterans that broke out in 2005. So, they established a “leading small group” to consider the soldiers’ grievances. After officials from the Civil Affairs and Letters and Visits bureaus “convinced them to return home,” work teams were dispatched to get to the “root” of their problems, since this was the only way to prevent further petitioning (Zhang and

¹⁹ Veterans’ posts on the VoV site refer to over 60 different policies, laws, “explanations” and regulations, as well as “the spirit” of various documents. The record is held by a veteran in Wuhan who compiled a list of more than 30 different documents and official letters.

Han, 2005).²⁰ More broadly, in 2007 the central government instructed localities to increase payments for elderly or ill rural veterans by 30-50 yuan (US\$ 4-6) per month and to give those who were disabled a 30% hike (Zhongxuanfa No. 9, 2013). This transpired just before Army Day, reflecting the state's sensitivity to symbolic dates. That the Yan'an contention took place in a celebrated revolutionary base area also gave it special purchase on the leadership's attention.

Controlled polarization and concessions represent the softer side of China's stability maintenance program. But should these fail to prevent organizing or protest, the security apparatus stands at the ready. Roughly 17% of VoV posts report some form of hard repression such as surveillance, phone tapping, beatings, detentions (in jails and mental institutions), or forced education (See Table 4). In Hainan, for example, an online document posted in 2012 by the Haikou municipal government described a meeting (with attendees from Civil Affairs, Letters and Visits, Stability Maintenance, and the Political-Legal Committee) devoted to monitoring veterans and men on the civil-military border who have "welfare and resettlement problems," demand "recognition for having participated in battle" or took part in the 1974 Xisha naval battle. When these people left Haikou to petition in Beijing during the National People's Congress session, officials were told to "track them down" and maintain "man-to-man coverage" (Haikou shi minzhengju, 2012).

The authorities also monitor veterans' online activities. One veteran reported that he had been "detained for 17 days just for mentioning plans to join the 90th Anniversary

²⁰ For an urban example, see Xuancheng ribao (2008). In 2010, the Zhanjiang Public Security Bureau, Guangdong claimed to have "solved 200 cases of economic difficulty" among 352 Vietnam War veterans after a three year campaign. Its investigation was prompted by over 16 collective petitioning runs to Beijing between 2005 and 2006 that "had a detrimental influence on social stability and gave local officials a headache" (Gong'an bu bianfang guanli ju, 2012).

celebrations [of the CCP] on July 1st online.” The police, he said, “had him under surveillance for highlighting inequalities and injustices in the treatment of veterans” (Radio Free Asia, 2011).

Stability maintenance is not, however, skin-tight. Veterans regularly arrive in Beijing, provincial capitals, regional military headquarters, county towns, and township offices demanding better benefits, compensation for land grabs, punishment of misconduct, faithful implementation of policies, the end of corruption, and much else. Does their “glorious” military service help them with security personnel? On the one hand, the VoV site includes many cases of veterans meeting with officials in government buildings and hotels; the authorities do listen and try to answer their questions, even if follow-through is frequently wanting. On the other hand, veterans’ posts suggest that particularly after the clampdown on petitioning in the mid-2000s, lodging complaints as a veteran can be just as harrowing as it is for an ordinary person.

Harsh treatment can be meted out to any veteran, regardless of wartime contribution or rank. Even war-related disability is not a guarantee of a softer touch when former soldiers threaten public order. In May 2010, thirty unemployed, disabled Sichuan veterans were waiting for a train to Beijing, where they planned to submit a petition. While in the ticketing area, they were roughed up by the party secretary of the Political-Legal Committee and men “who did not have clear identification.” They vented their frustrations on VoV (2013k), saying they had endured “ridicule,” “intimidation,” “threats” and “beatings.”

Senior officers often fare no better. In a 2010 open letter to Premier Wen Jiabao, a retired colonel complained that after he and 100 officers from a county near Changsha went to the State Council’s Letters and Visits Office, Changsha’s Beijing Office took him and another man to the Beijing Anyuanding Security Firm, where they remained in custody for three days.

During their detention they met senior officers from other provinces who had also been picked up by the Beijing office of their locale. Before they were sent home, the officers learned that Anyuanding, a multi-million dollar company with over 3,000 employees, had been hired by local governments to locate petitioners and escort them out of Beijing. Whether the people they “retrieved” (接访) had been ranking officers or anyone else did not appear to matter.

Despite their sometimes vigorous contention, veterans do not appear to be a threat to regime stability. Aside from their advancing age, the health problems many have militates against an aggressive stance toward the state. In addition, veterans tend to be politically conservative: their demands are mostly material or focus on ending corruption, which is also the Center’s stated policy. Divisions among veterans, some of which are exacerbated by the regime’s divide and rule tactics, further obstruct the formation of any sort of united front. Nor do veterans have powerful advocates in society who could help them overcome their internal splits.

Why then are the authorities so alarmed when former soldiers come together to protest? This fear is based more on misperception and irrational apprehension than a proven history of excessive violence or successful agitation. It is the case that veterans can be highly organized, but other social groups are, too. It is also the true that veterans are disciplined (and therefore more potent), but here again, this is hardly unique. Veterans have resorted to force, but so too have many others, often with much less cause. As far as we can tell without a peek at public security documents that lay out how to handle veterans’ activism, the only major difference, and probably a critical one in explaining the authorities’ hard line towards them, is their knowledge of weaponry. But this fear is also inflated. After all, only a minority of former

soldiers served in combat units, and many of those protesting now are elderly and ill—hardly Rambo-type figures.

Conclusion

Veterans in China sometimes petition, file lawsuits and protest on behalf of other groups. But more often they engage in activism with each other. This should not be surprising: former soldiers know each other well from years of service and similar, often life-threatening, experiences. Moreover, post-service efforts to win recognition, mourn the fallen, find jobs, secure health care and protect their status can enhance ties of comradeship and produce a sense of collective identity. Despite being dispersed, monitored, and forbidden to organize anything beyond small, self-help associations, shared problems and a determination to fix them have created some capacity for coordinated action.

But even as veterans act together and claim special treatment, they are far from a Weberian “status group”; there is no veterans’ movement. The three groups we have examined—Vietnam veterans, men on the civil-military border and military-transfer cadres—all make material demands, cite policies, and use the rhetoric of sacrifice and contribution, but their emphases vary and there is limited coordination among them. Vietnam veterans focus on compensation for disabilities and medical expenses as well as commemoration for fallen comrades; men on the civil-military border mostly fight for state recognition of their work; military-transfer veterans want the state to restore their cadre status. Then, of course, there are many other former soldiers engaged in lonely battles to get a job, defend their home from the wrecking ball, or collect a promised pension. Some of these efforts have dramatic

outcomes, such as a group suicide attempt involving 21 veterans employed by the Harbin Railway Bureau (Chen, 2013).

While some of this activism springs from reform-era policies—privatization of state-owned enterprises and land takings, for example—more of it can be traced to *pre-reform* politics. It was, after all, the Maoist state that assigned veterans state jobs, supported Vietnam in the 1960s, exploded nuclear weapons, required rural soldiers to return home and raised expectations by showering veterans with praise for their contributions. That one official in Guangdong responded to complaints from a fraternal association of Vietnam veterans by telling them that their employment and livelihood problems “were created by the previous government and are irrelevant to the current one,” is not entirely off the mark (VoV, 2013).

Beyond what it tells us about veterans’ problems, what they do about them and how the authorities respond, this study also casts light on civilian views of military service and why attracting new recruits is difficult. China’s urban youth, for example, seem quite aware of the political and economic status of former soldiers. A survey reported in *National Defense* magazine found that knowledge of veterans’ difficulties was one of the causes for tepid interest in a military career. In addition to material concerns such as “financial loss,” “insufficient special benefits” and “poor compensation,” young people worried that upon discharge “getting a job is very hard.” Fewer than 5% of 10,000 draft age youth questioned said that they “might consider” (可以考虑) joining the army (Liu, Can, and Ma, 2011).

Finally, this analysis makes it clear that the military’s role in local politics is easily overstated. Veterans’ blogposts and the public security press provide little indication that the PLA has served as a counterweight to the stability maintenance apparatus or can intervene with

local authorities to resolve most of the problems veterans face. Former soldiers who file petitions and lawsuits or who engage in non-violent contention are often subject to harassment and arrest, and have limited avenues to pursue redress. The Ministry of Civil Affairs, which is responsible for re-settling veterans, is one of the most overextended organizations in China. In the absence of effective bureaucratic support, organization, media coverage, allies in society and ready access to the courts, most complaints by former soldiers go unaddressed. Veterans may at times exaggerate their hardships, but they remain a marginalized and isolated group. As one scholar at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences put it: “No one hears them.”

TABLES

TABLE 1: PROVINCIAL REPRESENTATION OF BLOG POSTS

Province	Cases
Anhui	2
Beijing	2
Chongqing	4
Fujian	2
Gansu	5
Guangdong	17
Guangxi	4
Guizhou	3
Hainan	5
Hebei	11
Heilongjiang	2
Henan	22
Hubei	10
Hunan	17
Jiangsu	15
Jiangxi	9
Liaoning	6
Shaanxi	3

Shanxi	3
Shandong	14
Shanghai	2
Sichuan	13
Tianjin	1
Tibet	1
Xinjiang	4
Yunnan	4
Zhejiang	5
Total	186

TABLE 2: REGIONAL REPRESENTATION OF BLOG POSTS

Region	Cases
North	14
Northwest	16
Northeast	8
East	42
Central	58
South	24
Southwest	24
Total	186

*North includes Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei; Northwest includes Shaanxi, Shanxi, Gansu, Tibet, Xinjiang; Northeast: Heilongjiang, and Liaoning; Central: Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi; East: Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Shandong, and Fujian; South: Guangdong, Guangxi and Hainan; Southwest: Chongqing, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou.

TABLE 3: FORMS OF PROTEST

Form of Protest	Cases
Public demonstration	11
Public demonstration + petitioning	2
Petitioning	36
Petitioning + web post	8
Petition + lawsuit + web post	15
Petition + “report” (反映)	1
Petition + letter	1

Lawsuit (including mock indictments)	10
Lawsuit + newspaper + petition	3
Lawsuit + open letter	1
Petition + newspaper + people's congress appeal	2
Publishing an open letter (to public, officials)	23
Filing a report	18
Blog post/submitting case to a website	32
Web post + contacting a newspaper	3
Contact journalist/newspaper	9
Letter to PLA/senior officials	7
Writing on the street	1
Publishing a suicide letter	1*
Letter to law professor	1
	=185**

*There was a protest of hundreds of veterans nation-wide as a result of this post

** Ten cases did not indicate a course of action

TABLE 4: STATE HANDLING OF VETERANS' ACTIVISM

Method	Cases	%
Avoidance	94	54
Repression*	30	17
Denial**	27	15
Mixed	10	6
Positive***		
Accede to Request	9	5
	170	98#

*Refers to threats, detention, beating, intercepting petitioners, kidnapping, hunting down protesters, denying rights (such as voting).

** Includes refusing requests for payment, compensation, investigation, or transparency. Administrative agencies include public security bureaus, courts, state-owned enterprises, and labor arbitration committees. Also includes registering a case but then refusing to hear it.

*** Higher-level approves request but local authorities refuse to enforce it.

#Other methods include: central government sending cases back to local authorities (2); negotiation (1); a court accepting a case but no reference to the outcome (2).

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