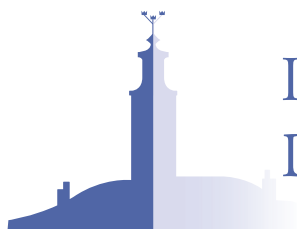


# The PLA and Student Recruits: Reforming China's Conscription System

Wang Shumei

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# **The PLA and Student Recruits: Reforming China's Conscription System**

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## Executive Summary

China's conscription system has come into focus in recent years amidst changes in the regulations governing the enlistment of college student recruits into the country's military forces. This paper accordingly examines the content of these changes, the reasons behind them, and their implications.

In 2001, in accordance with the amended Regulations on Conscription Work, the People's Liberation Army began to enlist college students with 2,000 students being conscripted that year. Since then, the number has grown significantly to a yearly intake of nearly 150,000 in 2014.

In 2011 a major amendment to the Military Service Law was made, which removed the article stating that full-time students could defer their military service, and raised the maximum age for recruitment to 24 years old. Moreover, in order to further attract students, a system of preferential treatment is employed, according to which college student conscripts have their tuition fees paid for, among other benefits. The standards and measures for enlistment have also been adjusted, which include changing the physical examination criteria and also adjusting the timing of the conscription intake to coincide with graduation time.

This paper argues that the driving force behind the change in the system is that the enlistment of college students is urgently needed to rapidly advance the modernization of China's national defense and the armed forces. According to the strategic objective of adapting to conditions of informationization and informationized warfare, increased demands are placed on the quality of personnel and the need for better-educated conscripts. While this need represents the primary driver behind efforts to recruit more students, other factors include the difficult labor market for graduates as well as the increase in the proportion of college students within a declining population of those of enlistment age.

In sum, it is argued that the growing enlistment of college students benefits not only the Chinese armed forces, but also student recruits and the nation of China as a whole. Looking to the future, it is predicted that highly-educated college students will become an increasingly significant cohort within the PLA, playing an important role as it modernizes and adapts to the dictates of warfare in the twenty-first century.

# Reform of China's Conscription System

During the Warring States Period between 475 and 221 BC, the Chinese military strategist Sun Bin once said, "Whether you could win a war depends on conscription."<sup>1</sup> Conscription is essential since it provides the necessary human resources for the building of the armed forces. More than two thousand years later, conscription is as important as ever as China modernizes its military forces and seeks to draft more educated personnel into its ranks.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) began to enlist college students in 2001 in accordance with the amended Regulations on Conscription Work (2001 年《征兵工作条例》). Thereafter, the number of college student recruits has been gradually increasing in line with changes in the legal regulations governing the enlistment of students from formal institutes of higher education into the PLA and the Armed Police Force for active service. The law has experienced two major amendments: the first one, from the *deferment* of military service to the *possibility* of being recruited; the second one, from the *possibility* of being recruited to the *obligation* of military service.

## From Deferment to Obligation

The Military Service Law of 1998 stated that "the enlistment of a citizen eligible for enlistment may be deferred if he is a student in a full-time school."<sup>2</sup> This regulation excluded college students at full-time regular institutions of higher education from being enlisted. Article 12 of the 1998 Military Service Law ruled that each year, male citizens who have reached 18 years of age by December 31 shall be enlisted for active service. Those who are not enlisted during the year shall remain eligible for active service until they are 22.<sup>3</sup> Since, however, it is customary for students to stay at college between the ages of 18 to 22, they would thus still be exempted after graduation as they would exceed the age limit.

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Bin's *Art of War* is a classic work on military strategy.

<sup>2</sup> 1998 年《中华人民共和国兵役法》规定：“应征公民是……正在全日制学校就学的学生，可以缓征 (Article 15, Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China, 1998. 1998 年《中华人民共和国兵役法》第 12 条。



The regulation of deferring the enlistment of college students reduced the number of well-educated youths eligible for military service. Consequently in 2001, according to the Regulations on Conscription Work, China abandoned deferment and introduced the following regulation: "for the students of full-time institutions of higher education, if one is enlisted voluntarily and eligible for enlistment, he can be approved for active service. The college where he stays should retain his name on the school roll and allow him to resume his studies after leaving the military."<sup>4</sup> This enabled the transition from the deferment of military service to the possibility of being recruited.

While the Regulations on Conscription Work ruled that college students were available for enlistment, the Military Service Law still insisted that college students could in practice defer their military service. By force of law, the Regulations on Conscription Work, which regulates the enlistment of citizens for active service, is subordinate to the Military Service Law. In order to solve this conflict of law and enlist more well-educated soldiers, China made a major amendment to its 1998 Military Service Law in 2011, which removed the article stating that full-time students could defer their military service, and raised the maximum age for recruitment to 24 years old.

In so doing, the 2011 Military Service Law in China stipulates that: "All citizens of the People's Republic of China, regardless of ethnic status, race, occupation, family background, religious belief and education, have the obligation to perform military service according to the provisions of this Law."<sup>5</sup> The duration of service is two years. China has thus laid the legal foundation for conscripting college students into the armed forces. It should be noted, however, that there is no need for all youths reaching the age of enlistment to join the armed forces, as potential supply exceeds demand. While obligatory by law, in practice the system is rather a selective one.

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<sup>4</sup> 2001年《征兵工作条例》第25条规定,“依法可以缓征的正在全日制高等学校就学的学生,本人自愿应征并且符合条件的,可以批准服现役,原就读学校应当按照有关规定保留其学籍,退伍后准其复学。”Article 25, Regulations on Conscription Work, 2001. 2001年《征兵工作条例》第25条。

<sup>5</sup> 现行《中华人民共和国兵役法》规定:“中华人民共和国公民,不分民族、种族、职业、家庭出身、宗教信仰和教育程度,都有义务依据本法的规定服兵役。”Article 3, Military Service Law of the People's Republic of China, 2011. 2011年《中华人民共和国兵役法》第3条。

## **Increase in College Student Recruits**

Between 2001, when college students were first recruited into the armed forces, and 2014, the number of students recruited to the PLA has increased from 2,000 to nearly 150,000. The details of this trend are outlined below.

### *Four-Year-Long Experiment (2001-2004)*

In accordance with the Regulations on Conscription Work of 2001, the PLA proceeded on an experimental basis with enlisting college students from regular institutions of higher education. In that year, 90 colleges and universities from Beijing, Shanghai, Hubei, among others, were selected, with more than 2000 students subsequently being granted to join the military.

In September 2002, the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Public Security, Ministry of Civil Affairs, Headquarters of the General Staff, and General Political Department jointly issued a notice entitled "On Further Promoting the Enlistment of New Recruits from Full-time Institutions of Higher Education." After its issuance, governments at all levels, departments of the people's armed forces, and local colleges responded actively. By the end of 2002, the number of colleges and universities from which college students were enlisted had increased to 269, with nearly 3,000 college students joining the armed forces. This number subsequently increased year on year (see Table 1).

### *Formal Promotion of Enlistment (2005-)*

At the end of October 2005, the State Council and the Central Military Commission declared that during that year's winter conscription intake, the enlistment of college students would be promoted formally and thus expanded.

The category of enlistment was expanded from general colleges and universities to key universities such as Peking University, and from experimental ones to all. According to the head of the conscription office in Nanjing Military Region, among five provinces and one city in East China, "the number and quality of college students joining the armed forces has hit a historical record. Students from some famous universities, such as Fudan University, Tongji University and Southeast University, actively regis-

tered, and the number of those enlisted has increased by about 10 percent, compared with previous years.”<sup>6</sup>

In 2008, an adjustment was made in the profile of conscripts recruited, with the focus changing from rural youth and urban unemployed youth to recent graduates of colleges and universities at various levels. Thus priority was given to youths with a higher education background; furthermore, among those of the same educational background, recent graduates would be admitted first. Statistics collected from all over the country showed that the proportion of enlisted college students had consequently increased. In 2008, the number reached 38,000 with more than 900 in Beijing alone.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1. The Number of College Student Recruits in China (2001-2014)**

Year	College Students Recruited
2001	> 2000
2002	3000
2003	~ 2000
2004	~ 2000
2005	~ 2000
2006	Not released
2007	Not released
2008	38,000
2009	130,000
2010	> 100,000
2011	> 100,000
2012	> 100,000
2013	~ 140,000
2014	~ 150,000

<sup>6</sup> “The enthusiasm to join the army has surged in colleges and universities—analysis of the phenomenon of the enthusiasm to join the army,” China’s National Defense, November 9, 2006. 高校涌动从军热——在校大学生参军热现象透析，《中国国防报》，2006—11—9。

<sup>7</sup> “The PLA conscription task of 2008 completed, more than 900 college students enlisted in Beijing,” *PLA Daily*, December 31, 2008. 解放军08年征兵完成 北京900余名大学生入伍服役，《解放军报》，2008—12—31。

In 2009, the enlistment of college students increased dramatically: 130,000 students nationwide were recruited into the armed forces in just one year; this scale has been maintained with subsequent levels of more than 100,000 each year.<sup>8</sup> In 2013, nearly 140,000 college students were enlisted. In 2014, the total number of new recruits reached about 150,000.<sup>9</sup>

## Preferential Treatment

Compared to other youths, students receive preferential treatment, which can be classified into three types: preferential treatment for enlistment, for active service, and for those discharged from active service.

### *Preferential Treatment for Enlistment*

To encourage college students to join the army, China has introduced a series of policies to facilitate their enlistment. For example, compared to youths with just high school certificates, priority is given to college students in their applications as well as in physical and political exams.

### *Preferential Treatment for Active Service*

Preferential treatment is also given to conscripts when performing active service. This includes as follows: a pension provided by the local government, parents are given a sum of money as compensation, free visits to some scenic spots, as well as priority when it comes to transport tickets. In some cities, soldiers also take buses free of charge. It should be noted that servicemen not coming from colleges also enjoy some of these benefits. Priority is, however, given to college conscripts in terms of selection and admittance (including recommendations for direct admission) to military academies;

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<sup>8</sup> Zhang Yifu and Yang Qiong, "China's conscription is in full swing, various measures are taken simultaneously to guarantee highly qualified recruits," *NetEase News Center, International Online Report*, 2011. 张一夫、杨琼：中国征兵火热进行 多措并举保高素质兵源，网易新闻中心，国际在线报道，2011年。

<sup>9</sup> Zhao Tingting, "Conscription task allocated to colleges and universities for the first time," *Beijing Youth Daily*, April 20, 2014. 赵婷婷：征兵任务首次分配到高校，《北京青年报》，2014-4-20; Zhang Yanzhong and Wu Xu, "150,000 college student new recruits have come into the camp," *PLA Daily*, October 13, 2014. 张彦中、吴旭：十五万大学生新兵入营来，《解放军报》，2014-10-13。

promotions to be officers; selections for noncommissioned officers; and assignments to technical posts, and so on.

### *Preferential Treatment for Dischargees*

Upon completion of military service, college students also receive preferential treatment. Tuition fees and/or student debts up to a yearly figure of 8,000 Yuan are repaid by the state. This effectively means that their education is free. Other benefits include favorable terms for entrance examinations. For example, in one particular exam retired soldiers with an education background above junior college degree will get another 10 points on top of their total written examination score; this is similarly the case when completing preliminary tests for national post-graduate entrance examinations; while those with first class and second class citations for meritorious service are exempted from the post-graduate entrance examination.

Assistance for employment and other arrangements is also given. Retired college student conscripts are more likely to be recruited by state-owned enterprises and be elected to village and neighborhood committees.

In addition, all levels of local governments have introduced preferential treatment in accordance with the respective actual situation. For example, college student conscripts from Beijing can obtain subsidies of more than 159,000 Yuan; this includes a living allowance, tuition, money provided to parents, and so on. Even more beneficial, perhaps, is that college undergraduates or recent graduates without registered permanent residence in Beijing are able to obtain it after they accomplish their studies and so can be hired by employers in Beijing.<sup>10</sup>

### **Adjusting Conscription Measures**

In order to enlist more well-educated conscripts, China has constantly adjusted its conscription measures. In addition to publicizing conscription, the conscription intake and standards have been adjusted to comply with the situation of college students. These are outlined below.

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<sup>10</sup> Conscription Office of Ministry of National Defense: Four Preferential Treatments for the College Student Conscripts in 2013, National Student Recruitment Network, Jan. 24, 2014. 国防部征兵办: 2013年大学生参军入伍四大优惠政策, 大学生征兵网, 2014-1-24。

### *Adjustment of Timing of Conscription Intake*

From 1990 to 2013, China undertook conscription once a year in winter. This was, however, unfavorable for enlisting college graduates, as the majority of them would sign employment contracts in the beginning of autumn. Therefore, a large number of excellent graduates would have instead gone into employment rather than sign up for active service. To rectify this, in 2013 the conscription intake across the country was altered to the summer and autumn rather than winter. In so doing, this will better coincide with the graduation of students and so guarantee a direct flow of graduates from colleges to the armed forces. Indeed, this step has already resulted in a better enlistment ratio of recent graduates.

### *Adjustment of Physical Standards for Enlistment*

In order to enlist more well-educated conscripts, the Conscription Office of the Ministry of National Defense has amended the "Physical Examination Standards for Citizens Eligible for Enlistment." Amendments to height, eyesight, and weight have been made. The physical examination standards for conscription as of 2014 are detailed in the table below. The adjustments made show a slight easing in the criteria, thereby increasing the number of college students eligible to perform active service.

**Table 2. Physical Examination Standards for Conscription**

	Standards before 2014	New Standards as of 2014
Height (male)	Above 162 cm	Above 160 cm
Height (female)	Above 160 cm	Above 158 cm
Weight (male)	No more than 25 percent over the standard weight	No more than 30 percent over the standard weight
Weight (female)	No more than 15 percent over the standard weight	No more than 20 percent over the standard weight
Eyesight	With an education background of junior college degree (in 2008) no less than 4.9 for the right eye; no less than 4.8 for the left; for those with an education background above junior college degree, no less than 4.6 for right eye and 4.5 for the left	no less than 4.6 for the right eye; no less than 4.5 for the left eye

*Amendments to Conscription Age*

In 2013, candidates included college undergraduates and graduates of conscription age. In 2014, the criterion was further expanded to include college freshmen. The conscription age has also been raised. In 2007 and 2008, it was raised to 22 for those with an educational background of and above junior college. Since 2011, the conscription age for undergraduates of regular institutions of higher education has risen to 22, while that for graduates of higher vocational schools (specialized schools) has risen to 23, and for graduates with an educational background of and above undergraduate it has risen to 24.

## Major Drivers Behind the Reform

As the previous section has examined, since 2011 China has abolished the regulation that college students could defer military service, with the result that a large number of college students have since been recruited into the PLA. The reasons for the change in conscription policy are considered here.

### Adapting to Conditions of Informationization

In the nineteenth century, Engels pointed out that war will be won by man instead of by guns. Chairman Mao also decreed that “Troops that are not armed with culture are the stupid ones, and stupid troops cannot defeat enemies.”<sup>11</sup> It follows that well-educated servicemen are critical to the decisive factors of warfare.

The backdrop for the change in conscription policy to enlist more students is the nation’s overall planning in response to security threats confronted both at home and abroad. In order to fulfill the three-step strategy of the modernization of Chinese armed forces according to schedule, substantial growth is needed in the construction of national defense and the armed forces.

Furthermore, with the strategic objective of the armed forces being to build informationized forces, the goal is to be able to win wars under informationized conditions. Informationized troops will require higher skills in operating modernized weapons. Indeed, the director of conscription in Beijing holds that while “high-tech weapons and equipment are used widely in the armed forces, higher requirements are a must in terms of soldiers’ overall quality. Some soldiers are assigned to operate new equipment worth millions of Yuan, or even more than tens of millions, and that it is impossible for them to do so if they don’t have certain quality and technical skills.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mao Zedong, “The United Front in Cultural Work,” *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, Volume 3 (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 1991 edition), p. 1011. 毛泽东：《文化工作中的统一战线》，《毛泽东选集》第3卷，人民出版社1991年版，第1011页。

<sup>12</sup> “China drastically adjusts the conscription policy, college students join the army in succession in order to alleviate the employment pressure,” *SOHU*, news.sohu.com/20081118/n260703924.shtml. 中国大幅调整征兵政策大学生纷参军缓就业压力，搜狐新闻。”



Accordingly, there is a need to improve the quality of servicemen to meet the new demands of the armed forces—including the modernization of weapons and equipment. This requires having a higher quota of well-educated and highly qualified young personnel.

### **Demographic Change and Higher Education**

Currently, the Chinese population is undergoing demographic change with the number of elderly increasing (14.9 percent of the population were over 60 in 2013),<sup>13</sup> while the number of youths is falling amidst a relatively low birth rate. As a proportion of the total population the number of those aged 14-35 has declined from 39.48 percent in 2000 to 30.93 percent in 2009. The proportion has thus dropped by 8.55 percent within the space of a decade. In terms of absolute numbers this represents a decline of 77.75 million. This also means that the number of those of conscription age between 18 and 22 eligible for active service is on the decline. Taking Beijing as an example, in 2008 the number of youths eligible for enlistment was over 500,000; by 2014 this number had dropped to less than 300,000.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the proportion of college students per conscription-age population is increasing year by year. Indeed, higher education developed rapidly in China in the 1990s, with 1999 representing a watershed year in terms of the beginning of a large-scale enrollment expansion in Chinese institutions of higher education. In 2002, the ratio of school leavers enrolling at colleges attained 15 percent, indicating that higher education in China is no longer only for the elites but the masses. In 2013, this ratio had reached 34.5 percent. The above means that the number of those choosing a college education instead of going into the armed forces has been increasing.

Consequently, by increasing the age limit for conscription to 24, this means a larger number of youths are eligible to be recruited. Furthermore, as the number of college students is increasing as a proportion of a declining conscription-age population, it is therefore natural that the PLA looks to increasingly recruit students from colleges.

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<sup>13</sup> Wu Yushao, "Actively respond to the challenges brought by the aging of population," *Guang Ming Daily*, October 11, 2014. 吴玉韶: "积极应对人口老龄化的挑战", 《光明日报》, 2014-10-11。

<sup>14</sup> "Beijing stipulates that male freshmen should submit military service certificates, otherwise their admission would not be allowed," *Beijing Daily*, August 25, 2011. 北京规定大一男生需提交兵役证 否则不准许入学, 《北京日报》, 2011-8-25。

## Competition

The armed forces face competition from alternative employers. Rather than conduct military service, many high school graduates (who choose not to enroll or fail to be enrolled in college) choose to work in factories or companies. Some companies provide such preferential treatment as training, promotions, and insurance, among other benefits, in addition to the basic monthly pay of 2,000-3,000 Yuan. This is an attractive option for many as the perception of military service is that it involves danger, high-intensity training, and strict discipline—factors which can serve to put off potential conscripts. The latter combined with the attractiveness of other options has resulted in the loss of many potential conscripts. Hence, as previously examined, it has been necessary for the PLA to tighten the regulations as well as practice preferential treatment to attract new recruits, especially college students.

## Employment Difficulties

The issue of the employment of college students has become a prominent problem in China—one which may impact the welfare of families and even social stability. Since the large-scale enrollment expansion of China's higher education in the 1990s, the number of college graduates has steadily increased. In 2014, the number of college graduates of China's regular institutions of higher education reached 7.27 million, larger than the total population of Denmark or Norway. However, high-end job opportunities commensurate with their skills has not kept pace.

China is facing economic challenges at the same time as its workforce (in terms of the working-age population) has increased. While demand for skilled workers in some emerging industries has increased, traditional industries as well as those oversubscribed are faced with a supply of labor outstripping demand. This is further exacerbated by the fact that China's economic growth has slowed down to 7.3 percent in the third-quarter of 2014.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Yang Yiyong et al., "Analysis and Prospect of China's employment situation (2013-2014), China's National Conditions," [guoqing.china.com.cn/2010-01/08/content\\_31129073.htm](http://guoqing.china.com.cn/2010-01/08/content_31129073.htm) (Editor's note: URL link not working as of January 22, 2015). 杨宜勇等：2013—2014年中国就业形势分析与展望。中国国情，2010-01-08。 "The overall situation remains stable, while the problem remains to be cracked—how to view the current employment

In the face of the severe employment situation, the government, colleges, and employers have cooperated to broaden channels of employment. In so doing, the government has stressed that the employment of college graduates should be prioritized, and that the enlistment of college students into the armed forces is one measure to strengthen the employment of college graduates.

In March 2009, then-premier of the State Council Wen Jiabao pointed out in the government work report of the second session of the Eleventh National People's Congress that college graduates can "join the army." He subsequently later stressed in an executive meeting of the State Council that enlistment of college graduates who would devote themselves to national defense would be encouraged. In the same year, the armed forces recruited 130,000 college students in tandem with the government's initiative.

In 2008, furthermore, the Chinese armed forces carried out a comprehensive recruitment of non-commissioned officers directly from among graduates of regular institutions of higher education. In September 2011, the General Staff, the General Political Department, and the General Logistics Department jointly issued the "Tentative Procedures to Select Officers from College Graduate Conscripts," according to which college student conscripts would be given preference in the selection of non-commissioned officers and in registering to the examinations of military academies. Those who excel and conform to the stipulations would be directly selected to be officers. In 2011, more than 4,000 college student conscripts were promoted to be officers in the PLA and the Armed Police Force, while 400 outstanding candidates were recommended for admission to military academies.<sup>16</sup>

While in the long run the enlistment of college students will not fundamentally solve their employment problem, the fact of deferring employment, and that some students subsequently remain in the armed forces beyond the period of conscription, does to some extent alleviate pressure on the labor market.

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situation in China," *XinhuaNet*, May 28, 2014. 形势总体平稳 难题仍待破解——如何看待我国当前就业形势, 新华网, 2014-5-28.

<sup>16</sup> "The three general headquarters: the whole army arranges 4,000 college graduate soldiers to be promoted to be cadres," *XinhuaNet*, [new.xinhuanet.com/mil/2011-09/16/c\\_122041491.htm](http://new.xinhuanet.com/mil/2011-09/16/c_122041491.htm) (Editor's note: URL link not working as of January 22, 2015). 三总部: 全军安排4000名大学毕业生士兵提干。新华网。

## Development Prospects

The enlistment of college students is essential for the speeding up of the modernization of China's national defense and its armed forces. As previously examined, in order to achieve the strategic objective of building an informationized force and winning informationized warfare by the middle of the twenty-first century, large numbers of highly qualified conscripts will be needed. At present, the proportion of college student conscripts has reached 10-15 percent in the grass root units of the PLA.

Talent has traditionally always been the scarcest resource for the modernization of China's armed forces. Nevertheless, it is estimated that by 2020 the number of people with a higher education degree among the working-age population will have doubled compared to 2009.<sup>17</sup> This means that China and its armed forces will have an increasingly large talent pool to draw from. In the next three to five years, it is predicted that the number of college student conscripts recruited by the armed forces will gradually increase. Thus, as more and more college students join the army, so their role in it will be further enhanced.

College student conscripts are mostly allocated to the grass root units of the PLA. However, some of them are given preference to be allocated to highly technical posts, while others take up posts as clerical staff and monitors or network room administrators; or still else work in theory publicizing, among other posts. No matter in what position, it is obvious that, with a strong sense of responsibility and work efficiency and quality, they quickly grasp professional military skills; excel in organized training; master subjects requiring a relatively high knowledge of informationization; and play an active role in completing major military exercises and performing diversified military tasks. In a survey comparing college students with non-college-student conscripts, it was found that 90 percent of the former performed better in practical work duties.

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<sup>17</sup> Li Shuohao and Li Wenping, "Research on the development of our nation's higher education scale from 2013 to 2030," *Open Education Research*, No. 6, 2013. 李硕豪、李文平: "2013—2030年我国高等教育规模发展研究", 《开放教育研究》, 2013年6期。

That college student conscripts have won the trust of the troops and taken up important positions due to their performance is borne out by statistics. In a certain detachment of the North China Sea Fleet of the PLA Navy, for instance, among the 42 college student conscripts who joined in 2009, 6 of them were promoted to be officers while 13 remained and became noncommissioned officers.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the skills and qualities that college student conscripts bring, it is also clear that the armed forces are a fertile ground for growth and development. Willpower and stamina, practical hands-on ability, and a sense of esprit de corps are all qualities which conscripts acquire. Furthermore, these qualities are useful not only in the armed services, but are beneficial even after military service as former conscripts go through their lives, and which puts them at a competitive advantage to those without military experience. As the deputy director-general of the Department of College Student Affairs of the Ministry of Education has said, "the macro environment of the armed forces is a fine place for development."<sup>19</sup>

With a solid cultural basis, lively minds, and quick receptivity, college student conscripts have already changed the composition of troops, enhanced troop quality, added new blood and vitality to the armed forces, and effectively boosted the grass root construction and management of troops. In the next five to ten years, as the number of those of enlistment age will continually decrease as a proportion of the population, the Chinese armed forces will be increasingly compelled to shift its main body of troop recruitment to colleges.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, as the pressures of the labor market for graduates are likely to remain difficult, the Chinese government will continue to promote the recruitment of students as a means to alleviate this pressure. These challenges therefore also represent an opportunity from which the PLA can benefit.

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<sup>18</sup> Wang Zhigang, "Conditions have been met for college students to be the main body of armed forces' soldiers," *China Youth Daily*, August 15, 2014. 王志刚: "军队实现士兵以大学生为主体条件已经具备", 《中国青年报》, 2014-8-15。

<sup>19</sup> "Three accounts by the Ministry of Education demonstrate the benefits for college students to join the army," China Broadcasting Network, October 26, 2009. 教育部"三笔帐"彰显大学生参军入伍好处, 中国广播网, 2009-10-26。

<sup>20</sup> Li Shuohao and Li Wenping, "Research on the development of our nation's higher education scale from 2013 to 2030."

## Conclusion

The reform of China's conscription system and the increased focus on the enlistment of Chinese college students, which has contributed to an unprecedented change in the personnel structure of the Chinese armed forces, is part and parcel of the wider reform and development of the Chinese armed forces. In turn, this comes in response to the global revolution in military affairs and the necessity of building an army adapted to the conditions of informationization, which has placed increased demands on the quality of personnel.

Military demands aside, it is also clear that Chinese society has undergone profound changes. Never before has such a large number of people had the educational opportunities that they do now, acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to sustain and promote China's development. This constitutes a vast talent pool from which the Chinese armed forces also benefits from and will increasingly rely on as it undergoes modernization.

In sum, the enlistment of college students has achieved positive results, which have been both beneficial to and welcomed by the armed forces, the colleges, as well as student conscripts themselves. With the continuous improvement of regulations to attract the best and brightest, the enlistment of students into the Chinese armed forces would appear to have a positive future.

## **About the Author**

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