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**Winning Reports, Losing  
Readiness?  
'Formalism' and Military  
Effectiveness in the PLA**

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## Winning Reports, Losing Readiness?

### ‘Formalism’ and Military Effectiveness in the PLA

#### Abstract

*The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has seen the widespread expansion of the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) capabilities across air, land and sea, as part of its reforms aimed at establishing what it calls a ‘World Class Military’ by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Part of these reforms has been the improvement of the human capital of the PLA, inculcating not only new skills required to fight a modern-day conflict, but also aimed at reforming the work ethic and culture of the PLA at large, in order to remove behaviour that harms the PLA. The concept of ‘Formalism’ is one of these behaviours, which encourages the distortion and misrepresentation of facts up the chain of command, and certain actions taken in order to simply present a picture of work being done, and currying favour with superiors, while not actually solving on-ground problems and losing touch with reality.*

*This paper seeks to understand the phenomenon in detail by examining articles on the topic in the PLA’s official newspaper. It looks at how the practice manifests itself and at its effects on the organisation, in order to understand the implications it could carry for China’s ambitious programme of military reform-*

**Keywords:** People's Liberation Army, Formalism, Military Reform, Combat Readiness, Organisational Culture

#### Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has seen the resurgence of an increasingly assertive China, as part of its ‘Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation’ by 2049 (U.S Department of Defense, 2022). As part of this effort, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has undertaken, from 2015 onwards, a host of military reforms aimed at creating what it calls a world-class military by 2049 (U.S Department of Defense, 2022). This includes not only the modernisation of equipment, but also the cultivation of human talent and formulation of new doctrine.

Part of the PLA’s efforts to cultivate better talent has been its war on ‘Formalism’ in the PLA, part of the larger efforts to root out ‘Formalism’ in the Communist Party of China (CPC) and People’s Republic of China (PRC) organs at large. In the PLA, the concept of ‘Formalism’ essentially refers to the practice of preparing reports and paperwork in a manner that indicates

that all is well, along with highlighting generic and abstract deficiencies during self-criticism and feedback sessions, while not actually highlighting relevant issues that may be festering in the background. This, in turn, affects the operational readiness, morale, the ideological loyalty etc. of troops in the PLA, and has been designated as one of the ‘Four Undesirable Work Styles’ identified by the CPC (Xinhua, 2014).

It is in this context that this paper examines various examples of ‘Formalism’ highlighted in the PLA Daily, affecting various fields such as training, administration, logistics, professional military education, and seeks to understand its effects on the PLA as an organisation, along with PLA efforts to counter ‘Formalism’ and the implications it carries for China’s ambitious program of military reform.

### **‘Formalism’ In Practice**

‘Formalism’ in the PLA has existed not only since the early days of the People’s Republic but also during the guerrilla war waged by the PLA during the Chinese Civil War from 1927 to 1949, with the practice being labelled as a “childish, low-level and mindless thing” by Mao Zedong (Dai, 2020). The CPC attributes ‘Formalism’ to what it calls a “misaligned view of political achievements and a lack of responsibility” (Dai, 2020) and sees it arising from what it terms the ‘Peace Disease’ (Army Party Innovation Theory Study and Research Center, 2019).

Administration and staff duties are amongst one of the areas where the concept of ‘Formalism’ is most prevalent. One PLA Daily article (Chen, 2023) mentions how the year-end period is often packed with overdue paperwork and reports. This accumulation of tasks, in turn, results in year-end summaries being simply copied and pasted from those of previous years, thereby making the content out of touch with reality, with generic problems being highlighted repeatedly, and vague action plans to solve the same. In addition, the urgency of preparing reports, including the recommendation of awards, results in awards not being awarded based on detailed analysis of performance reviews, but on pre-selected choices (Chen, 2023). Similarly, when units encounter administrative hurdles, they tend to simply dig up old records to search for answers, instead of innovating new and relevant solutions, making some of these efforts ineffective and merely a record to show some action had been undertaken (Chen, 2023). These issues are not solely restricted to operational units, but also exist amongst support and training establishments, with a student unit of the PLA’s Armoured Forces Academy also being identified as a victim of the same (Pan, Liu & Yin, 2022).

Another example of the avoidable accumulation of administrative work was highlighted in a regiment in the Xinjiang Military Region, where a battalion had been deployed to conduct field exercises in the Gobi Desert. After its companies had submitted their respective after-action reports, the new reports were deemed to be too inconsistent; the battalion issued new formats and labels for documents, requiring all reports to be remade (Guo, Zhang & Yang, 2020). Similarly, the communications support team, recently attached to the battalion headquarters, had to redo its documentation and rosters to fulfil Battalion HQ standards. Even prior documents, which had yellowed due to time, were required to be reprinted. This pursuit of standardisation, in the middle of exercises, put a large amount of strain on the troops and affected their combat readiness and morale (Guo, Zhang & Yang, 2020).

The frequency and length of meetings have been another issue highlighted by the PLA Daily, with an article about a brigade of the 80<sup>th</sup> Group Army, noting that repetition of talking points by the participants meant that meetings ended up being far longer than they needed to be, along with key issues being unresolved leading to the need for additional meetings. Thus, the unit brought about a series of steps to solve this, including each battalion commander sharing their own speeches, and reviewing those of others to avoid overlaps, along with combining cadre evaluation and education meetings, to free up time for other tasks (Guo, Zhang & Yang, 2020).

Training and education have been another problem area where 'Formalism' has been prevalent. An article detailing logistics exercises conducted by the 1<sup>st</sup> Mobile Support Battalion of a brigade of the 78<sup>th</sup> Group Army explained how the loading of pallets containing equipment was done in a neat and orderly fashion, with the pallets arranged neatly according to size to impress the onlookers. However, this arrangement did not take into account the weight of said pallets, causing the truck carrying the load to bend and deform, and the troops had to manually load the pallets into the waiting aircraft, and subsequently failed their assessment of loading the materiel on time (Wang & Zheng, 2020).

'Formalism' has also crept into the tactical aspects of basic rear-area security exercises, with usually fresh recruits playing Opposing Force (OPFOR) roles, simulating the entry of intruders into secure bases. Here, the OPFOR team continues to wander near the camp gate, making apprehending them and fulfilling their mission a fairly easy task. The flaw of such an approach was exposed when the battalion commander decided to appoint one of their best

soldiers for the task, who subsequently utilised a combination of stealth and surprise to bypass the camp's security with remarkable ease (Zhu & Tong, 2026).

Even units stationed in the heart of the nation's power have not been immune from this, with an example of a regiment in the Beijing Garrison District, where a report prepared for a review meeting of the regiment's training was rejected outright by the regimental leadership for being formalist and not identifying concrete problems and actionable advice to solve them. Thus, the review meeting was rescheduled for 2 weeks later, while the staff officers who had prepared the initial report were sent back to observe the daily training routine of the regiment and spend time amongst the troops to get genuine feedback and to directly identify problems and methods to solve them (Qian & Shi, 2026).

Another example cited by the PLA Daily was that of the 1<sup>st</sup> Reconnaissance Company of a brigade of the 78<sup>th</sup> Group Army, which highlighted how a soldier, who performed well in theoretical education, organised newspaper clippings, which kept him well informed. His instructor, therefore, instructed the other soldiers in the unit to also start organising their own clippings. This soon escalated further, with the unit starting a formal book of newspaper clippings. Soon, all attention turned to improving the quality of this book, to the extent that improving the quality of the book became the main focus. Therefore, when the unit underwent its theoretical assessment, they scored more poorly than the previous time, as the focus of the newspaper clippings had changed from encouraging learning to becoming an end in itself (Niu, Wang & Zhao, 2022).

Another example from the 83<sup>rd</sup> Group Army showed how a particularly tech-savvy soldier ended up being detailed for producing PPTs for the coursework and lectures organised by his unit, in addition to all his usual duties. This resulted in the soldier simply focusing on improving the visual quality of the slides, while there was no improvement in the actual content of the PPTs, which reused materials across various presentations and were in cases out of touch with reality. Here, the focus on improving visual quality was just aimed at impressing higher-ups, while the stagnant content quality did little to address actual issues, along with wearing out the soldier tasked with the additional duties, affecting his performance and morale (Mo & Lu, 2025).

Political and Cultural Work remain critical elements for the PLA, with enforcing ideological conformity remaining one of its priorities. As part of this, soldiers undergo a range of cultural and political activities aimed to strengthen their ideological loyalty. However, even

some of these events have started to suffer the effects of 'Formalism'. The Propaganda Section of a brigade of the 73<sup>rd</sup> Group Army, in a survey, found out that more than half the officers and soldiers surveyed felt that what the PLA calls 'Field Cultural Work' took up too much time and energy, and affected training and regular duties (Li, Liao, et. al, 2022). In a particular example at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Motorised Infantry Battalion of the same brigade, each of the companies had made their own posters and banners, but these were declared too disorganised by battalion HQ and ordered to be pulled down, and all the work had to be redone (Li, Liao, et. al, 2022).

Another incident in the 71<sup>st</sup> Group Army details how, when troops issued a request for new cameras and photography equipment, and this new equipment was subsequently issued to them, most of the units receiving the new equipment did not use these because their troops were not familiar with how to use the new equipment (Zhou, Gao & Xue, 2020). This, again, is a case where the department could simply show that it had done its job by issuing new equipment, without it actually making an effect.

An interesting case unfolded in a brigade of the 81<sup>st</sup> Group Army, where the Propaganda Section of the brigade instructed all battalions to provide a summary of the field training exercises they conducted in the form of a five-minute video clip. Here, in order to produce a high-quality video, one of the battalions sent its soldiers to the field training range just for video footage to be shot and included in the video summary. This, in turn, led to the soldiers having to work overtime to fulfil their regular duties as well, including cases where a soldier had to redo the training exercises for the video in daytime, only to undertake sentry duty at night, and another case where a soldier had to undergo physical tests the very next day. After this, the script for the video, the voiceovers, rendering and subtitling of the video would also have to be done, turning what was ostensibly meant to be a 5-minute video, into a task spanning a week, with very little training value to show for the extra work, and only aimed at impressing superiors (Lu & Cao, 2025).

### **Countering 'Formalism'**

The standard Chinese ideological lines about 'Formalism' aside, the fact remains that this phenomenon arises from a core structural weakness shared by all authoritarian structures, that of appeasing one's superiors, and climbing the ladder, at best, or saving one's job, along with their head as well, at worst. Thus, ensuring that one remains covered by the paper trail, and one has completed their tasks, at least on paper, becomes a top priority.

Nevertheless, the PLA does seem to have taken the problem seriously, with an article in the PLA Daily noting that ‘Formalism’, while prioritising short-term results, has harmful consequences in the long term, affecting the PLA’s core objective of fighting and winning battles. In addition, it highlights the negative effects that ‘Formalism’ has on the morale and political loyalty of troops, such as the erosion of enthusiasm for training, the weakening of a belief in the PLA’s mission, and the erosion of fighting will amongst the troops (Army Party Innovation Theory Study and Research Center, 2019). Another important indicator of the PLA’s seriousness in the matter is its citing of the example of the Qing Army’s defeat during the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), as an event borne out of a similar phenomenon, noting that the Qing Army’s lack of realistic training, combined with the common practice of deceiving superiors in order to avoid punishment, lowered the effectiveness of the Qing Forces, while providing a false sense of power to its leadership (Army Party Innovation Theory Study and Research Center, 2019).

However, there remain gaps identifiable through whatever reporting the PLA has done on the matter. The most notable of these trends is the ad-hoc nature of the steps being undertaken to deal with the issue, with some even being contradictory. For example, the student unit of the Armoured Forces Academy introduced a video summary to be recorded instead of the standard written year-end report (Pan, Liu & Yin, 2022), while on the other hand, as demonstrated above, the introduction of a video report has been illustrated as an example of ‘Formalism’ that merely created more problems (Lu & Cao, 2025). Similarly, there is inconsistency regarding the actual progress being reported on the fight against ‘Formalism’. While some articles note that ‘Formalism’ continues to persist (Army Party Innovation Theory Study and Research Center, 2019), others report that the phenomenon has been wiped out to a large extent. Others mention that old forms of ‘Formalism’ have been eliminated, while new forms may crop up which haven’t been identified yet (Dai, 2020).

## **Conclusion: Takeaways For the Future**

Across the abovementioned examples of 'Formalism' in the PLA, a key trend emerges, highlighting how a new idea is brought about to address a real issue. However, the implementation of this idea, in turn, becomes tied to evaluation by superiors. Thus, the implementation of the idea, in itself, becomes the main goal, with the original issue that was intended to be solved getting sidelined. This is a direct result of a system that encourages flashier short-term actions with documentable and attributable outcomes, over long-term actions with relatively abstract results. To put it simply, instant or quick results can see oneself climbing the ladder, while long-term projects might bring benefits far into the future, by which time one might not even be serving in the PLA, let alone be in a position to gain anything from it. Thus, the prioritising of appearances over actual results has been a recurring theme in the PLA throughout most of its existence.

Thus, with a concept as abstract as 'Formalism', one that has no written definition, there seems to be an inability to judge a final goalpost that must be pursued. Ironically, the crusade against 'Formalism' in the PLA does have the potential to become a new form of 'Formalism' itself, where the pursuit of eliminating 'Formalism' might just become an end in itself, instead of a means to an end goal of improving operational readiness.

Indeed, the ad-hoc nature of countering 'Formalism', with the variations of doing so across various different formations as demonstrated in these stories, might even indicate the different working styles, training and administrative practices, and operational cultures amongst different units in the PLA itself. This points to various inconsistencies between different PLA formations, carrying implications for the cross-integration of forces amongst various commands. This, in turn, could cause friction amongst different units, which in turn would affect their combat readiness in the event of a spread-out conflict, such as that across the Indo-Pacific, that might require agile forces ready to be shipped out to unfamiliar areas and fight alongside unfamiliar formations.

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