

# *Accommodating Veterans in China: Resettlement, Resistance, and the Rise of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs\**

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## *Abstract*

During the past ten years, China has undergone significant shifts in state-veteran relations, including the reduction of 30,000 military personnel, increased veterans' activism, and the establishment of the Ministry of Veterans Affairs in 2018. This article reviews China's veteran-resettlement system, summarizes veterans' grievances and claims, and evaluates the Ministry's effectiveness in addressing veterans' concerns. It argues that, thus far, the Ministry's efforts have been largely performative rather than substantive. It primarily focuses on providing secondary services, such as visiting veterans on special occasions, while sidestepping the resolution of core issues raised by disaffected veterans, such as ex-officers' requests to reinstate their cadre status. This disparity between state provisions and veterans' demands stems primarily from structural challenges in policy revision and implementation in the post-Mao era, rather than from corruption among state agents. Despite its limited effectiveness so far, the government's institutional accommodation signifies a willingness to make concessions and its dedication to the well-being of veterans, which may help alleviate veterans' frustrations. The new institutions also serve as official channels for veterans to articulate their interests, potentially

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discouraging further street protests. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on state responses to claim-making groups and the dynamics of state-veteran relations in China.

## 1. Introduction

In September 2015, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced that the People's Liberation Army (PLA; 人民解放軍 *Renmin jiefang jun*) would discharge 300,000 personnel by the end of 2017. The targeted groups include conscripts (義務兵 *yiwu bing*), non-commissioned officers (NCOs) (士官 *shiguan*), and officers (軍官 *junguan*). This marks the eleventh round of massive military downsizing (大裁軍 *da caijun*) since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power in 1949. It also aligns with the line of military retrenchment during the Reform era, which saw reductions of 1,000,000 in 1985, 500,000 in 1997, and 200,000 in 2003.<sup>1</sup> These downsizings aim to modernize the armed forces and to shape China's image as a "peacefully rising power."<sup>2</sup> However, the retrenchment also poses a significant challenges to the party-state: how to resettle a large number of veterans satisfactorily?

In CCP-led China, the government always faces challenges related to resettlement and occasionally encounters veterans' protests. During the Mao's era, veterans faced difficulties reintegrating into society, and engaged in conflicts with local bureaucrats over various issues, such as employment, land allocation, and marriage.<sup>3</sup> In the Reform era, veterans continued to demand better job assignments, improved welfare, and more compensations for their lost opportunities, health, and youth.<sup>4</sup> For example, in October 2016, around 1,000 veterans from across China demonstrated outside the Ministry of National Defense, demanding national leaders' attention to their issues.<sup>5</sup> Similar joint demonstrations occurred in February 2017 outside the CCP's Central Commission for Discipline and Inspection.<sup>6</sup>

In response to veterans' activism, the government established the Ministry of Veterans Affairs (MVA; 退役軍人事務部 *Tuiyi junren shiwu bu*) in 2018 and pledged to systematically address veterans' grievances. However, this has proven to be no easy task. My fieldwork finds that, while the government has expedited the processing of many long-overdue petition cases—such as veterans' requests for official recognition as "disabled veterans" (傷殘軍人 *shangcan junren*)—many essential claims raised by specific groups, including job assignments and pensions for ex-officers, remain largely unattended. A survey of local officials in 2020 revealed that 69.5 percent of them had processed veterans' cases on "historically unresolved issues" (歷史遺留問題 *lishi yiliu wenti*), but they were unable to find