



PLA Air Force Shifts Transition Training to the Schoolhouse

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On October 4 and 5, 2021, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) reported that the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has begun experimenting with training a brigade of new pilots to fly the J-10, a fourth-generation fighter,¹ at the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy, one of its three flight academies.¹ In the PLAAF, transition training for operational aircraft is mostly the responsibility of operational units, so this experimental program likely indicates that the PLAAF will gradually shift the responsibility for transition training to its flight academies.

The Shijiazhuang Flight Academy is not the first flight academy to conduct transition training. In 2015 the Xi'an Flight Academy undertook the training of new pilots transitioning to the third-generation J-7 fighter.² (In the same year, the Harbin Flight Academy began training new pilots transitioning to the H-6 bomber.³) This effort did not affect the length of the initial training of J-7 pilots, but it should have relieved some combat units of the burden of conducting transition training themselves.

What distinguishes the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy's transition training for the J-10 is the type of aircraft for which it is being conducted and the fact that it is being conducted in conjunction with an effort to shorten the length of initial fighter pilot training. As stated above, the J-10 is a fourth-generation fighter. The proportion of fourth-generation fighters in the PLAAF's inventory is likely to have increased so much that the PLAAF no longer has enough third-generation aircraft for all its new pilots to gain experience in before eventually transitioning to a fourth-generation fighter. This was how fighter pilots in the PLAAF graduated to fourth-generation fighters from approximately 1990 to 2015, and this was mainly because the PLAAF lacked an adequate trainer to bridge the gap between the PLAAF's primary trainer and its new, advanced fighters.

¹ The Chinese define fighter aircraft generations differently, using "fourth-generation" for the West's "fifth-generation" fighters, "third-generation" for the West's "fourth-generation" fighters, and so on.

In 2015 the PLAAF's flight academies began receiving a new trainer, the JL-9, which presumably better prepared new pilots to undergo transition training to a fourth-generation fighter.ⁱⁱ However, the introduction of the PLAAF's newest, much more advanced trainer, the JL-10, to the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy in 2019 enabled a radical change in the PLAAF's initial fighter pilot training: pilot candidates beginning flight training in a brigade operating the JL-10 in 2020 skipped intermediate flight training, proceeding directly from the PLAAF's primary trainer to the JL-10.⁴ The Harbin Flight Academy followed suit in 2020.⁵ The JL-10 is a fourth-generation aircraft itself, so it is the perfect bridge between the PLAAF's primary trainer and the PLAAF's newest fighters. Not every training brigade at the PLAAF's flight academies has adopted the JL-10, but those that have adopted it can produce a fighter pilot in almost half the time that it took the PLAAF to do so in 2010.⁶

At the same time that the Shijiazhuang Flight Academy changed the curriculum for those pilot candidates undergoing training in brigades operating the JL-10, it also undertook the task of conducting transition training for the J-10, establishing what seems to be a single brigade operating the J-10S, a two-seated version of the J-10.⁷ Those undergoing the transition training now are graduates of the shortened program employing the JL-10 who graduated in July or August 2021 and began their transition training in September 2021.⁸ The transition training will last for one year, so conducting transition training at Shijiazhuang itself will not shorten the time that it takes the PLAAF to produce a fighter pilot in this program, which is six years including non-flight-related officer training.⁹

However, shifting transition training to the flight academies has other advantages. As mentioned above, doing so relieves combat units of the burden of conducting transition training themselves, freeing them to concentrate on more advanced training and regular operations. Moreover, it should also make it easier for the PLAAF to ensure that new pilots are trained to a single standard. It is likely that the PLAAF will expand this experimental program to the Harbin Flight Academy, where the JL-10 was also introduced,¹⁰ eventually shifting all transition training to the flight academies as it further eliminates intermediate flight training within the next decade. While the PLAAF's initial fighter pilot training would still take longer than that in other countries like the USA, its gradual efforts will still greatly improve the training.

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ⁱⁱ For more about the JL-9 and the PLAAF's other trainers, see U.S. Air Force China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force*, Derek Solen, February 16, 2021, 3-4, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>.

Endnotes

¹ 李敏 [Li Ao], 陈林利 [Chen Linli], 李孟洋 [Li Mengyang], 郑文汇 [Zheng Wenhui], 范攀攀 [Fan Panpan], and 彭勇 [Peng Yong], “全军首批歼-10 飞行学员展翅蓝天” [The armed forces' first group of pilot candidates operating the J-10 spreads its wings in the blue sky], 中国军视网 [China Military Television Online], October 4, 2021, accessed October 4, 2021, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202110_259304.html; 王川 [Wang Chuan] and 李建文 [Li Jianwen], “首批歼-10 飞行学员展翅蓝天” [First group of pilot candidates operating J-10 spreads wings in blue sky], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], October 4, 2021, accessed October 5, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-10/04/content_300219.htm.

² 曹传彪 [Cao Chuanbiao], 李关 [Li Guan], and 王健 [Wang Jian], “换装之后” [After a change in arms], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], August 18, 2018, accessed October 7, 2021, http://www.81.cn/kj/2017-08/18/content_7722285.htm. In a previous paper, the author concluded that the Xi'an Flight Academy had been conducting transition training for the J-7 over a period of two years before 2015. The fact that the academy began transition training in 2015 contradicts that conclusion. U.S. Air Force China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force*, Derek Solen, February 16, 2021, 11n15, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>.

³ 邵文杰 [Shao Wenjie] and 王志佳 [Wang Zhijia], “让学员毕业就成为战斗员” [Make the pilot candidates become combatants just after graduating], 中国青年报 [China Youth Daily], June 1, 2017, accessed October 8, 2021, http://zqb.cyol.com/html/2017-06/01/nw.D110000zgqnb_20170601_2-11.htm. In a previous paper, the author incorrectly concluded that this unit had begun transition training from 2017. U.S. Air Force China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force*, Derek Solen, February 16, 2021, 3, 11n18, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>.

⁴ U.S. Air Force China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force*, Derek Solen, February 16, 2021, 3-4, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1, 4.

⁷ “首批歼-10 飞行学员开飞，探索优化飞行人才成长链路” [First group of pilot candidates operating the J-10 begins flying, explores the optimization of the link for the growth of flight personnel], 李敏 [Li Ao], 陈林利 [Chen Linli], 李孟洋 [Li Mengyang], 郑文汇 [Zheng Wenhui], 范攀攀 [Fan Panpan], and 彭勇 [Peng Yong], 军事报道 [Military Report], aired October 4, 2021, on CCTV-7, accessed October 5, 2021, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202110_259323.html; 王川 [Wang Chuan] and 李建文 [Li Jianwen], “首批歼-10 飞行学员展翅蓝天” [First group of pilot candidates operating J-10 spreads wings in blue sky], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], October 4, 2021, accessed October 5, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-10/04/content_300219.htm.

⁸ “首批歼-10 飞行学员开飞，探索优化飞行人才成长链路” [First group of pilot candidates operating the J-10 begins flying, explores the optimization of the link for the growth of flight personnel], 李敏 [Li Ao], 陈林利 [Chen Linli], 李孟洋 [Li Mengyang], 郑文汇 [Zheng Wenhui], 范攀攀 [Fan Panpan], and 彭勇 [Peng Yong], 军事报道 [Military Report], aired October 4, 2021, on CCTV-7, accessed October 5, 2021, http://www.js7tv.cn/video/202110_259323.html; 王川 [Wang Chuan] and 李建文 [Li Jianwen], “首批歼-10 飞行学员展翅蓝天” [First group of pilot candidates operating J-10 spreads wings in blue sky], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], October 4, 2021, accessed October 5, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-10/04/content_300219.htm.

⁹ 王川 [Wang Chuan] and 李建文 [Li Jianwen], “首批歼-10 飞行学员展翅蓝天” [First group of pilot candidates operating J-10 spreads wings in blue sky], 解放军报 [Liberation Army News], October 4, 2021, accessed October 5, 2021, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2021-10/04/content_300219.htm; U.S. Air Force China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force*, Derek Solen, February 16, 2021, 4, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>.

¹⁰ U.S. Air Force China Aerospace Studies Institute, *Initial Fighter Pilot Training in the PLA Air Force*, Derek Solen, February 16, 2021, 4, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2502985/initial-fighter-pilot-training-in-the-pla-air-force/>.