

Military Culture in Imperial China. Edited by Nicola Di Cosmo. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp. x + 445. \$45.00/£33.95.

The flowering of research about the Chinese military over the last several decades has been a most welcome, and somewhat unexpected, development. Many of the scholars who pioneered this work are represented in this important volume, focused on imperial China, and therefore includes chapters touching on periods from the pre-Qin to the Qianlong 乾隆 period, but nothing about the modern period, which is so often explicated by reference to the past, particularly to the continuing influence of the military classics.

The volume is the final product of a conference held in 2001 at the University of Canterbury, in New Zealand: the volume's fourteen chapters are gathered under the somewhat elusive rubric of "military culture." For this Nicola Di Cosmo makes a valiant attempt at definition in his introduction, which starts with a mention of the influential article by Lei Haizong 雷海宗 (1939) who characterized China, in the editor's words, as having been an "enervated" polity "whose ability to fight had been sapped by centuries of Confucian culture" (p. 2)—an analysis that has already been thoroughly examined and queried, with this volume providing perhaps the final blow that crumbles it.

The distinction between the realms of *wen* 文 (the literary or civil) and *wu* 武 (the military) has been present since the beginning of Chinese thought, but generally considered to divide opposite cultural poles, coexisting uneasily, often colliding, and with the *wen* more highly esteemed and giving more colour to the overall picture of Chinese tradition.

These chapters demonstrate clearly that *wu* was at almost all times more robust and central than is usually recognized. Moreover, its relationship to *wen* was dynamic, informing, and at some times dominant. The point of the volume is thus not simply to show that Chinese states possessed a serious military dimension—that is beyond question—but rather to explore the ways in which military ideas and activity affected culture in general, both high and low, including areas many would think of as purely civil. This process was not a steady progression: it ebbed and flowed, reaching its high tide, as Joanna Waley-Cohen demonstrates, only in the Qing, which was quite distinct to its predecessors in the degree to which martial accomplishment and its celebration informed legitimation, and the spectacles, art works, monuments, and so forth associated with it. The Qing melding of *wen* and *wu* furthermore defined many of the issues with which Chinese governments have grappled since the end of dynastic rule.

Yingcong Dai provides confirmation of Waley-Cohen's point about the distinctiveness of the Qing in his chapter on finance. Some aspects of governance and culture are similar in Ming and Qing, but not the way troops were paid. The founder of the Ming imagined that he could make his army self-supporting by settling his soldiers in military colonies, where they would cultivate their own food when not engaged in fighting. This proved unrealistic and by the end of the dynasty money was being used extensively, indeed ruinously, to support the military. In the Qing the system was a mixture of food

rations and monetary pay from the start. The Qing took the military more seriously than the Ming had done: as a result they developed an army that was stronger, better prepared, and more successful, not least because it was properly paid.

Taken together, the chapters demonstrate that in area after area military activity and military thought were influential, indeed central, to the development not only of what at times (in the Han, the Tang, and the Qing, for example) was truly formidable state military power, but also formative, for example, in the development of law and broader patterns of culture.

Chinese official careers moved between the military and the civil: civil scholars were often involved in military affairs, and military specialists were by no means all brutes. Far from being relentless pacifists, we find that many members of the Chinese élite whom we tend to know from their civil administrative or belletristic accomplishments, were also military figures in their own rights, or participants in a culture in which military achievement was esteemed. Don J. Wyatt, who treats the military sides of a number of well-known Song figures, provides powerful evidence.

Military and civil knowledge were not mutually exclusive categories. In a most illuminating chapter S. R. Gilbert shows how the Kangxi 康熙 emperor became disgusted with the traditional military classics—"I have read the seven military classics in their entirety," he wrote, "and find them a real mishmash, to the point that they cannot possibly be brought into accord with righteousness. This talk of 'attacking with fire' [*huo gong*] and 'water wars' is all nonsense. If one were to follow these directions there would be absolutely no method for gaining victory" (p. 246). As he reformulated the military examinations, the emperor made the *Mengzi* and *Lunyu* primary texts. We see here the attempt to create "Confucian generals" who would understand that the lasting incorporation of new territory into the Qing empire would not be accomplished by deception and slaughter (though in fact it often was) but by the extension of humane values to the new populations—not without, of course, a certain degree of compulsion. Qianlong would eventually reverse these reforms.

The opposite also applies. Even before the Qing, aspects of the military were highly esteemed by members of the civil élite. An ironic twist is provided by Kathleen Ryor, who studies sword collecting among members of the élite in the late Ming, giving the lie to the old saw that "good steel is not made into nails, and good men are not made into soldiers" by showing that the best steel was in fact beaten into swords.

The interpenetration of military and civil achievement continued well into Republican times. Perhaps the greatest strategist of the early twentieth century, Wu Peifu 吳佩孚 (1874–1939) started as a scholar who discarded the writing brush to follow the career of a soldier. The intellectual achievement of Jiang Baili 蔣百里 (1882–1938), Wu's erstwhile chief of staff, are similar. In addition to being a polyglot who understood the significance of German experiments with tank warfare ahead of most Europeans, he was also a true *intelligent* who was accepted as an equal by the iconoclastic vanguard intellectuals of his time.

One is reminded of the career of Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) whose unmatched text *On War* (1832) is as much more an exemplar of nineteenth-century German approaches to philosophical analysis—with assertions, examinations of how they fail when taken to the extreme, new assertions, and syntheses—than it is a guide to actual war-making and who was accepted socially as a man of culture and intellect as well as a master of war.

That the Chinese case should be similar in certain ways is not surprising. What is puzzling in retrospect is that for so long a time scholars could have imagined that Chinese literati, who took all under heaven as their own responsibility, could somehow have avoided the chief activity of the state, and the most dangerous challenge to its survival: namely, war. Against this several contributors note the continuing popular Chinese fascination with battle, knights errant, swordplay, *Three Kingdoms*, and so forth.

It is nevertheless undeniable that official Chinese culture did not pay attention to war comparable to what is found in the West. Heroic martial images, equestrian statuary, etc., are relatively rare even today (for many years no official memorial or museum in Beijing commemorated World War II. Only in 1987 was a museum opened, followed by a field of memorial sculptures which, when visited the day after its opening, was already showing signs of decay).

The question persists, then, of why, in nearly all traditional Chinese historical writing and most official governmental self-presentation (save the Qing and of course modern China) we find what I believe David A. Graff has called “the ellipsis of battle”—the bare-bones records that X met Y at Z, and X triumphed. No more. In a chapter that demonstrates how much one can find by careful digging and thought, Graff examines this problem. He finds that even official reports of victories were largely standardized, and that only anecdotes, rather than full battle analyses, are to be found even in biographies of important military figures. He attributes this, to oversimplify a bit, to redaction: the people who prepared the reports were by and large not eyewitnesses nor did they know much about military operations. What they did know were numerous templates for such documents, found in texts from at least the *Shu jing* 書經 onwards—just as what most Chinese today know of war is what is found in official presentations, peopled by such imaginary figures as “warlords,” handsome but treacherous Kuomintang officers, heroic guerrillas, and so forth.

If the highly polished surface of official historiography frustrates the efforts of even the most sophisticated military historians, where then do we turn? Unofficial records exist and can be informative, as Grace S. Fong demonstrates. The diaries and poetry that she examines, from the time of the Ming-Qing transition and mostly from Jiangnan 江南, provide a personal perspective on the violence of the times. Unfortunately it is difficult for the historian of war to build a narrative on such sources, informative and affecting as they are. Furthermore, discoveries of hitherto unknown texts starting in the 1970s, along with archaeological work can be squeezed hard, as Robin D. S. Yates demonstrates, to establish facts that are not obvious from the written record: in his chapter, for example,

the degree to which civilian law was affected by military usages. Yates's descriptions, e.g. of the way that presentation of heads of slain enemies would raise one in rank order, and the consequent danger that one might behead one's comrades in the search for status, is concrete, fascinating, and clearly the product of much hard thinking about what the sources can yield. Another example of how much can be reconstructed from text and dead reckoning is the chapter by the late Edward L. Dreyer on the War of the Eight Princes—usually dismissed with a sentence or two, but which on further examination proves to be a formidably complex.

Operational information can be gleaned as well, though not comprehensively. Wisdom about operations was embodied in strategems: roughly speaking, more than what we would call an operational plan; rather a plan in which deception and ruse were added to the operation in order to derive the maximum psychological effect from whatever was done. Chinese literature and folk tradition are full of anecdotes about strategems; the ability to formulate them was esteemed far more than valour, for if the strategem was appropriate, it would succeed, so it was thought, regardless of how heroically or not individuals fought. One of the most popular strategems was the feigned withdrawal, which brings us to a second important point that emerges from this collection. This is that while operational aspects of Chinese warfare are difficult to know, the general strategic approaches, with arguments about them, are relatively accessible, in veritable records toward the end of the Imperial period, and in other sources, notably biographies, for earlier periods.

At root was what might be called “the problem of the *hu* 胡.” This is a character that, as Jaroslav Průšek pointed out long ago, does not occur in the Confucian classics. “Barbarians” at the time those were composed were, at least in theory, considered mostly amenable to sinicization and assimilation, which meant that what might have been thought of as a military task was in fact understood to be cultural. If true, this would have been indeed fortunate, but it was not, and like other sedentary civilizations around the world, the Chinese were confronted, shortly after the definitive texts of their culture had been completed, with unassimilable nomadic adversaries who had no interest in Chinese civilization nor any desire to become Chinese—and who, moreover, were more than a match for most Chinese forces.

These facts created an impossible dilemma on which dynasty after dynasty impaled itself. If one followed the precepts of the classics, one would treat the nomads as lower beings, to be chastised and eventually civilized. If one acted pragmatically, for example by entering into a dialogue of equals, that was tantamount to betrayal of basic principles: hence such counter-productive actions as the killing of envoys sent by the nomads. The solution would be somehow to overawe the nomads and force them to submit: hence repeated campaigns, mostly failures, for example into the region of the Ordos and beyond, which may be found, listed one after another as if they were essentially all the same problem (which to some extent they were) found in a wide range of encyclopedias, and served nicely as a source of precedents for debates that came to be somewhat choreographed.

Peter C. Perdue does a masterful job of presenting Ming border policy as a single enterprise, although a controversial one, in which personnel often moved from one frontier to another, where however they might encounter quite different circumstances. This was particularly true of complementarity, or lack thereof, of economic or commercial, and military components. In the northwest these were mutually supporting. In the southeast, against the so-called pirates, they were not.

Rafe de Crespigny deals in detail with the military and diplomatic aspects of latter Han dealings with the Xiongnu 匈奴, pointing out for example how the Han destruction of the southern Xiongnu kingdom, satisfying as it may have been, proved harmful strategically by eliminating a buffer between Chinese lands and those of far stronger and irreconcilable nomads.

Such errors continue to be a feature of Chinese foreign policy and military behaviour. Consider, for example, the tactical victory China scored in her war with India in 1962. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), long a would-be friend and admirer of China, as an examination of his library at Teen Murti house in New Delhi quickly discloses, was utterly humiliated and baffled. This followed on the heels of the Chinese conquest of Tibet, likewise a tactical success. But viewed geopolitically, India with her large population, technological sophistication, and so forth, poses a strategic problem for China on her southern frontier that quite simply cannot be managed militarily save at the cost of nuclear war. For the two states to trust one another and be able to work together, some buffer between them is essential. That role was played superbly by the autonomous Tibetan region. Now that Tibet is thoroughly militarized and Chinese missiles peek over the Himalayas, China is in a geopolitical situation in which real reconciliation or even trust with India is wellnigh impossible, absent a major strategic rethinking.

I have left till last consideration of the inescapable question of what exactly military culture is. As Peter Perdue notes rather sharply “the word *culture* . . . is one of the most contested terms in the human sciences” (p. 317). Traditionally it has meant cultivation, as of a crop. In modern social science usage, however, it is a product of the regular process of packing and unpacking characteristic of e.g. anthropology. A generation or two ago most anthropologists were “lumpers” who reacted to the vast numbers of artefacts flooding into western collections by unifying them as manifestations of a given culture. We see this in Ruth Benedict’s (1887–1948) *Patterns of Culture* (1934) with a preface by her fellow student Margaret Mead (1901–1978). Of course some material products of a given culture may or may not share much in common with other such products. Fabric designs may be highly culture-dependent, but metallurgy may not be, or for that matter weaving.

Particularly problematical is the notion of military culture. Do different societies have fundamentally different approaches to the waging of war? Or do issues such as recruitment, finance, and technology, which carry no flags, outweigh the cultural factor, if indeed it exists? My own view is that culture does matter. I once defended this view against a largely hostile group of political scientists by posing the following question:

suppose you are a commander who is being attacked and that you have a device that will answer any questions you may have about the attacker, in the order that you ask them: e.g. From what direction are they coming? What sort of guns do they have? How fast are they moving? Do they have air support? etc., etc.—I spelled out my examples rather slowly when a voice from the back piped up “Is it the Germans?” which brought down the house. I believe that whether it is the Germans (or the Chinese) matters a lot—although an eminent political scientist told me that my example was the single stupidest argument he had ever heard in his life—which reflects the culture-free way in which much political theory, notably realism, treats the state.

A good deal of what we think of as Chinese military culture, moreover, is the product of the absorption of steppe military ways, sometimes at the top, as when a warring states king decreed adoption of cavalry combat or the Ming adopted almost without modification the Yuan military system; sometimes as the result of mixing, at a lower level, of Chinese and non-Chinese soldiers as in the conquest dynasties. This important topic is treated in the chapter by Jonathan Karam Skaff.

Nicola Di Cosimo attempts to give content to the rather inchoate notion of military culture by asking some specific questions. Only one of the contributors really tries to answer them systematically: that is Michael Loewe in his definitive examination of the Han army.

Peter Perdue, modifying Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), proposes a new terminology for discussions of the seeming domestic cultural clash over how to deal with unassimilable adversaries: instead of talking about the “idealists” wedded to Confucianism, who tend to seek maximum military results (e.g. the destruction of the nomads) with relatively minimal physical means, and their adversaries, the militarily experienced pragmatists who oppose them, he suggests using the terms “logic of theory” and “logic of practice.” This is a good way to avoid cultural essentialization, examples of which are alluded to by several authors.

Thus Robin Yates quotes Herbert Franke (1914–) on the ostensibly perfect mechanism of the Chinese army: “In medieval China the army was still considered as a body which could be governed by an almost automatic mechanism of intimidating punishments and tempting rewards. From the commander-in-chief down to the last soldier everybody was nothing but a piece on a chess-board [*sic*] whose movements were predictably controlled by the automatism of psychological pressure” (p. 43).

The passage has much in common with the widespread popular view of Chinese administration as uniform and rational, and of Chinese people as indistinguishable and homogenous, although of course it is far more sophisticated and carefully hedged.

In his chapter on law, Yates criticises it on two accounts. First, it does not take note of the degree to which military practices affected civil practices. Second, and more importantly, “Franke misses what I would call the cultural dimensions of both the military and the law as it was actually practiced in pre-imperial and imperial China. Neither the law nor the military functioned as a secular, rational institution in a society dominated by

religious and superstitious cultural practices, administered by enlightened bureaucrats who applied modern, secular, rational psychology to control and rule the masses. Both the law and the military were means by which officials and officers eliminated polluting activity and maintained pure order, ensuring the harmonization of the human realm with the patterns and rhythms of the cosmos. The Chinese organized their units, camps, and formations according to the patterns of the stars and the constellations in the sky. They emblazoned their flags and pennons with the signs of the constellations, the images of the astral deities, and the Eight Trigrams of the *Book of Changes*. . .” (p. 43).

This is a very important point. An even more concrete sense of the superstitious element prevalent in Chinese military culture, at least at the popular level, is provided by Ralph D. Sawyer’s absorbing chapter on Martial Prognostication, and the various aspects of the *qi* 氣, which it seems one could visually inspect, and their implications.

To sum up, these fine essays demonstrate collectively that when we look for what constitutes Chinese military culture, we regularly find, at base, not something distinct to civil culture, nor something to be known through the esoteric texts of the *bingjia* 兵家, but rather an extension, at least at the mass level, of the often opaque interpretative structures based on fundamental Chinese notions about the universe and its relationship to human events, interactively linked to their civilian counterparts. Nor are such currents missing in China thinking even today.

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Women’s Ritual in China: Jiezhū (Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads) Performed by Menopausal Women in Ninghua, Western Fujian. By Neki Tak-ching Cheung. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. Pp. v + 320. \$119.95.

Neki Tak-ching Cheung’s book, *Jiezhū (Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads) Performed by Menopausal Women in Ninghua, Western Fujian*, the fruit of her doctoral research at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, contributes to providing a firsthand primary source for a ritual practised by the Ninghua Hakka women in their menopausal age, specifically the rite of “Receiving Buddhist Prayer Beads” (*jiezhū* 接珠). This is a subject generally considered as embarrassing, a censored subject that is usually hardly mentioned by its name. One speaks of advancing age, of old age as a stage in life, but not of the threshold where a woman’s status changes because she cannot conceive children any more. It is the moment when having performed her role within the lineage by giving sons to her husband, her sexuality which is not oriented any more toward conception and is the object of an increased control as attested by the myth of origin of the *jiezhū* ritual retold here by the