

China as a Military Power to 1700, Jeremy Black

China's role as one of the greatest powers in world history is both a given fact and yet curiously underplayed by military historians writing in the Western tradition. There, particularly for the last half-millennium, there is a practice of underrating the significance of China and also, in a linked fashion, offering somewhat simplistic accounts of its military history and position. The situation has improved over the last decade, but it is still all-too-easy to write histories of war that underrate the role of China. The purpose of these two articles is to offer an instructive narrative, to introduce key themes and to provide the perspective of a Western historian interested in global historical trends and concerned to place China in its proper place in them.

As a centre of early agriculture and urbanisation, China was significant from the outset. In the north China plain in the third millennium BCE, walled settlements and metal weapons appeared. The relative density of population and the nature of state development ensured that in China, as in republican and, even more so, imperial Rome and the Achaemenid Persian empire (*c.* 550-*c.* 330 BCE), developed military systems and large forces appeared.

Frontiers were a zone of dynamic interaction. For example, the Zhou dynasty (*c.* 1050-256 BCE), originally a frontier power to the west that had overthrown the Shang dynasty (*c.* 1600-*c.* 1040 BCE), was, in turn, attacked by border people, especially the Di and the Xianyun from the bend in the Yellow River to the north-west. Chariots played a major role in conflict in this period. Their use had spread to China from Central Asia in about 1200 BCE and, thereafter, chariot-borne nobles played a crucial part in battle. This was a type of warfare centred on a social élite.

There was a marked change in the character of Chinese warfare during the Warring States period (403-221 BCE), in which warring regional lords ignored and finally overthrew the weak power of the Zhou. These lords became in effect independent. The most successful of these dynasties in the end was the Qin, who, in 221-206 BCE, ruled in all of China after a major series of conquests by King Zheng (*r.* 247-210 BCE) in 230-221 BCE. He extended his power south of the Yangzi River in the 220s and to the South China Sea in 209 BCE.

Disciplined mass armies of infantry and cavalry came to dominate conflict, and new weapons were introduced, for example, in the fourth century BCE, the crossbow. The scale of conflict grew, a development that drew on organisational strength. Improved weapons and the use of mass infantry formations led to some of the largest military engagements yet recorded, although the reliability of the literary sources that record very large armies and high casualties

is in question. The rise of mass armies, a product of population growth and the introduction of conscription, ensured that chariots no longer played an important role. With iron weapons, infantry became more effective; but it was also necessary to develop iron casting. Much of the Chinese infantry was armed with spears. Cavalry was introduced from the fourth century, as the northern state of Jin responded to the horsemen of non-Chinese peoples to the north. Siege warfare developed with the use of siege towers and stone-throwing catapults against cities protected by thick earth walls. The scale of conflict contributed, in the fourth and third centuries, to the development of military treatises, for example those of Sunzi and Sun Bin.

This period suggests that institutions, not technology, drove change in Chinese military history. The first element of the Warring States's military 'revolution' to appear was conscription for mass infantry armies, and these were the result of developments in administrative technique and in the extension of state authority over rural populations. Use of iron weapons on a large scale, and the introduction of the crossbow, came later. Similarly, when gunpowder weapons subsequently appeared, they did not transform warfare in China to anywhere near the extent they were to do in Europe.

The marked growth of Chinese power under the Qin in the third century BCE, with major extensions of territorial control (Qin power far exceeded the Shang and the Zhou, both loose hegemonies limited to north China), brought new external opponents, especially among the nomadic steppe people to the north. The Qin and their predecessors in the Warring States period built a series of walls, including the Long Walls of Wei, Zhao and Yan (c. 353-290 BCE), which testified to the sense of challenge from the nomadic people in the arid steppe north of China, and their well-trained mounted archers. These walls also indicated China's organisational powers.

The Qin empire was overly dependent on the character of the ruler. Zheng's death was followed by conflict in the ruling family, military disaffection and popular uprisings. The eventual civil war was won by Gaozu, who took the title King of Han. The Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) built a new Great Wall to prevent attack from the north, and also established a system of garrisons to provide cohesion to their far-flung empire, which eventually extended into Korea, Vietnam and Central Asia. Similarities between the military arrangements of the Han and Roman empires included sophisticated logistical systems, and the use both of military colonies and of non-native troops.

The Han were challenged by the Xiongnu confederation of nomadic tribes, the first empire to control all of Mongolia. The Han responded not only with walls but also with large-scale offensives during the years 201-200 BCE (a disaster that ended with the army encircled and the Emperor suing for peace) and 129-87 BCE, that of 97 BCE involving the use of about

210,000 troops. To confront the Xiongnu, the Han had to build up their cavalry. Reliance on conscription to raise a mass army was replaced by the build-up of a smaller professional force. The tension between the two has frequently played a role in military history, including that of China.

Chinese relations with nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples of the steppe combined military force with a variety of diplomatic procedures, including *jimi* or ‘loose rein’, which permitted the incorporation of ‘barbarian’ groups into the Chinese realm. Their chiefs were given Chinese administrative titles, but continued to rule over their own people in traditional fashion. This could assist the policies of divide and rule that were important to the Chinese influence in the steppes.

Under the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), the army was successfully used to check external challenges. Traditional Chinese methods – trying to divide the tribes, to win them by trade, tribute and diplomacy, and to fortify against them – were followed, in 630, by a successful campaign which won control of the Ordos and south-western Mongolia. The Tang benefited from their ability to emulate the operational behaviour and cavalry forces of their opponents, with their emphasis on speed and surprise. In the 640s and 650s, China launched expeditions into Central Asia, although in 751, near Lake Balkhash, an Arab army under the Governor of Samarkand defeated a Chinese army. As a result, the expansion of the Tang dynasty into western Turkestan was halted.

The situation was transformed when the Mongols conquered China in the thirteenth century. The Mongols benefited from the division of China between the Jurchen Jin empire of northern China (itself the creation, in the 1120s, of earlier invaders from the steppe), and the Song empire of southern China. The Jurchens were attacked in 1211, their capital, Beijing, sacked in 1215, and the Jurchens driven south of the Yellow river, where they were crushed in 1234. The Song resisted the Mongols until 1279, but the Mongols became the first steppe force to conquer China south of the Yangzi river.

In turn, rebellions against Mongol rule in southern China led to the establishment of the Ming dynasty by Zhu Yuanzhang in 1368 after the Mongol emperor had fled from Beijing ahead of the approaching army sent north from Zhu’s headquarters at Nanjing. However, in 1449, the Yingzong emperor was captured and his army destroyed at Tumu after a foolish advance into the steppe against the Mongols had been followed, by a disastrous retreat in which the rearguard had been destroyed, next by the mistaken establishment of a waterless camp that had been swiftly surrounded by the well-led Mongols, and then by the destruction of the Chinese army when it tried to break out. The defeat greatly influenced Ming policy and brought to an end a period in which the Ming had launched numerous offensives beyond the

Great Wall and taken the war to the Mongols. Instead, the Ming thereafter largely relied on a defensive strategy based on walls.

The nature of the Ming military system is one that has attracted considerable interest in modern China, not least because its Manchu replacement has not always been seen as rooted in China itself. This issue of ethno-genesis is a complex one, not least as the Manchu acculturated, while the bulk of their soldiers were Han Chinese, but the Ming system is certainly instructive for long-term trends. The difficulty facing a state with commitments along long frontiers is clear. Alongside challenges from the steppe, there was, for example, the issue of troubled relations with Dai Viet (North Vietnam), which had recognised the nominal suzerainty of Mongol China in 1288 and been conquered by the Ming in 1407. However, serious resistance began in 1418 and led to the Ming expulsion in 1428.

The Ming also had to face internal resistance, notably from tribal peoples. Domestic resistance, by peasants and other rebels commanded by charismatic leaders, was to play a key role in the fall of the Ming in the 1640s, which serves as a reminder of the danger of assuming that the Manchu conquest in some way represented a clear contrast between Chinese and non-Chinese forces. Indeed, in many respects, the Manchu conquered China with Chinese assistance, repeating a pattern that was common with imperial expansion, for example the Mughals and, later, British in India. Ming generals who had been battling the Manchu switched sides in response to the strife within China, and then helped in its conquest.

This process looked toward the latter nature of Manchu armies. The banner forces were a combination of Manchu, Mongol and Chinese units, while the Green Standard forces were entirely Chinese. The latter proved a key element, notably in suppressing rebellion by dissident provincial governors in the 1670s and 1680s, the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories.

Considering Chinese military history up to 1700, therefore, draws attention to key elements some of which are still of considerable relevance. First, as in other states and societies, including, in the seventeenth century, Russia, France, Spain, Turkey, and Britain, rebellion was a central element in politics, and the military acted as the means to deter or suppress rebellion. In the broadest sense of the term, military history also has to address the means and purposes of rebellion. Chinese regular forces were challenged by rebellions arising from a range of causes. These rebellions caused greatest problem, as in the 1640s, when China also faced serious war abroad, a feature also seen in Spain with the Catalan and Portuguese rebellions in 1640, and in France with the beginning of the *Fronde* in 1648. Conversely, when China did not face such war, then it proved easier to suppress major rebellions, as with the Rebellion of the Three Feudatories in the 1670s or the White Lotus Rebellion in the 1790s.

Secondly, if China could maintain domestic cohesion, then it was a formidable military force. The resource base was the greatest in the world, while the organisational capacity enabled the deployment of considerable numbers across a great distance. This was essentially a matter of land forces, although Chinese naval capacity was shown in the ability to mount expeditions against Japan and Java in the thirteenth century, into the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth, against Japanese invaders of Korea in the 1590s, and to gain control of Taiwan in the late seventeenth.

Thirdly, that this naval capacity did not lead to long-range maritime activity ensured that China as a major power would be different to the powers of Western Europe in a fashion that was far from inevitable. For example, in the first millennia BCE and CE, there had been no such contrast between European and Chinese power.

Fourthly, China faced a high level of disruption and military effort, due not only to the major external challenges that engage attention, notably the Mongols, but also to a more persistent problem of maintaining control over border areas, however the border is defined. This was a case not only of external frontiers but also of inner ones, which, for China, were particularly seen in the case of areas occupied by non-Han peoples, notably in south-west China. For example, in the 1590s, tensions over Han intrusions and governmental authority interacted with internal rivalries in the Yang clan, which had hereditary overlordship over Bozhou, the mountainous region bordering the three provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou and Huguang. This resulted in conflict with the government, a conflict in which the Miao people eventually supported Yang Yinglong, who was able to deploy about 100,000 men.

The course of the conflict reflected the contrast between China, a great state that needed to balance differing commitments over a wide area, and, on the other hand, a local force that lacked such problems but, in this case, was unable to benefit from external support. Ming efforts in south-west China were limited while conflict with Japan in Korea took precedence, but, in 1599, after the Japanese attacks had ceased, Wanli approved a counter-offensive. The initial Ming force was destroyed in 1599, as a result of an effective feint by Yang, but, in 1600, over 200,000 troops were deployed. Most were provincial and tribal forces, providing the necessary manpower, but, crucially reflecting the value of trained forces, there were also experienced units from the war in Korea which led each advancing column.

In the face of converging columns, the mountains and ravines provided no refuge. Yang committed suicide, and the hereditary overlordship was ended. The control of such areas was related to international relations, a theme still relevant today. Overlapping with these frontier conflicts, there were intermittent border wars with Burma, notably in the 1580s-

90s and 1760s. The political context of conflict and confrontation, domestic and international, provided a link to the more modern situation.