

# Characteristics of Chinese Military Culture: A Historical Perspective

Zhang Heng

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## **Introduction**

Military culture influences military thinking and military strategy. Today, the armed forces of the major powers have the goal of defending their national interests and contributing to world peace. For geographical and historical reasons, Chinese military culture developed its own unique orientation. Just as culture is what makes groups different from each another and distinguishes man from the animals, so too is military culture to what distinguishes the armed forces from other social groups. Similarly, Chinese military culture makes China's armed forces different to those of other countries. These cultural differences express themselves in the characteristics of various countries' armed forces. Studying Chinese military culture is thus a path toward a better understanding of the characteristics of the Chinese armed forces.

## Definition of Military Culture

There is no authoritative definition of military culture. It can be defined in both a broad and a narrow sense. The broad sense of military culture refers not only to the organizational culture of the armed forces, but also to the culture reflected in military strategies, military thinking and even military architecture. The narrow sense of military culture, on the other hand, usually only refers to the culture of the organization or institutions of the military. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) defines military culture as “an amalgam of values, customs, traditions and their philosophical underpinnings that, over time, has created a shared institutional ethos.”<sup>1</sup> This definition seems to ignore the “military” dimension and is more akin to a definition of “organizational culture.” Quoting Edgar Schein’s classic definition, Don M. Snider and his associates give another definition: “Military culture is the deep structure of organization drawn from the Army’s past successes and from its current interactions with the environment. It is rooted in the prevailing assumptions, values, and traditions which collectively, over time, have created shared individual expectations among the members of the Army profession.”<sup>2</sup> Snider agrees with James Burk that military culture includes four factors, which are: (1) discipline; (2) professional ethos; (3) ceremony and etiquette; and (4) cohesion and esprit de corps.<sup>3</sup> However, it seems that these four elements could be the elements of any kind of organizational culture. The above two definitions given by CSIS and U.S. scholar Don M. Snider apply more to the narrow sense of military culture. Anthony King has argued that military culture refers simply to “the collective activities of the armed forces... the distinctive practices which military

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<sup>1</sup> CSIS Report, *American Military Culture in the Twenty-First Century: A Report of the CSIS International Security Program / Project Coauthors*, Edwin Dorn, Howard D. Graves ; Working Group Chair, Walter F. Ulmer, Jr.; Project Director, Joseph J. Collins; Survey Coordinator, T.O. Jacobs (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2000), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Don M. Snider, Paul Oh, Kevin Toner, “The Army’s Professional Military Ethic in an Era of Persistent Conflict,” 6, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=895> (accessed November 20, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Don M. Snider, “An Uninformed Debate on Military Culture,” *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 1, (Winter 1999, 12), 119, <http://www.fpri.org/americanvulnerable/08.UninformedDebateonMilitaryCulture.Snider.pdf> (accessed March 10, 2013).



groups perform together [and] their common understandings which identify shared goals and the collective means by which they will achieve these ends."<sup>4</sup> He points out that in his article: "the analysis of military culture will primarily examine the conceptual element of the armed forces, concentrating, in particular, on doctrine. It will examine how the armed forces establish their collective goals and seek to achieve them."<sup>5</sup> This definition may better reflect the connotations of military culture in the broad sense.

In the present paper it is assumed that military culture refers to a broader set of concerns than simply the armed forces' organizational or institutional culture. The perspective of war, as well as military philosophy, which is embodied in battles and military development, should not be ignored.

However, there is another way to make a distinction between the broad and narrow sense of military culture. In China, there is a discussion as to how many levels the military includes. Some scholars prefer to divide military culture into three levels, i.e. the conceptual, the institutional and the matériel level. Others define military culture as having two levels, the conceptual and the matériel. The Chinese scholar Ni Lexiong has argued: "All the conceptual and matériel products are created in military activities during a civilizing process."<sup>6</sup> Also, some argue that the institutional and matériel levels are only the carriers of the conceptual, so the conceptual level is at the center of military culture, and the definition of military culture should be "the conceptual products that have been created in military activities." This includes "military thinking, military academics, military knowledge, military concepts and military thought, military tradition, faith of serviceman, morale of soldiers, military psychology, military spirit, habits and the scientific and technological factors in military equipment."<sup>7</sup> So, according to the above debates, the broad sense of military culture could include all three levels, while the narrow sense refers just to the conceptual level.

This paper takes military culture to be more than a kind of organizational or institutional culture, and assumes that its core connotations are at

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony King, "Towards a European Military Culture?" *Defence Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (September 2006), 258–59.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ni Lexiong, "Zhongguo gudai junshi wenhua guannian dui shijie heping de yiyi" [The significance of the conceptions in ancient Chinese military culture to world peace], *Junshi Lishi Yanjiu* [Military history studies], No. 2 (2001), 152.

<sup>7</sup> Xu Changan, "Junshi wenhua yu shehui wenhua" [Military culture and social culture], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* [China military science], No. 3 (1998), 52.

the conceptual level. In this way, military culture refers mainly to the concepts and philosophy that are reflected in military activities, from decision-making, command, military operations and management to construction, which can create a unique organizational atmosphere, and form special patterns of behavior. Military culture has a long-term impact, and over time, a certain degree of adjustment and development may occur. The unique conception and philosophy reflected in military activities shape the unique characteristics of a country's military culture, which distinguish it from those of other countries.

A summary of the characteristics of traditional Chinese military culture will be presented. Here it is important to note that the term "traditional" does not imply that such characteristics are no longer in existence. In fact, most of them are still at the core of Chinese contemporary military culture, even if some backwards traditions have been abandoned. Then, after these characteristics are listed, the expressions of, reasons for and influences on the characteristics of traditional Chinese military culture will be discussed. Finally, some developments in or reforms of Chinese traditional military culture will be brought up.

## The Characteristics of “non-war” and “shenzhan”

The concept of “non-war” means not taking war as a means to solve problems, while “shenzhan” is an ancient Chinese word, meaning “to be cautious of war.” These two concepts are reflected in history, as the Chinese people always took war to be the last resort and did not resort to force unless it was inevitable. Mozi (also known as Mo Tzu, 486 BC–378 BC), a Chinese philosopher who lived during the early Warring States Period, is famous for his conception of feigong [non-offensive]. He argued that war is an extremely cruel social activity, and pointed out that “there will be tens of thousands killed with thousands of woman becoming widows, before a city of three miles or seven miles can be occupied.”<sup>8</sup> Mozi used the word “uncountable” eight times in his article “Feigong” to describe the ruthless nature of war, which kills people directly or indirectly.<sup>9</sup> Thus, he pointed out that to attack another country is the biggest injustice in the world; disputes between countries should be dealt with by peaceful means. Not only Mozi, but also Taoists and Confucianists held the same view of war. Laozi (also known as Lao Tzu), the founder of the Taoist School, said that “In general, beautiful martial displays are inauspicious artifacts. Natural kinds should perhaps eschew them.”<sup>10</sup> Confucianism emphasizes benevolence, righteousness, manners, wisdom and credit, opposes war between countries and advocates the prohibition of killing and injury. One of the most famous ancient Chinese philosophers of the Confucian school, Mencius, said: “There are men who say, ‘I am skillful at marshaling troops, I am skillful at conducting a battle!’ They are great criminals.”<sup>11</sup> This reflects a strong anti-war sentiment. In China, even military strategists of the Bingjia School,<sup>12</sup> who specialized in the art of war, also emphasized the concepts of “non-war” and “shenzhan.”

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<sup>8</sup> *The Complete Works of Motzu in English*, trans. Dr. Cyrus Lee (Beijing: The Commercial Press 2009), 88.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>10</sup> *Tao Te Ching on the Art of Harmony: The new illustrated edition of the Chinese philosophical masterpiece*, trans. Chad Hansen (London: Duncan Baird Publishers, 2009), 100.

<sup>11</sup> *The Chinese Classical Work Commonly Called the Four Books (1828)*, trans. Late Rev. David Collie (Gainesville: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints 1970), 176.

<sup>12</sup> *Bingjia* is a term that usually refers to ancient Chinese thinkers who specialized in the art of war.

The famous military strategist Sunzi (also known as Sun Tzu) used to say that “to fight a hundred battles and win each and every one of them is not the wisest thing to do. To break the enemy’s resistance without fighting is.”<sup>13</sup> Also, there is a saying in Wei Liaozi’s *Art of War*: “Weapons are evil implements. War is contrary to virtue. The post of the general is an office of death and lives. Thus only when it cannot be avoided does one employ them.”<sup>14</sup> The Chinese believe that enlightenment is more effective than using force when dealing with an enemy. Confucius said, “Now if things are thus, and people at a distance after all do not serve you, then cultivate learning and virtue to entice them to come.”<sup>15</sup> They stressed the importance of winning people by virtue rather than by force, as armed oppression can only solve problems temporarily, but not fundamentally.

The pacifist view of war that Chinese military culture has inherited is different from the conception of some Western military strategists and thinkers. The famous German military strategist Carl von Clausewitz argued that there are many ways to the aim, that is, to the attainment of the political object; but that the only means is combat, and that consequently everything is subject to a supreme law, which is the decision by arms. He also believed that the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces is therefore always the superior and more effectual means, to which all others must give away.<sup>16</sup> In this sense he had a different viewpoint than Sunzi on breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting, and pointed out that “now, philanthropists may easily imagine there is a skillful method of disarming and overcoming an enemy without great bloodshed, and that this is the proper tendency of the Art of War. However plausible this may appear, still it is an error which must be extirpated; for in such dangerous things as war, the errors which proceed from a spirit of benevolence are the worst.”<sup>17</sup> Hegel argued that “finite pursuits are rendered unstable, and the ethical health of peoples is preserved. Just as the movement of the ocean prevents the corruption which would be the result of perpetual calm, so by war people

<sup>13</sup> Sunzi: *The Art of War*, ed. Wu Rusong and Wu Xianlin, trans. Lin Wusun (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, and Changsha: Hunan People’s Publishing House, 1999), 17.

<sup>14</sup> John A. Lynn, *Battle: a history of combat and culture* (Boulder: Westview Press), 44.

<sup>15</sup> *The Four Books*, 79.

<sup>16</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Colonel J.J. Graham (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008), 46–59.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

escape the corruption which would be occasioned by a continuous or eternal peace.”<sup>18</sup> Such belief that war is necessary even in the absence of a threat is quite opposite to the conception of Chinese military culture.

One point in particular should be explained. Just as there are philosophers in Western countries like Immanuel Kant who advocated perpetual peace, ancient China did have philosophers who had the same view of war as Clausewitz, but their philosophies never became the mainstream. Legalism was a school of thought in the Warring States Period, which had some representatives who argued that “it is feasible to start a war in order to prevent one; it is feasible to kill a person in order to save more.”<sup>19</sup> They believed that it is just to use force when facing the threat of war; only a prosperous country with a powerful army can take a preemptive strike and thus achieve stability and security. Some of them even argued that if there was no war, how could a country profit from it? However, this philosophy was only accepted by decision-makers in the Warring States Period, before ancient China had been unified by the Qin Dynasty. After the unification of China in 221 BC, in order to better consolidate imperial rule, Confucianism quickly occupied a dominant position. During the Han Dynasty, Emperor Wudi issued the policy of “Banning the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thoughts and Honoring Confucianism Alone” and for more than 2,000 years, no school of thought was able to shake Confucianism’s status. This had a fundamental influence on Chinese military culture, as Confucianism influenced the ideology of Bingjia and informed the concepts of “non-war” and shenzhan” in Chinese military culture.

At their root, the concepts of “non-war” and “shenzhan” in China’s military culture come from the view in Confucianism and Taoism that man is born to be good. In the same way as the Western philosophers, ancient Chinese thinkers had three kinds of perspective on human nature: (a) man is born to be good; (b) man is born to be bad, and (c) human nature can be either good or evil. As the impact of Confucianism and Taoism grew, the theory of the original goodness of human nature generally became the leading view. Thus, the Chinese people believe the old saying that “a man’s life begins with a good nature.” Mencius said, “The Virtue of man’s nature

<sup>18</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 258ff.

<sup>19</sup> Shang Yang, *Shang Shu Jun: Huace* [The book of Lord Shang], 37, <http://21book.jlmpc.cn/中国文学卷/诸子百家/法家/商君书.pdf> (accessed March 9, 2013).

resembles the downward flowing of water. Man are all naturally virtuous, the same as all water naturally flows downwards."<sup>20</sup> According to this logic, it is possible to win people by virtue, the conflict between people can be solved by enlightenment and the use of force can be avoided. As the antithesis of good human nature, war is the root of evil, which is why a country should do everything possible to avoid it.

The ideas of "non-war" and "shenzhan" have had a great influence on policy making from ancient times until today. In history, when facing harassing from attacks by nomadic groups, China's rulers usually used the pro-policy or offered amnesty.<sup>21</sup> Today, in dealing with marine territorial disputes with neighboring countries, the Chinese government adheres to the principle of "putting aside disputes and seeking common development." Even when China's military strength is stronger than that of some neighboring countries, China insists on solving disputes through peaceful means.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Four Books*, 141.

<sup>21</sup> "Pro-policy" refers to the policy of making peace with rulers of minority nationalities in the border areas by marriage.

## Valuing Morality and Justice over Interests

When war is inevitable, ancient Chinese leaders were accustomed to first consider the problem of whether the war was “right” or “wrong,” rather than the interests at stake in the war. The Chinese people only accept “just wars,” which are moral wars with the goal of striking back against attacks, consoling the people, punishing the wicked, and fighting for morality and justice instead of fighting for interests. In China’s traditional military culture, if a war is seen as necessary to enter into, then it must be a “just war.” Military strategists of the Bingjia School pointed out: “In general, when employing the military, do not attack cities that have not committed transgressions or slay men who are innocent [...] the military provides the means to execute the brutal and chaotic and to stop the unrighteous.”<sup>22</sup> There is a well known old saying in China that “the use of troops is not in order to pursue the expansion of territory or to seek treasures, but to preserve the country from subjugation, save the family from extinction, and to put down the world’s turmoil to remove the scourge of the people.”<sup>23</sup> Sunzi gives five fundamental factors to assess the outcome of a war. The first one is the “dao,” which stands for “moral influence.”<sup>24</sup> King Wu’s crusade against King Zhou because of his cruelty and decadence at the end of the Shang Dynasty is a good example of such a “just war.”

On the other hand, Confucianism emphasized order, and the ancient Chinese believed that the emperor represented justice and order. To follow orders and to obey the emperor was a kind of justice, to do otherwise would be injustice. Ancient Imperial China used to believe that it was the center of the world, and the emperors of China saw themselves as “Tianzi” (Son of Heaven) and believed that other countries should acknowledge them as such, otherwise it would be a break of order. Any disrespect to Tianzi would be viewed as an injustice. This is a backwards ideology that has been

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<sup>22</sup> *Wu Jing Qi Shu* [The seven military classics] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2007), 231.

<sup>23</sup> Huainanzi, “Bing lue xun,” see *The Dao of the Military: Liu An’s art of war*, trans. Andrew Seth Meyer, Columbia University Press 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Five fundamental factors to assess the outcome of a war in Sunzi’s work are the “way” (*dao*), “heaven” (*tian*), “earth” (*di*), “command” (*jiang*), “rules and regulations” (*fa*).

eliminated since the end of Imperial China in 1911. But in its history, Chinese civilization used to be very advanced and attractive, so other countries were willing to accept China as a leader and learn from its culture. Chinese emperors usually adopted a policy of appeasement and rewarded these countries, demonstrating tolerance and strength as a leading country. However, sometimes, when individual countries did not recognize China's great power status and the distinguished status of the emperor, it would be seen as a break of order by ancient Chinese rulers. Usually, China would try to "civilize" such countries, but if the challenger could not be civilized, and particularly when they undertook some military provocations, a "just war" might become necessary. This kind of war was usually pursued for the sake of the distinguished status of the emperor rather than economic benefits. For example, the tribute system established by China had more symbolic meaning than economic significance. In fact, it brought on so much economic pressure that Imperial China had to restrict the times at which neighboring countries paid tribute, as each time China gave much greater rewards to neighboring countries than it received tribute in order to show a leader's generosity and strength.

Conducting war to pursue interests, such as territorial expansion or to plunder resources has always been criticized in China, because it is contrary to the mainstream values. Emperor Yang Di of the Sui Dynasty, one of the rare leaders who used to start wars of conquest, is criticized for having been greedy and brutal, even in the contemporary Chinese history textbooks of middle-school students.

In contrast, the wars started by Western countries are usually accompanied by a clear pursuit of interests. Ever since the ancient Greek and Roman era, campaigns accompanied the pursuit of economic interests. As Thucydides says, "When Greece increased in riches, Tyrants arose in the cities, and the Greeks devoted themselves more zealously to the sea."<sup>25</sup> He also noted that "the Romans by their retail military transactions had become capitalists in a strength proper to themselves."<sup>26</sup> The Crusades in the Middle Ages were not only religious wars but also wars for territory and wealth. During the process of the establishment of the colonial system, the fundamental

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, M.A. (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1857), 243.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.



goal of war was capturing markets and resources. Through the Anglo-Spanish War (1586–1604) and the Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1674), Britain established its maritime hegemony and could therefore control its maritime commercial interests. The great influence of the British East India Company can be seen behind the wars against India, China and even France. In order to expand its territory to its “natural boundary” and to pursue political and economic hegemony in Europe, France involved itself in a series of wars, until Napoleon’s Empire and its militarily expansionist behavior peaked. To pursue its “place in the sun,” Germany launched World War I, after its failure to challenge the British and French monopoly within the colonial system; 20 years later, Germany waged World War II. From Peter the Great to Catherine the Great, Russia launched several protracted wars to gain access to the sea, along with political and economic control of southeast Europe, the Middle East and the Near East. The Spanish-American War made the United States capture the Spanish colonies in South America. All in all, these wars reflect a sense of utilitarianism. The reason for such difference in characteristics between Chinese military culture and Western military culture is due to geography and culture. Western civilization was built on maritime culture. This is because Western countries usually have limited land resources, which made inter-state conflicts inevitable. As a result of objective conditions, overseas expansion or competition with neighboring countries became the main means to acquire wealth. Sometimes war is the only way to survive. In this case, if a Western country cannot achieve any national interests or development through war, then it would be a meaningless effort and a waste of valuable resources.

On the other hand, the reason why China’s traditional military culture values morality and justice over interests is also its geographical environment and its culture. Chinese civilization is built on the basis of its agrarian culture, and as ancient China was an agrarian country, wealth creation was achieved by a combination of human resources and land resources, meaning that Chinese civilization was self-sufficient and needed no external resources. To an agrarian civilization, warfare often brings not wealth but disaster. The *Dao De Jing* (also known as *Tao Te Ching*) described how “where we place a division, thorns and briars grow. In the wake of a great army inevitably lie years of calamities.”<sup>27</sup> Its agrarian civilization shapes the

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<sup>27</sup> *Tao Te Ching on the Art of Harmony*, 98.

Chinese psychology, which emphasizes harmony and stability, and pays great attention to order, all of which are core ideas in Taoism and Confucianism. Confucian philosophy emphasizes “benevolence” and “harmony.” “Benevolence” means to love people; “harmony” refers to the emphasis on kinship, stable relationships and unity. Thus, a heartless monarch is considered to be unjust, and separatist behavior causing instability is also regarded as unjust. Therefore, China’s view of war puts the emphasis on “benevolence” and “harmony” as the core purpose of war, rather than economic interests.

The impact of such characteristics of traditional Chinese military culture is far-reaching. On the one hand, it makes modern China attach great importance to the question of justice when considering a war or a military action, such as whether it has a United Nations mandate and is recognized by the international community. On the other hand, it makes China attach great importance to national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Take the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) for example: the protracted war in order to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity was costly for China. But after Japan’s defeat, China did not claim any war reparations from Japan and did not ask Japan to cede any piece of land, which is something quite rarely seen in history. This most vividly reflected the characteristic of Chinese military culture that values justice and morality over interests.

## The Defensive Character of Chinese Military Culture

China's military culture always reflects a defensive military philosophy, which is expressed through an emphasis on defense at a military strategic level. Since Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty, unified China in 221 BC in the face of the invasion of northern nomads, China implemented a long-term defensive military strategy in the form of the Great Wall, which was constructed during the Qin Dynasty. It is the largest military engineering work in Chinese history; it is a complete fortification, and is the best embodiment of China's defensive military strategy. While the mighty Han and Tang Dynasties sent troops to drive out the northern nomads, they withdrew immediately after the victory in order to consolidate their defense. In the Ming Dynasty, China had the most advanced sailing technology in the world. Starting in 1405, Admiral Zheng He, leading the most powerful fleet in the world, made seven voyages to the west and reached as far as the east coast of Africa, bringing with him porcelain, silk and tea rather than bloodshed, plundering or colonialism. His voyages preceded the voyages of Columbus and Magellan by nearly a century. However, the Ming Dynasty issued an imperial edict banning the construction of seagoing ships soon afterwards, making the world wonder: "Despite all the opportunities which beckoned overseas, China had decided to turn its back on the world."<sup>28</sup> Such defense policy was extended to the First Opium War (1840–1842): when external invasion forced China to carry out the "Westernization Movement," one of the most famous ministers, Zeng Guofan, still declared that "even if in the future China flourishes and foreign countries have declined, China will only seek to protect its people and will have no intention to invade other countries."<sup>29</sup> Until the 1911 Revolution, the leader Sun Yat-sen pointed out that "the Chinese nation advocates peace, complies with the law and is rooted in nature; unless it is the last resort of self-defense, we will definitely refuse to launch a war."<sup>30</sup> After the estab-

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<sup>28</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Gong Yuzhen, "Lun jindai Zhongguo de zhanlue wenhua zouxiang" [On the Trend of Strategic Culture in Modern China], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue*, [China Military Science], No. 6 (2000), 55.

<sup>30</sup> Ji Yunfei and Zhang Murong, "Zhongguo jindai junshi wenhua de bianqian" [The

lishment of New China, Mao Zedong insisted on implementing a national defense policy that was defensive in nature. He used to say that “we will not attack unless we are attacked.”<sup>31</sup> After the victory in the self-defense war with India (1962), China did not pursue and attack, but took the initiative to retreat, and returned the seized weapons and captives to India.

The defensive character of traditional Chinese military culture is also reflected at the level of military tactics. The Chinese military strategist Sunzi argued that “it is a rule in war that you must not count on the enemy not coming, but always be ready for him; that you must not count on the enemy not attacking, but make yourself so strong that you are invincible.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, to achieve a good defense, skilled commanders “first made themselves invulnerable.”<sup>33</sup> The defensive character of traditional China’s military culture is also discussed by Western scholars. The leading U.S. scholar on China, John King Fairbank, has pointed out that “China’s policy makers have always emphasized a defensive ground war [...] and European imperialism, the business operations as shown in the expansionist theory of different attacks.”<sup>34</sup>

As China’s territory has expanded since the unification during the Qin Dynasty, some people might ask: if one of the characteristics of Chinese traditional military culture is that it is defensive, how are we to explain this phenomenon? Based on history, it is not difficult to answer this question: first, a considerable part of the nation became Chinese territory in a peaceful way. In 1247, the eminent monk Sakya Pandita of Tubo (present-day Tibet), endorsed Prince Godan of the Mongol Khanate in Liangzhou (present day Wuwei, Gansu province of China), and agreed to the request that the Tibetan tribes submit to the Mongol Khanate. The Mongol Khanate changed its name to Yuan a few years later, i.e. the Chinese Yuan Dynasty. After this, Tibet ended its civil strife and the peaceful reunification of China began. Secondly, in order to prevent harassment by nomads and to establish a strategic buffer, ancient China expanded part of its territory in the process of

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Changes in Chinese Military Culture in Modern History], *Junshi Lishi Yanjiu*, [Military History Studies], No. 4, 2002, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Mao Zedong stated this policy during an interview on September 16, 1939.

<sup>32</sup> *Sunzi: The Art of War*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Li Jijun, “Lun zhanlue wenhua” [On Strategic Culture], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* [China Military Science], No. 1 (1997), 9.

counterattacking the nomads, such as during the counterattack against the Huns during the Han Dynasty. Thirdly, China's dominant culture is the Han culture. The expansions of territory mainly took place during the nomadic regimes, such as the Yuan Dynasty, when China was ruled by Mongols, as well as the Qing Dynasty when China was ruled by Manchus. When the Han nationality was in power, the territory of China usually remained unchanged or even decreased.

Some Western scholars have questioned the defensive character of traditional Chinese military culture. One is Alastair Iain Johnston, who presented his article "On the Western interpretation of traditional Chinese strategic thinking" at the second "International Symposium on Sun Tzu: The Art of War" (1990). He pointed out that Western studies usually believe that Chinese culture emphasizes strategic defense and underestimates the role of "pure violence" when addressing security issues, but such a conclusion is not supported by textual research. Through his analysis of Chinese ancient books on the art of war, among them Sunzi, Art of War and Wei Liaozi, Art of War, Johnston found that "the real situation is that the Chinese people advocated strategic defense, but at the same time advocated attacking, destroying and conquering the enemy; they stressed 'just war' and 'contingency' while they disregarded the constraints of war objectives, scope and methods; they took non-violent means, but also stressed the use of violence to achieve political objectives."<sup>35</sup> Basically, he disagreed with the traditional judgment that Chinese military culture is defensive, and argued that Chinese military culture actually has a very strong element of expansiveness and violence. However, there are several crucial problems with this argument. First, it confuses the distinction between tactics and strategy. Military tactics may be actively offensive, while military strategy may be exactly the opposite. What is the content of the books on the art of war? They specifically study how to prepare for war and win it, which makes it naturally difficult for them not to include any offensive and violent content, but such kinds of discussions are at the tactical level, rather than strategic planning. To depend on studying books on the art of war to come to the conclusion that China has an offensive culture, is like saying that pandas are

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<sup>35</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "Qiantan xifang dui Zhongguo chuantong zhanlve sixiang de jieshi" [On the Western interpretation of traditional Chinese strategic thinking], *Junshi Lishi* [Military History], Issue 3 (1991), 35.

predators based on studying their canine teeth. Second, he ignores the great significance of the anti-war conception when it was presented by a military strategist such as Sunzi. Johnston claims that “Sun Tzu’s well-known sayings ‘to break the enemy’ and ‘resistance without fighting’ are ideal concepts that really do not have a practical effect on the Chinese art of war.”<sup>36</sup> But he did not realize that a military strategist who was specialized in how to win a war clearly placed peaceful means above military means, which is the best reflection of Chinese defensive military culture. Third, he ignores the differences between theory and practice. The art of war is only a theory; such theories might not become a military practice and affect the final military strategic decision. When ancient Chinese policymakers had to decide whether to start a war or not, to be strategically offensive or defensive, books on the art of war were only for consulting. When examining whether Chinese military culture is offensive or defensive, it is better to study historical facts, which, as is evident in the previous analysis in this article, would argue for precisely the opposite of Johnston’s conclusion.

There are a number of reasons for China to uphold defensive military culture: (1) Geographical factors. As mentioned previously, China has a vast land area and abundant natural resources; it is able to achieve self-sufficiency in its means of production and living, without the need for external expansion to obtain land and resources. (2) The influence of the Confucian concept “rule of virtue.” In matters of foreign policy, the Chinese emperors stressed the idea of the indulgent treatment of men from a distance. In other words, they relied on soft power to establish their great power status, rather than relying on hard power such as the use of force. For example, in relations with other countries, the early Ming Dynasty emperor Zhu Yuanzhang pointed out that “the foundation of China’s security is to live in harmony with its neighbors, rather than forcing these countries to submit to China.” He also said that “since they are not a threat to China, it would be bad for us to attack them rashly.”<sup>37</sup> So it is clear that even when China was more powerful than neighboring countries, its rulers still adhered to a defensive military policy. (3) Religion has little influence on Chinese culture. Chinese

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>37</sup> Wei Zhanbin, “Zhu yuanzhang de bianfang sixiang jiqi dui mingdai bianfang de yingxiang” [Zhu Yuanzhang’s thought on frontier defense and its influence on frontier defense building in the Ming Dynasty], *Handan Xueyuan Xuebao* [Journal of Handan College], Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec. 2005), 80.

culture was more shaped by Confucianism and its emphasis on “harmony in diversity.” This is different from the Western religious conception of salvation and universalism. Therefore, in history, China has never experienced a domestic or international religious war.

The defensive character of traditional military culture still remains influential. The People’s Republic of China always adheres to a national defense policy that is defensive in nature. China’s defense white paper in 2010 clearly pointed out: “The pursuit of a national defense policy which is defensive in nature is determined by China’s development path, its fundamental aims, its foreign policy, and its historical and cultural traditions.”<sup>38</sup> To give a simple example: China is the only nuclear power that has declared that it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons.

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<sup>38</sup> Information Office of the State Council, The People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defense in 2010*, Part II: National Defense Policy, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjb/zzjg/jks/kjfywj/t812036.htm> (accessed November 22, 2012).

## Emphasis on Self-defense

Traditional Chinese military culture stresses self-defense. Historically, China rarely allied itself with other countries. Its pro-policy was not to build alliances with nomads in order to fight against those more powerful, but to prevent nomadic harassment itself; the two sides did not have the obligation to protect each other, only to make sure not to attack each other. Such a relationship cannot be regarded as an alliance, but rather as a diversionary one. China's tributary system, in the military area, was more to provide security to neighboring countries than to obtain military support. In modern times, China has long suffered external aggression, and its national sovereignty has been severely undermined, which has made the Chinese leaders pay great attention to state sovereignty and independence in military defense. Even during the Cold War when China had a brief alliance with the Soviet Union, China rejected the proposal of the Soviet Union to build a joint fleet. In contrast, Western countries attach much more importance to the use of military alliances. In history, Western countries either formed alliances to deal with a common threat, or to ensure common security through a collective security treaty. In Ancient Greece, there was the Delian League against Persia; the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) was the long struggle between the Protestant Union and the Catholic Alliance; during the Napoleonic era, most of the major powers in Europe joined the coalitions against France; after the Napoleonic war, Russia, Austria, and Prussia built the Holy Alliance in order to maintain feudal rule in Europe; facing the rise of Germany, Great Britain had to give up its "Splendid Isolation" and turned to seek a military alliance with France and Russia; both of the World Wars were confrontations between the allied forces led by Britain and France and the allied forces led by Germany; during the Cold War, in order to counter the Soviet Union, the United States and European countries established NATO; when the Soviet military threat disappeared, the European countries were still willing to accept military protection from the United States, while NATO has not only been retained, but has even continued to expand its membership. Therefore, entering into military alliances to ensure security is a significant feature of Western military culture.



There are two reasons China rarely forms alliances with other countries. First, China has faced fewer threats than the European countries over history. In the relationship with neighboring countries, China was more likely to be a provider of security than a claimer of security in ancient times. It gradually formed the habit of undertaking the defense of China's own security independently. Secondly, China's sovereignty was undermined severely in modern history, making the Chinese emphasize independence and sovereignty on a military level, which implied an emphasis on self-defense. Today, China still pursues a policy of non-alignment.

## Valuing Stratagems and Tactics over Weapons

China attaches importance to the role of stratagems and tactics. It thus practices Sunzi's insight that "the best policy in war is to thwart the enemy's strategy. The second best is to disrupt his alliances through diplomatic means. The third best is to attack his army in the field ... the best subdues the enemy without fighting, and wins total victory without wearing out his troops."<sup>39</sup> The Chinese art of war did not entirely despise the power of force but placed special emphasis on outwitting it. To outwit here refers to the use of tactics and strategies. The most typical example of valuing stratagems over weapons is the history of firearms in China. After the invention of firearms, the military theorists took extremely erroneous positions, one of which was to regard the firearm as an odd trick and to openly reject such technology when Dai Zi, a firearms expert in the early Qing Dynasty, invented the Lianzhu gun, a quite powerful repeating rifle. However, it was not used to equip the military, and even samples of the gun have long been lost.<sup>40</sup> Another extreme behavior was to try to make firearms mysterious and mislead people as to their use. In his *Huo Gong Qi Yao* (*Abstract of Firearms*), Jiao Xu said that many books and articles on firearms during that time had tried to pursue strange things and satisfy people's curiosity, and to achieve an improper purpose or to grandstand, meaning that few of them were of practical significance. Thus, although gunpowder was first invented in China, China did not become the beneficiary of it. As a result, during modern history, Chinese troops still took weapons such as spears, swords and other handheld weapons to confront foreign invaders with flintlocks in their hands, and not surprisingly, China was defeated miserably.

Western military culture is completely different. In Western countries, changes in tactics have a close relationship with the development of weapons. As the invention of the stirrup resulted in cavalry combat, the invention and development of the musket promoted changes in tactics, such as when

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<sup>39</sup> Sunzi: *The Art of War*, 17-19.

<sup>40</sup> Xu Zeping, 'Cong zhongxi fang junshi wenhua zhi bijiao kan xian shaoshu minzu junshi wenhua' [Comparing Chinese and Western military culture and understanding the military culture of Southwestern Ethnic Minorities], *Jiaoyu Wenhau Luntan* [Education and Culture Forum], No. 2 (2010), 42.

Swedish King Gustavus II Adolphus designed classical tactics combining gunners, cavalry and infantry; the improvement of field artillery and rifles made columns gradually replace line tactics; the invention of tank and aircraft brought a wave of mobile operations, the Blitzkrieg and air supremacy began to gain wide attention, classics such as *The Command of the Air*, *Armored Warfare* were published soon afterwards; the emergence of nuclear weapons brought the theory of rockets, nuclear war and deterrence; during the Cold War, with the further development of military technology, communications technology and network technology, joint operations such as Air-Land battle were launched to enhance the coordination and cooperation between the mechanized armored corps and air force units. Today, information technology breakthroughs have brought cyber war and electronic war, which are getting more and more attention.

The reason for Chinese traditional military culture's emphasis on stratagem and tactics rather than weapons is that in history China valued liberal arts over science, and this is a backwards conception. Ancient China paid more attention to social science than to natural science. Even though ancient China had made some achievements in the field of scientific research, most of the achievements received little attention from those in power. From the Sui Dynasty, the imperial examination system (the Keju system) was employed for more than 1,300 years. As the only method of selecting capable officials, the imperial examination system aimed at consolidating feudal rule; its examination included tests on Confucian classics and some other knowledge of liberal arts, while there was almost no testing whatsoever of natural science. If a man with lofty ideals wanted to stand out among people and get a better social status, he had to be able to recite the Confucian articles and to devote himself to statecraft. As a result, few people wanted to waste time on scientific research, which was of little help to them in being successful. In the military area, this tendency manifested itself as praising good stratagems and tactics more than advanced military technology. Military strategists stressed that victory depends on the person rather than the weapon and stressed mapping out a strategy to win a victory thousands of miles away, but paid less attention to technological innovations in weaponry. The famous military strategists during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Three Kingdoms Period had always been praised, especially those who defeated enemy troops by artful tactics with a force inferior in

number. However, few inventors of weaponry were remembered by people in China. In addition, Sunzi's *Art of War* also to some extent shaped the characteristic of valuing stratagems and tactics over weapons. Due to limited technical conditions at that time, Sunzi mainly discussed how to use force artfully: his famous five fundamental factors of war are "way, heaven, earth, command, rules and regulations" – the only thing missing is weaponry.<sup>41</sup> *The Art of War* appeared early, and is regarded as a classic. Sunzi himself may not have valued stratagems and tactics over weapons, but the contents of his book have had a great influence on the research direction of other ancient Chinese military strategists. The situation is just the reverse in Western history. Ever since ancient Greece, natural sciences, especially mathematics, were already well developed; philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle were often natural scientists as well. Westerners emphasized the importance of natural sciences, the Renaissance liberated people from their shackles in thinking, scientific research and technology made great progress. Western countries led all the industrial revolutions in the history of mankind. New technology was promoted and quickly applied to the military field, thus, Western countries gradually attached great importance to the innovation and replacement of new weapons and equipment.

The best evidence of the negative impact of valuing stratagems and tactics over weapons is the painful lessons of China's modern history. Today, such backwards aspects of military culture have been corrected, but the culture retains some relatively positive effects to an extent: from ancient times, Chinese people disliked weapons that represent pure violence, so China has no tradition of sparking arms races. Thus, contemporary China also has little interest in provoking an arms race or developing its armaments without control. China's military modernization is to fill the gaps rather than to seek advantage; the only purpose is self-defense.

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<sup>41</sup> Sunzi: *The Art of War*, 3.

## Valuing the Army over the Navy

Over its history, China paid more attention to army building, and neglected the navy by comparison. Geographically, China has both vast land and ocean territories; however, throughout history, the role of the ocean for China has been more that of a barrier than a channel. As Hegel said, for China “the sea is only the limit, the ceasing of the land; they have no positive relation to it.”<sup>42</sup> Its maritime technology developed early, and used to lead the world, but China’s navy was weak compared to its army for most of its history, and was even neglected at certain times. The Wu Qi Battle of the Yellow Sea in 485 BC was the first naval battle according to Chinese history, which is two hundred years earlier than the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage. During the Qin, Han and Tang Dynasties, China’s shipbuilding technology made progress and reached a world-leading level. During the Song Dynasty, China was able to build ships with a displacement of 500 tons. However, before the Song Dynasty the Chinese navy was always much weaker than its army, and has never become a strong force. The Yuan Dynasty was one of the rare periods in which China tried to be assertive at sea, as the Mongols extended their nomadic spirit of expansion to the ocean, and Kublai Khan twice sent fleets to attack Japan and later tried to attack Java. However, the Mongols were famous for their cavalry, and were more powerful fighting on horseback than on the sea, so these maritime military expeditions ended disastrously, casting a shadow over China’s thinking about its coastal defenses, confirming the emperors in their view that the ocean was a barrier rather than an object of territorial expansion. During the Ming Dynasty, the development of the Chinese navy reached a historical peak and it became the most powerful navy in the world; China defeated Japan and the Netherlands in naval battles. At one time, the Ming Dynasty had over 3,500 ships. This was the heyday of Chinese naval history, and Zheng He’s fleet made seven great voyages. However, due to the tributary system this brought minimal profit. Added to this was the huge expenditure for the navy, the growing threat of nomads and a lack of people who had a strategic vision. The ruler therefore soon banned the construction of seagoing ships, which made the Ming navy decline rapidly.

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<sup>42</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, 95.

The speed by which it faded away is a shocking record in the world's military history. In the nearly three hundred years of the Ming Dynasty, naval development lasted only a short period of fifty years at its beginning. The Qing Dynasty was the period when the northern nomadic Manchu people ruled China; the Manchus, who grew up on horseback, did not have any interest in maritime matters, and after recovering Taiwan, the residual fleet that had been incorporated from the Ming Dynasty was dismissed. Coming up to the First Opium War, China started to realize the great importance of the navy, but its defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) made the Chinese navy suffer a serious setback. From the 1911 Revolution that ended Imperial China to the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China experienced a series of wars such as the Northern Expedition, the second Sino-Japanese War and the liberation war. During this period, the Chinese mainland was the main battlefield. The Chinese army was further developed and became even more powerful, while the lack of development of the navy made it the weak link in the build-up of the Chinese military. During the Cold War, the threat of the Soviet Union made China focus more on the preparation of ground forces.

There are a number of reasons why China used to value the army over the navy. First is the geographical factor. China is a continental country. It has a vast land territory and many plains that are habitable; in ancient times when science and technology were not advanced, it was easy to take the sea as a natural barrier. The second factor is the source of the threat. In most periods of history, the major threats to China came from the Huns, Mongols and other internal minorities on the mainland, which made the Chinese policymakers focus more on army building. The third factor is the economy. As the peasant economy was dominant, China paid more attention to protecting land resources, so the national economic interest was directed towards farming, and little attention was paid to taking advantage of maritime resources. Linked to this was the fact that feudal Chinese rulers had long pursued a policy of physiocracy and restriction of business, which resulted in China's maritime trade not prospering.

By valuing the army over the navy, China's naval forces became unable to confront the gunboats of the other countries, and a huge gap in naval construction between China and other major powers was created. At present, Chinese naval power is still not strong enough to secure the critical sea lines of communication.

## The Development of Contemporary Chinese Military Culture

From a historical perspective, the impact of China's traditional military culture is dialectical. The focus has been on long-term peace but this has sometimes caused weakness. Just war has been emphasized, but this has sometimes resulted in a waste of money and fruitless fighting. An advanced Chinese army was built in ancient times, but aspects of it to some extent gave rise to the backwardness of the Chinese military in modern history; it was helpful to avoid wars, but it also brought on foreign invasions. In short, China's traditional military culture had both good and bad elements. As the wheel of history turns, Chinese and Western military exchanges become more and more frequent and Chinese military culture also goes through new developments and evolutions, of which five general trends can be identified.

First, there is still an emphasis on "non-war" and "just war," but great importance is also attached to the protection of China's national interests. In Chinese history, various views on war have been seen, the first of which was to fight only for reputation but not interests, leading to a waste of resources; as well as blind avoidance of war, leading to territorial violation. Contemporary Chinese military culture still has the characteristic of "non-war," i.e. it still stresses that war should be the last resort to solve problems. But at the same time, the core national interests, such as territorial integrity, sovereignty and national unity have become an unbreakable bottom line for the military. A lesson that China has learned from history is that a war to safeguard the legitimate interests of the country is a just war. This was concluded by Mao Zedong when he said that "we will not attack unless we are attacked; if we are attacked, we will certainly counterattack."<sup>43</sup> For example, on the Taiwan issue, China will strive for a peaceful settlement, but will not rule out the possibility of the use of force.

Second, China has gone from an emphasis on passive defense to an emphasis on active defense. In Chinese history, there is no lack of examples of too much emphasis on defense, resulting in a passive situ-

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<sup>43</sup> Mao Zedong stated this policy in an interview in 1939.

ation, making for lost opportunities to defeat invaders. During the Sino-Japanese naval battle in the 1894-1895 war, the Chinese navy was known for being the strongest in Asia. But because the commander only focused on tactical defense and tried to avoid fighting the Japanese fleet, the Chinese navy had to hole up in the port and was completely annihilated in the end. China's current defense policy of active defense is to emphasize the premise of strategic defense, combining some tactical attacks with tactical defense, in which attack is a means for defense.

Third, China has gone from valuing stratagems and tactics over weapons to paying attention to both stratagems and weapons. In modern history, Chinese military technology lagged behind that of other countries because of its backward ideas about how to build an army. The contemporary Chinese armed forces have realized that while stratagems and tactics are important, technological factors can determine the outcome of a war. Therefore, on the one hand, China continues to attach importance to military theory and the art of war in ancient China, such as the excellent military thinking of *The Seven Military Classics* and actively introduces advanced Western military thinking; while on the other hand, China keeps on strengthening the modernization of weaponry in order to bridge the technological gaps between China and other countries. It should be noted that in many areas, China's military power still falls far behind that of other major powers. The technological generation gap still exists; this is the bitter consequence of China's traditional military culture, which ignored the importance of technological development. Today, the first Chinese aircraft carrier has been launched, new-generation fighter-jets are being developed, and space and network technologies are being strengthened. However, these constructions are not in order to obtain technical advantages, or to start an arms race with other countries, but in order to make China no longer lag behind.

Fourth, China has gone from self-defense to strengthening international military cooperation and promoting common security through nonalignment. Currently, the process of globalization continues to accelerate, and the challenges facing humanity are getting increasingly complex. Cyber attacks, transnational crime, terrorism, environmental pollution, piracy and other non-traditional security issues have become common threats to all countries. Such problems cannot be solved by one country alone; military cooperation between countries is imperative. As a responsible country shouldering the



responsibility of contributing to regional stability and world peace, China is increasingly opening up to military cooperation and military exchanges with other countries. Of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, China provides the largest number of UN peacekeepers. The anti-piracy operations and joint convoys conducted by the Chinese navy and other navies in the Gulf of Aden, are one sign that China is strengthening and paying more attention to international military cooperation. The latest report of the 18th National Congress of the CPC clearly states: "China's armed forces have always been a staunch force upholding world peace and will continue to increase cooperation and mutual trust with the armed forces of other countries, participate in regional and international security affairs, and thus play an active role in international political and security fields."<sup>44</sup>

Fifth, China has gone from valuing the army over the navy to attaching equal importance to all the military services. At present, China's military development not only attaches importance to improving the quality of the army, but also to the development of the navy and air force, in order to close the gap between China and other countries. For a long time, China upheld a military structure with a much larger army than the other services, and relatively neglected the construction of the navy and air forces. In the new era, China's military development will become more and more comprehensive in order to adapt to the geographical situation with its vast land and sea territory, following the world's military development trend. However, the characteristics of Chinese military culture determine that it is impossible for China to become involved in an arms race or to seek hegemony.

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<sup>44</sup> Hu Jintao, Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, November 8, 2012, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpnc/2012-11/17/c\\_131981259.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm) (accessed November 17, 2012).



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