



## WAR AND THE EAST

By Andrew R. Wilson

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Teaching East Asian, South Asian or Middle Eastern military history permits students to explore the rich potential areas of study that encompass half the globe and trace back five thousand years. Moreover, since Asian states have historically been far larger in area and population and far more bureaucratic than Western states, they have been able to fight wars on a scale that was inconceivable in the West until modern times. As a result, Asian civilizations have had much longer experience with many of the strategic, operational and logistical issues that have been the obsession of Western statesmen and commanders since the eighteenth century.

For example, during the eleventh century China's Song Dynasty waged two wars against their Tangut neighbors in the Ordos region. The first Sino-Tangut War of 1038-1044 saw 1.25 million Chinese troops mustered against 826,000 Tanguts; a second war in the 1080s had close to a million Song soldiers driving deep into Tangut territory before their elaborate logistical train was severed by Tangut cavalry and the Song forces retreated after suffering 600,000 casualties. To the student of military history the Song defeat in the Ordos resonates more with Napoleon's nineteenth-century debacle in Russia than it does with William's 7,000-man invasion of England in 1066. The Asian experience with mass war does not predict the experience of the modern West, but it certainly anticipates critical elements of war and the West.

But it is important to see the East as more than merely a

venue for the West's wars or to reduce Asian strategic cultures, military traditions and experiences with war to stereotypes or simply the antithesis of the Western experience. Better is to look at War and the East as primarily an indigenous phenomenon.

In our own times, crises in the Middle East and Central Asia, the rise of China and India, the future of Japan and the resolution of the Korean stand-off will be defining events of the twenty-first century. Not only has the U.S. shifted its military assets decisively from the West to the East, but the military competition and dynamism that once characterized Europe have been supplanted by an apparent rush to demilitarize, whereas in Asia opposite trends are emerging. There are several arms races in progress in the region, in conventional and strategic weapons. Students will be well-served if they can judge whether these trajectories will follow the patterns of the West in the last two centuries, one of the many Asian strategic/military models, or some combination thereof.

Three distinct models demonstrate the diversity of Asian strategic/military traditions, each with its own "hook" to grab students' attention: (1) the Chinese model of the agrarian Warring State exemplified in the *Sunzi bingfa* (*Sun Tzu's Art of War*), (2) the steppe nomad predatory model typified by the Mongols, and (3) the role that the martial ethos of *Bushido* played in the rise and fall of Imperial Japan.

### SUNZI AND THE STRATEGIC CULTURE OF THE AGRARIAN WARRING STATE

*Sun Tzu's Art of War* will elicit some recognition even for the military history novice. It is the most widely read and most frequently quoted (and misquoted) work of strategic theory. It is required reading in military academies, staff colleges and business schools. It has spawned an entire cottage industry of pop strategy manuals espousing the Sunzi's relevance to sports, business, and even romance. It has been quoted in films and invoked on television shows as varied as *CSI*, *The Simpsons*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *The Sopranos*. Beyond this pop cultural cachet, the *Sunzi* remains one of the great books on war and strategic leadership.

The *Sunzi* first appeared in China's Warring States era (403-221 BCE), in the context of the rise of states that were large and lethal enough to vie for mastery over all of Ancient China. This was an era of revolutionary military/technological and agricultural/demographic and social changes--as the crossbow displaced the chariot on the battlefield, aristocratic institutions began to break down. The crossbow could not achieve its full potential as an instrument of war, and armies like that depicted at Qin Shihuang's tomb were in turn inconceivable until new social roles were created. The author of *Sunzi* is inventing the "general" and providing the conceptual framework within which the military technology and organization of his day could reach its full potential. This trend was impossible absent the bureaucratization of the Warring States and the systematic exploitation of manpower and materiel. As war became more lethal, it also became more expensive. This made the military both the guarantor of the state's wealth and power and the biggest drain on the state's resources.

One would think that such dramatic changes in the scale and scope of warfare would have demanded a complete reappraisal of strategic culture. In fact, old aristocratic values still prevailed and were being reinforced. The *Sunzi*, with its antiheroic bent, is an argument against that contradiction.

"To achieve one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the supreme excellence, to reject battle and yet force the submission of the enemy's troops is the supreme excellence."

For the aristocratic hero, victory without combat precluded a display of martial virtue and social status and completely subverted the reason for taking up arms in the first place.

The costs of the new military and the costs of protracted war also account for the *Sunzi*'s stark cost/benefit calculations:

"Generally the way of employing the military is this: 1000 fast chariots, 1000 leather carriages, 100,000 sashes and suits of armor, transport and provisions for 1000 *li*, then total expenses, the employ of liaisons and ambassadors, glue and lacquer materials, contributions for chariots and armor, amount to 1000 gold pieces per day. Only after this can 100,000 troops be raised.

If it does not profit the state, do not deploy your armies. If the objective cannot be seized, do not give battle."

Passages like these might remind one of the old saw that amateurs talk about strategy while professionals talk about logistics, but the implications go far beyond this maxim. Reading the *Sunzi* as both an historical artifact and as a response to a set of historical conditions enlivens the educational experience and makes *The Art of War* a much more interesting read. Seeing a work of strategic theory as a polemic--like Thucydides, *The Prince*, and even the Declaration of Independence--will encourage a critical appraisal of its validity, either historically or currently. It might also cause us to question whether a strategic theory written for conflicts between symmetrical bureaucratic/agrarian states within a homogeneous cultural sphere prepared the Chinese to deal with the horse nomads of

the steppe.

## THE MONGOLS

If the Chinese model is that of an agrarian state able to wage war because of its immense peacetime productivity, the Mongols (and the other horse nomads) appear to be the polar opposite. The Mongols produced so little that they waged war for profit at the expense of peaceful agrarian societies. This dichotomy is frequently reinforced in the historical records of the victimized cultures. The nomads left few of their own histories, so we mostly know them as the barbaric "other." A quotation attributed to Genghis Khan (c.1167-1227) from the Persian history sums it up nicely:

"The greatest pleasure is to vanquish your enemies and chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth and see those dear to them bathed in tears, to ride their horses and clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters."

The stark contrast between Mongol ruthlessness and the *Sunzi*'s rationality makes for a great teaching point, but rather than purely a barbaric aberration, the Mongols are the culmination of a long-standing military/strategic tradition that competed with and complemented the agrarian model. In fact, numerous rulers of China behaved more like mounted warlords than Confucian bureaucrats. The part-Turkic founders of the Tang Dynasty (617-907) and the Manchu aristocrats of the Qing (1636-1911) were obviously inclined to the nomad model, but even the ethnic Chinese that founded and consolidated the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) took many cues from their Mongol foes.

In addition to being the apotheosis of the nomad model, the Mongols of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, especially under Genghis and his immediate successors, are the one Asian military force that fundamentally changed world history. At the height of their power, Mongol khanates ruled from the South China Sea to the Black Sea and from the Russian steppe to the Persian Gulf, opening unprecedented trade, technology transfers, and intellectual exchanges between east and west. These positives must, however, be weighed against the Mongol conquest and destruction of many of the great centers of culture, trade, and learning of medieval Asia. The Mesopotamian campaign of 1257-58, led by Hulegu Khan, devastated the region and reduced once-brilliant Baghdad to a physical and cultural ruin.

The Mongols possessed both immense offensive power and a fragile system. The fractious nature of the steppe tribes meant that only an individual of immense charisma, organizational brilliance, and military genius could build and lead what Joseph Fletcher called a "supra-tribal" polity.<sup>1</sup> A fascinating subplot in the Mongol epic is the impact of the environment on military history; a dip in global temperatures in the late twelfth century affected the traditional pasturelands of north Asia and created the sense of crisis that facilitated Genghis' unification and propelled the Mongols outward. Genghis succeeded in breaking down tribal barriers enough to lead the Mongols as a coherent political and strategic entity, but the continued loyalty of his

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Fletcher, "The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, June 1986, p. 37.

subordinates required continued expansion. Given the personalistic nature of the system and the Mongol predilection for bloody succession crises, the death of the Great Khan-- Genghis in 1227 and his son Ogo dei in 1241--sapped some of the Mongols' momentum as it turned the princes away from the business of conquest and toward internal power struggles. Surprisingly, many of the institutions that Genghis had crafted endured long after his death. The question then is not why the Mongol moment was so brief, but rather why it lasted so long. One explanation may lie in the Mongols' cosmopolitanism. Given their brutal reputation it might sound strange to call the Mongols cosmopolitans, but as long as an individual had some artistic, bureaucratic, technological or military talent, the Khan cared little about their race or religion.

A final cautionary lesson regarding the Mongols is this speed with which a destructive and world-changing force can coalesce in a backward corner of the world among a people best known for their in-fighting and divisiveness.

### **BUSHIDO AND THE RISE AND FALL OF IMPERIAL JAPAN**

The story of modern Japan shows that states can make choices about their strategic cultures and military inclinations and that those choices are fraught with both opportunity and danger. The forced opening of Japan in the 1850s coincided with revolutions in Western state-making and military affairs. Following the Meiji restoration, Japan's oligarchy, the *genro*, concluded that a unified state and society were critical to national survival. The Japanese applied various European models to enhance the reach of the state, rationalize its fiscal apparatus, and unify the people under a modern, but also "Japanese," monarchy.

A critical aspect of the invention of modern Japan was the military. In terms of mechanics, it was French and later Prussian systems of organization that served as the modern part of the new Japanese military, but for the Japanese element the *genro* invoked the concept of *Bushido*, the way of the warrior. Historically Japanese warfare has been both highly ritualistic and exceptionally bloody. Japan was also a feudal society with a clearly articulated hierarchy of ranks. Just below the great houses were the samurai, whose elevated status and privilege were based on their possession of martial skill. Ideally the conduct of the samurai, including everything from dress and bearing to strictures on honor and shame, were all in accord with *Bushido*. These notions permeated high culture and popular literature in pre-modern Japan: tales of selfless and often suicidal loyalty and honor, exemplified by legends like the 47 Ronin, master-less samurai who died to avenge the murder of their lord.

In the late nineteenth century, the *genro* used these cultural models to imbue the Japanese military with a sense of cohesion and loyalty to the new Japanese state, but rather than being the sole province of the samurai class, *Bushido* was to be the way of all Japanese warriors:

"The soldier and sailor should consider loyalty their essential duty... No soldier or sailor, especially, can be considered efficient unless this spirit be strong within him. A soldier or a sailor in whom this spirit is not strong, however skilled in art or proficient in

science, is a mere puppet; and a body of soldiers or sailors wanting in loyalty, however well ordered and disciplined it may be, is in an emergency no better than a rabble... [B]ear in mind that duty is weightier than a mountain, while death is lighter than a feather. Never by failing in moral principle fall into disgrace and bring dishonor upon your name." (*Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors*, 1882)

However, much of the literature on *Bushido*, especially Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings*, was produced during the peaceful Tokugawa period (1603-1868). As the pre-Tokugawa generation of samurai faded; new generations were hard-pressed to justify their exalted role in society. Their literature idealized samurai conduct and hardened the expectations of what constituted valor and honor. In other words, by adopting this literature as their model, the Meiji elite was trying to render the exemplary ordinary and the ideal real.

Nonetheless, that animus imparted to Japanese soldiers and sailors by *Bushido* proved to be immensely valuable in Japan's imperial rise. A fanatical devotion to the emperor spurred the Army and Navy to victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, both waged against much larger opponents. Yet in both of these wars the passion of the military was subordinated to good strategy and to political control. There are, nonetheless, some hints even in these early successes of the self-destructive course that Japanese martial culture would take. A hero of both these wars was General Nogi Maresuke, one of Meiji Japan's most accomplished and widely-educated officers. Despite his professional success, Nogi was haunted by the loss of his regimental standard (a gift of the emperor) during the 1877 Satsuma Rebellion. Nogi longed to die in the service of the emperor to expunge this shame. On board the transport ferrying Nogi and the men of the Japanese Third Army to Korea in 1904, Nogi penned funerary poems for himself and for his two sons. Both sons died in the Russo-Japanese War, but Nogi survived and was feted as a national hero. Still consumed by shame, Nogi and his wife committed ritual suicide on the day of the Meiji emperor's funeral in 1912.

That this undercurrent was present does not mean that Japan's path to national self-destruction was inevitable. For much of the 1910s and 1920s Japan was a "responsible stakeholder" in the international system and kept its militaristic tendencies in check, but beginning with the Great Depression Japan experienced a perfect storm. The oligarchy of the Meiji had died off, leaving lesser men at the helm. What competent civilian leaders there were, were increasingly cowed by a radicalized and ultra-nationalist military and finally economic crises and resource concerns were compounded by looming security threats (both real and imagined) on every front.

What we see in the 1930s and 1940s is a martial tradition seemingly unfettered by any strategic or political constraints. During the 1930s, the Imperial Japanese Army became increasingly bogged-down in an indecisive war in China, where, by their own admission, they were afflicted with "victory disease," the urge to press further militarily without regard to the implications. A disastrous border war

with the Soviet Union followed in the summer of 1939. We can see here the central pathology of Japanese military thinking: Japan had taken Korea to preserve its own security; then moved into Manchuria to protect Korea, then pushed into China and clashed with the Soviets to defend Manchuria. Eventually they pushed into Southeast Asia and the Pacific in order to finish off the war with China. Faced with numerous stalemates on the continent, a maxim from Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings* (1645) began to resonate within the Japanese military: "In large-scale military science as well, if there is a total deadlock and no progress is being made, there will be a loss of personnel. It is essential to stop right away and seize victory by taking advantage of a tactic unsuspected by the enemy."

The Japanese decided to push south, and since that meant war with the U.S., the "tactic unsuspected by the enemy"

was the attack on Pearl Harbor. The wisdom of and rationales behind that surprise attack are the fodder of great debate among students, especially as it forces them to look at a defining moment in American military history from the perspective of the enemy. Moreover, the lead-up to Pearl Harbor also alerts us to the difficulties inherent in trying to deter, contain or even predict the behavior of an adversary whose strategic inclinations and risk/benefit calculations are so alien to one's own.

Finally, the elephant in the room when it comes to the military history of modern Japan is the role that suicide played, both as a social norm and as a military tactic. This is an exceedingly sensitive topic, and teachers will have to judge how or even if they can raise it with their students. That said, no other historical case is as rich in material for comparison and contrast to the suicide terrorism of today.

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