

CHINESE MILITARY HISTORY

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Introduction Chinese civilization boasts one of the oldest and most unique cultures in the world. It is known for developing strong central governments at a time when it was extremely difficult to administer large territories. It is unclear precisely where or when the model for an authoritarian state originated. Perhaps the Xia (2100-1600 BCE), the Shang (1600-1050 BCE) or the Zhou (1046-475 BCE) rulers created prototype systems that were later perfected. Regardless, Chinese society has provided historians with examples of nearly a dozen strong, prosperous, stable dynasties that facilitated some of the greatest expressions of human achievement in history. The prototype of Chinese authoritarianism was the first emperor Qin Shihuangdi (259-210 BCE). Many historians believe that he created the notion of China as a unified entity, although he was so hated that his dynasty lasted only a few months after his death. Still, there would likely be no China without him. Successor dynasties built on his legacy—the Han (206 BCE-220 CE), Tang (618-906 CE), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) stand out among all the epochs in human history as among the greatest. All were distinctive and reflected the time and milieu in which they were situated. But they also all embraced the vision of a unified system with a strong central government ruling all Chinese people. This is a vision that remains the ideal today.

PREHISTORY—The Neolithic age (10,000 BCE-2000 BCE)

The Military. There is no evidence for the existence of specialized military units until very late in the neolithic era. Small groups of hunter gatherers banded together for protection and safety. By definition, however, many members of hunter gatherer groups were proficient in the use of weapons that could take down large game. When threatened, the same skills and weapons used to hunt big game could be employed against enemies. These included spears and clubs, and mechanical devices such as bows and arrows. Small groups occasionally fought, likely over dwindling resources, abductions, and other perceived slights, but there is scant evidence of large scale warfare. Settlements and villages were extremely exposed if significant numbers of inhabitants were away hunting, fishing or fighting. Given the size of the population and the highly dispersed and isolated settlements, fighting was surely sporadic and also probably didn't result in the complete annihilation of an enemy. The taking of slaves and the abduction of women was far more advantageous to the victor than the utter destruction of an enemy.

BRONZE AGE (2000 BCE-600 BCE)

The Military. The Shang military was quite small but generally well organized. It is recorded that they were able to field up to 3000 warriors in battle and keep them there for a season. The government was therefore organized well enough, along with its vassals, to arm itself and defend against significant barbarian threats. In the Zhou period, the monarchs were able to field more than 30,000 warriors and 3000 chariots. This 10-fold increase in military size and strength indicates a commensurate increase in organizational ability and command of resources by the central government.

IRON AGE

The Military. The capability and effectiveness of the Chinese armies increased dramatically in the iron age. Advances in metallurgy provided soldiers with new and stronger swords, pikes, battle axes, arrow tips and other items such as chariots. Iron was also much, much cheaper to produce than bronze and more effective than wood or stone. These same advances applied to agriculture meant that society could spare additional manpower for fighting and armies grew quite large. An arms race appeared whereby larger, more effective armies took the field of battle during the Warring States period. Some kingdoms eventually fielded hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Those that could not were quickly destroyed. By the third century BCE, only a handful of kingdoms remained. The monarch of the state of Qin is well known for organizing his entire kingdom for war. Indeed, it was mobilized for total war, was capably led and its soldiers battle-hardened. King Zheng, its monarch, was also known to be the embodiment of ruthlessness. On several occasions he massacred hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had surrendered. When the last kingdom succumbed in 221 BCE, King Zheng proclaimed himself Emperor of China: Qin Shihuangdi.

POST-CLASSICAL PERIOD (500 CE-1500 CE)

The Military. Technological advances in post-classical China were largely incremental. Blades, for example, were sharper, shields and armor stronger and long-range weapons more effective. But the revolutionary advances seen in the iron age and later in the industrial age were rarely seen. The one notable exception was gunpowder. The Tang Dynasty (618-907) military is known to have used it to fire projectiles and potentially created rudimentary mortars and bombs. It is possible that Tang chemists discovered the formula. It is more likely, however, that the knowledge existed hundreds of years before but its utility on the battlefield was finally realized during this period. In addition to new technology, the Chinese military was able to dominate its neighbors with its massive population, fine leadership, tremendous wealth and unparalleled organization. In the early Tang period the Chinese military was composed mostly of farmer-soldiers (local militia) and led by a professional officer corps. In practice, this meant that tens of thousands of farmer-soldiers spent 8-11 months in the fields and 2-3 months training. In times of crisis, they could be called up. This kept costs low and had a minimal impact on agricultural production. In spite of this, the Tang armies were able to expand control to areas of Central Asia, Mongolia, Korea and other areas. A permanent standing army later emerged and is understood by historians as contributing to the collapse of the dynasty because various generals with loyal troops on the frontier turned on the central authorities.

Vast Population Provides a Foundation for the Military. The plight of the peasants remained largely unchanged from previous epochs. In some dynasties, they were tied to the land using one form or coercion or another. In the Sui (589-618) and Tang (618-907) periods, significant numbers of the peasant population enjoyed something close to “free-holder” status. This was particularly the case if they served in the military. And there were enormous numbers of peasants in Tang China, approximately 80 million. Interestingly, the population under the control of the Tang Emperor represented roughly one-quarter of the world’s population, which was double the population of the contemporaneous Umayyad Caliphate and more than quadruple the number of the Carolingian Empire. Troops from the Abbasid Caliphate later encountered Tang troops near Samarkand in Uzbekistan, so these civilizations knew each other quite well. The difficulties inherent in governing this vast and populous empire in a pre-modern age are easy to understand. In order to govern well, the Tang court created the world’s first large-scale civil service examination.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1500-1800 CE)

The Military. The Qing military was divided into what is known today as “bannermen” armies. The armies were organized in different ways. Some armies were composed mostly of Manchu soldiers with Manchu generals. Others were composed of mostly Han Chinese soldiers with Han generals who worked with Manchu generals who acted as liaisons. A third type of army was composed of a combination of mostly Mongols, Han and other foreigners as soldiers. The armies were stationed in strategic areas of China where they could be called upon in time of emergency. The armies were known by the color of their banner, which could be solid or solid and framed with a different color. Early in the period of conquest there were six banner armies. Later that number was increased to eight. By the reign of the Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-1796), the Qing could field armies of more than a hundred thousand.

The 19th CENTURY

The Military. The bannermen armies which had swept the Manchu into power in the middle of the 17th century had long since ceased to function as an effective military force by the late 19th century. The Taiping (1850-1864) and Nian (1851-1868) rebellions had demonstrated that the Qing had little in the way of a military to force its will on an unwilling population. There were several attempts to reform the bannermen armies in the wake of the two rebellions. New weapons, new tactics, new training, new technology and new forms of transportation were all employed to upgrade the Qing military. The even had a new name, the “New Army.” By the late 19th century, it appeared as though they might have been successful. But events such as the Boxer Uprising (1900) made clear that the Chinese military was extremely weak and could neither keep the peace domestically nor repel foreign aggression.

The Early 20th CENTURY (1900-1950)

The Military. In the dying days of the Qing Dynasty, the imperial household had sought to reform and rebuild its military. Given the limitations of a bankrupt treasury, their only option was to ask wealthy, influential men to raise, train, equip and maintain armies that were to remain under the titular command of the Qing. However, these armies were of questionable loyalty from the very beginning. Indeed, they played a major role in the final collapse of the dynasty. In the brief Republican era (1912-1916), these armies continued to exist as mostly independent actors. With the total collapse of all central authority in 1916, the fragmentation of China was complete and the warlord era began. Each warlord controlled as much territory as possible and conducted themselves as they saw fit. Fighting between warlords, though not incessant, was an ever-present specter. Several great generals had visions of grandeur and believed themselves to be the eventual undisputed leader of China. It should be noted that none of the warlords ever achieved this goal and the Guomindang armies emerged to lead the country in the late 1920s.

The Late 20th Century (1950-1999)

The Military. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the Chinese Communist Party shifted tactics in the aftermath of the war with Japan. Whereas it had been a guerilla force before 1948, Mao and the CCP believed that the PLA was capable of fighting Guomindang armies on an equal footing and soon began the route of Guomindang forces. The Korean War, which began two years after the civil war ended, demonstrated the effectiveness of the PLA when Mao ordered the invasion of the Korean peninsula to push back US and UN forces. Fierce fighting ensued lasting for two years. Casualty rates were high and resulted in at least 600,000 Chinese deaths, the highest number of all combatants. In recent years, the Chinese military has been modernized. It now possesses very fine weapons, including a first-rate air force and an ability to project power through its navy. China also has several dozen ICBM (Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles) with nuclear capability.

Readings

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