

CHINA: FUTURE SUPERPOWER OR REGIONAL HEGEMON?

John T. Kuehn*

A remarkable transformation in the relationship between China and the United States has occurred since the 9/11 bombings. Mere months before the EP-3 incident off Hainan Island seemed another milestone in the downward spiral of Sino-U.S. relations. Today the same two countries are aligned together in a war on terrorism. Beijing's previously strident rhetoric vis-à-vis Taiwan is, and remains, muted. Most recently, China has taken positive steps to limit its export of various weapons systems that have long been viewed unfavorably by U.S. administrations¹. Finally, the two nations share alarm and exhibit surprising cooperation on the threat posed by North Korea; so much so that China's positive role vis-à-vis the North Korean nuclear threat was critical to the policy position of the Bush administration during the 2004 U.S. Presidential election.

Is it the power of the 9/11 event alone that has resulted in these seemingly profound, positive developments—or was 9/11 merely a tearing of the veil of hostility that had grown up between these two nations since 1989? Has the more pacific and cordial relationship between them, the one promised by an “Open Door” vision of American idealists and the Westernizing Chinese intellectuals of the early 20th Century, now reestablished the basis for a more realistic long-term relationship?

To better understand how to address these questions, if not answer them, one must approach the subject with an understanding of the linkage between Chinese hostility to the world at large and its leaders' perceptions of domestic stability at home. One approach is to examine the topic from the standpoint of a unique Chinese approach to the problem of conflict itself. This paper suggests that there is a unique Chinese approach to conflict that has been manifested throughout her long history. The principle features of this “Chinese Way of War” are the primacy of the civil over the military and the relationship between internal instability and external aggression. Because of these features it can be said that the Chinese approach to warfare, at the global strategic level, is basically defensive. However, at the regional level it tends toward bellicose behavior along China's strategic periphery.

1. A CHINESE WAY OF WAR?

Is there a distinct Chinese pattern that, despite sharing some features of the more familiar western models, is nevertheless ultimately dissimilar, prototypical, or perhaps both? Among the many schools of thought on this topic there are two general viewpoints which have primacy. The traditional viewpoint labels the Chinese military tradition “distinctive” and “unique”². The traditional view-

* Assistant Professor of Military History. USA Command and General Staff College-Fort Leavenworth, United States. E-mail: john.t.kuehn@us.army.mil.

¹ Pomfret, John, “China Embraces More Moderate Foreign Policy”. *Washington Post*, 24 October 2002, 23.

² Fairbank, John K., “Introduction: Varieties of the Chinese Military Experience”, in Frank A. Kierman; John K. Fairbank (eds.), *Chinese Ways in Warfare*. Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1974, 1-2.

point maintains that China represents the triumph of civil control over the military in early human civilization. The primacy of the civilian, or non-military, sector of society bequeathed China a reputation as a pacifist society and culture. This school of thought also bases its argument on the cultural paradigm of the Confucian-Mencian tradition that “disesteems” violence. Put another way, war to the Confucian mind is a *breakdown or failure* in policy vice an *extension* of it. This is a break with the penultimate modern western theory of war propounded by the famous German philosopher of war Karl von Clausewitz in his classic *On War*. The opposing viewpoint takes a realistic approach by examining both Chinese words *and* deeds. The realists argue that China essentially has a superficial pacifist tradition that constitutes a self-perpetuating cultural myth. The reality of Chinese strategic culture is best represented as *regionally* bellicose and warlike³.

The traditionalist school would seem the more suited to support an argument for a distinctive Chinese military tradition since the parallels between the realists’ model and the military traditions of the West (represented most recently by the United States) are superficially similar. However, a synthesis of the two schools may be a better approach to illustrate a distinctive Chinese “way of war”. A closer examination is therefore warranted, particularly on the issue of civil control of the military.

My chief focus will be the strategic behavior of China to include the entire span of the imperial experience (since 221 BC). More recent experience will also be examined due to characteristics that are arguably common to both the communist and imperial approaches. The limited scope of this essay prevents a more comprehensive and integrated examination at all three levels of war. However, the tactical and operational levels will be addressed principally as they relate to strategic behavior. The strategic behavior of China was not picked arbitrarily. The strategic level provides some of the more salient features that make China not only distinctive but also prototypical.

2. CHINESE STRATEGIC BEHAVIOR

The key feature of the Chinese approach to war is its cultural attitude toward the military. The mechanism for control of the military is placed firmly in the hands of the non-military government, or what Americans refer to as *civilian control*. One reason for this type of control is the deep-seated paranoia Chinese society historically has of standing armies. This paranoia can be classified in modern terms as distrust or a fear of militarism.

This negative view of standing armies, both officers but more so the common soldiers, has common roots in a perception of coercive or oppressive behavior. One writer has chronicled how the Chinese during the late Ming dynasty again came to equate things military with a fracturing of society and a threat to the harmony of “all under heaven”⁴. The most commonly oppressed group in China was also the largest—the peasants. Sharing the peasants’ disesteem, but for different reasons, were the Emperors and the all-important Mandarin bureaucratic elite. One scholar argues that the Emperors, particularly those who established new dynasties, understood how tenuous their power base was with a standing military. This was in many cases due to their own seizure of power in times of chaos, warlordism, and rebellion by military means and—in the case of the “barbarian” dynasties like the Manchu—through outright conquest⁵.

After consolidating power the Emperors often removed the military influence from the heartland in a variety of ways. Sometimes they simply demobilized the bulk of the armies, mostly peasant farmers in any case, sending them back to their farms. Too, they might simply re-deploy them in order to re-establish suzerainty over the strategic peripheral areas that often “broke away” from their Chinese overlords during the times of strife and chaos in the heartland⁶.

Finally, the more successful Emperors (in terms of the longevity of their dynasty) moved quickly to

³ Johnston, Alistair Iain, *Cultural Realism*. Princeton, Princeton UP, 1995, X.

⁴ Parsons, James Bunyan, *The Peasant Rebellions of the Late Ming Dynasty*. Tuscon, University of Arizona Press, 1970.

⁵ Dreyer, Edward L., “Military continuities: The PLA and Imperial China”, in William Whitson (ed.), *The Military and Political Power In China in the 1970’s*. New York, Praeger, 1972, 4-6. The Manchu or Qing Dynasty conquered China in the mid-17th century as the Ming Dynasty collapsed due to misrule and internal revolts that lead to chaos.

⁶ Swaine, Michael D.; Tellis, Ashley J., *Interpreting China’s Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future*. Santa Monica, Project Air Force RAND Corporation, 2000, 39-40. Dreyer, Edward L., “Military...”, op. cit., 4-5.

marginalize the military's influence in the running of the Empire by re-establishing the control of the Mandarin bureaucracy via the mechanism of administration. For example, during the period of the five short-lived dynasties (really military dictatorships) in the first half of the Tenth Century AD the Confucian system of exams and the ascendancy of the Mandarin bureaucrats had essentially been suppressed. Chao K'ung-yin, the founder of the Song Dynasty, broke the mold in 960 by reviving the Confucian-Mandarin system and replacing or marginalizing his more independent generals⁷.

The traditional school cites the triumph of civil control over the military in laudatory terms as a unique Chinese achievement. Two millennia ago this was indeed the case. The mechanism was a large civil bureaucracy that was both a counterweight and a watchdog over the military. The Imperial bureaucracy's power base stemmed from their control, via the mechanism of literacy, of the structure of—and entry process of individuals into—educated society. Educated society was by definition civil society and administered (ruled) the Imperial domains. Some Sinologists suggest that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is roughly analogous to the Imperial model. However, in the PRC the Communist Party shares the role of the civil bureaucracy to a degree with the military since most of the successful senior leaders in the military are by necessity party members. Stretching the analogy a bit—the various Party Chairmen and Premiers, exclusively drawn from the party elite, provide the analog of the Imperial executive: e.g. Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and, currently, Hu Jintao. This civilian “chief executive” combines all the key state executive functions, including that of commander-in-chief by virtue of the chairmanship of the Central Military Commis-

sion of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in one person⁸.

One writer has argued that the bureaucratic mantle might in fact devolve on the entire military. There was a partial realization of this outcome in the economic sector of the PRC when the military assumed responsibility for managing a significant fraction of the PRC's expanding economy through the 1980's to 1998. Ironically, communist military leaders had become old-fashioned capitalists. However, the paradigm partially returned to its normal pattern in 1998 and the military is now in a more traditional role somewhat similar to its status prior to the Cultural Revolution⁹. In any case, the defining feature of China's approach to military matters is civilian control through the principal mechanism of a large and literate bureaucracy.

Another feature in the administration of war in China is the practice, similar to the West, of the ruler or executive remaining in the capital while the professional general leads from the field¹⁰. However, it was not always this way in the West. When George II of Great Britain was personally leading his army during the Seven Years War the Qing Emperor Qianlong was safely ensconced in the Forbidden City providing guidance to his various generals via an army of bureaucrats transcribing palace memorials. Another standard feature of Chinese armies that varied with the Western experience in Europe was their composition: principally a militia force led by non-professionals. The employment of these “civilian” or peasant armies was often as a means of the last resort. However, this militia basis for armies originated with China and has persisted into the modern era¹¹.

The Chinese, like the Americans, have historically had a tendency to justify their wars, before and after, in terms of righteousness and as well as essential to security or for “the common defense”.

⁷ Michael, Franz H., “From the Fall of the T'ang to the Fall of the Ch'ing”, in H. F. MacNair (ed.), *China*. Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1951, 89-91.

⁸ Lieberthal, Kenneth, *Governing China*. New York, WW Norton, 1995, 205. *China Economic Net* (available from Internet at: <http://en-1.ce.cn/main/photo-news/200409/20/t20040920_1805220.shtml>). It was only this year the Hu succeeded to the Central Military Commission chairmanship, the updated name for the Military Affairs Commission (MAC), after more than two years holding the other two top jobs of General Secretary and, more recently, as President. Jiang Zemin held all these jobs and only recently turned the MAC job over to Hu.

⁹ Mulvenon, James, *Soldiers of Fortune*. London, M.E.Sharpe, 2001, 3.

¹⁰ Dreyer, Edward L., “Military...”, op. cit., 5.

¹¹ Kuhn, Philip A., *Rebellion and its Enemies in Late Imperial China: Militarization and Social Structure, 1796-1864*. Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1980, 225.

The traditional school is foremost in making the argument that moral rectitude is an imperative for Chinese military courses of action. Too, the traditional school links rectitude with an aversion to military and coercive measures. Under this paradigm the moral state sanctions official violence only in the most dire circumstances and then only as a last resort. However, the evidence seems to support the realist school's claim that this pacific reputation is a convenient myth. They argue that the Confucian moralists were bending the facts to fit their concept of harmony "all under heaven"¹².

Moral rectitude and the conduct of warfare throughout Chinese military history have not been mutually exclusive behaviors. One writer has taken special pains to note the importance of righteous behavior in his discussion of the early classic battles of Chinese history¹³. Righteous behavior in this construct then is not inimical to military personnel and can occur in an environment of conflict. The writings attributed to Sun Tzu are filled with moral platitudes for the conduct of war, for example: "Treat the captives well, and care for them"¹⁴. However, it must be noted that Sun Tzu's directive, in context, provides for both a military and a moral purpose; the military purpose being to "convert" your enemies into your friends, allies, or even persuade them to join your armies.

A final element of the Chinese strategic approach is its emphasis on defense. Put more simply, the Chinese have historically fought limited wars to ensure stability along their periphery instead of wars of conquest. This is a matter of great debate. Critics of this position can point to numerous instances of Imperial and Communist "adventurism". From a Chinese perspective wars outside of China proper are defensive in nature and were fought to secure lengthy land and sea borders from the incursions of barbarians and pirates. Even the massive effort by the Mongol Yuan dynasty (in the 14th Century) to invade Japan was primarily to chastise the Japanese for meddling with China's tributary kingdom of Korea and for Japan's tacit

support and protection of pirates in the Yellow and East China Seas. China for much of her history has always been supremely concerned about the security of her borders. Border security remains a major factor in China's strategic behavior. The PRC continues to actively employ its quasi-military security forces on its periphery toady. For current examples one need only look to the ongoing Uighur and Tibetan separatist problems along China's massive western periphery¹⁵.

China's security concerns throughout her history have contributed to a belief in a profound linkage between encroachment and even invasion along its borders and internal or domestic instability. The almost constant experience of the Chinese with nomadic incursions has fundamentally tempered their attitude toward their strategic periphery. Too, the modern experience with European and Japanese imperialism has done nothing to disabuse them of this notion—rather, recent experience in the Taiwan Strait has reinforced it. One historian posits that the Great Wall, the most well known icon of China's defensive mindset, might be the result of a lack of a coherent defensive policy and more a monument to vacillation and lack of commitment due more to internal policies vice any one massive external threat¹⁶. Nevertheless, the Great Wall's fundamental meaning in military terms is clearly defensive.

3. DISSIMILARITIES WITH THE WEST

Now it is appropriate to turn to a more explicit illustration of Chinese dissimilarities with the Western tradition and the way these differences highlight a distinctive Chinese approach to strategy and conflict. The western liberal vision seems superficially similar to that of China discussed earlier. Both traditions inherently believe in the moral superiority of their culture.

However, a profound dissimilarity exists in the means. China's attitude toward her culture is clearly chauvinistic—those that cannot see its clear

¹² Johnston, Alistair Iain, *Cultural...*, op. cit., 15.

¹³ Kierman, Frank A., Fairbank, John K. (eds.), *Chinese...*, op. cit., 64. These of course are the famous battles of Cheng-Pu and Ching-Hsing during the Warring States and Han periods, respectively.

¹⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (trans. by Samuel B. Griffith). New York, Oxford UP, 1963, 76.

¹⁵ Swaine, Michael D.; Tellis, Ashley J., *Interpreting...*, op. cit., 64.

¹⁶ Waldron, Arthur, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth*. Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1990.

spiritual and intellectual superiority are not worthy of it. In other words, the Chinese do not feel the need evangelize their culture abroad. In fact, many have argued that western cultural imperialism in great part led to the upheavals that caused the Boxer Rebellion and the subsequent revolution in 1911¹⁷.

Another Chinese dissimilarity is her attitude toward sea power. The Western tradition in the modern era has seen a succession of states—Spain, the United Provinces, France, Portugal, Denmark, Great Britain, and the United States—whose basis for both national and military power has consisted of a substantial maritime component. Outside the Western tradition Japan adopted this approach and the Ottoman Turks maintained their power via maritime sea power as well. Even continental powers in the western tradition, rightly or wrongly, have found the imperatives of sea power difficult to resist—Germany in the first half of the 20th century and the Soviet Union in the last half being the outstanding examples.

China is nearly the opposite. She was and is, except for a brief period during the Ming Dynasty, a continental power. She understood the importance of water as a means of communication, both commercially and militarily, but her interests never compelled her to seek the world beyond the glittering seas. There was no need to cross the seas because everything one could ever want was already available in China. This is no small point. Even today China does not have a separate maritime component analogous to the western ideal of a navy. The Chinese Navy is a subset of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)—the PLAN. Maritime powers, principally through means of navies and colonies or bases built around deep-water ports, have maintained an arguably defensive posture that today is often called “forward presence”. China's approach has historically been to defend her maritime borders and interests much closer to home—with coastal garrisons, brown water fleets and sometimes by proxy (the case of Korea).

This then is a salient feature of their global approach to conflict—a limited view of the impor-

tance and relevance of sea power that is a direct result of China's culture and geography. Even with all of the recent developments and the profound impact of the lack of sea power in helping China to resolve the Taiwan issue, the Chinese still fundamentally see their navy in coastal and defensive terms¹⁸.

Another difference, especially in the modern era, is China's persistent use of the military as an internal security force. The Chinese military has always played a role, to a greater or lesser degree, in the transition, transference, and maintenance of power. One need only compare the shootings at Kent State in the 1970s with Tienamen Square in 1989 to understand the considerable magnitude of difference (regarding the use of the military) between the Western and Chinese traditions. This comparison highlights the relative role of the “militia” in China. Militia—often manifested as PLA second and third line units—serve an integral security role on a full-time basis in China. China's continuity with the past, with soldiers providing their own means of sustenance and more recently their own financial support, is also another unique feature. As mentioned earlier, this trend developed into the military's assumption of a considerable part of the economic management function after Mao's death until 1998.

The actual mechanism of operational command also provides another data point in favor of Chinese military uniqueness. In the Chinese experience the difference comes down to *who* is actually commanding in the field. In the Ming Dynasty, for example, we find not professional military officers but commanders who were themselves Chin Shih level Mandarins—that is members of the highest level of the civilian bureaucratic elite (the Chin Shih is the rough equivalent of the Western Ph.D.). These leaders were adept principally at civil administration but their familiarity with the military classics like Sun Tzu qualified them, in their own estimation and that of the Emperor, for field command. Among the most successful was Hung Ch'eng-ch'ou of the late Ming period. Hung held the Chin Shih and one writer takes special pains to

¹⁷ Esherick, Joseph W., *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*. Berkeley, U. of California Press, 1987, chapter 5 passim. This chapter discusses the central incident of conflict between German Missionaries and Chinese in Shandong that incited the Boxers to violence.

¹⁸ Lewis, John Wilson; Litai, Xue, *China's Strategic Seapower: The Politics of Force Modernization in the Nuclear Age*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994.

emphasize his adherence to Confucian non-coercive methods in his conduct of the suppression of the peasant rebellions in the northern province of Shanxi¹⁹.

Hung's example—a Mandarin first and soldier second—provides an ideal opportunity to examine the issue of military professionalism from the Chinese perspective. A key component in any modern military is the officer corps. It is in the officer corps that a major unifying theme that separates the Chinese from all the others can be found. Professionalism in the officer corps did not develop on the western model in the Chinese military because professionalism of this sort required literacy. For most of the Imperial experience in China the officer corps was either semi-literate or illiterate. One writer argues that this trend, in the absence of a need for the technical mastery required for modern war, tended to draw the most talented and literate members of society into the more "esteemed" Mandarin bureaucratic civil service instead of the military²⁰. A recent extreme example of this "tradition" of military illiteracy was "Marshal" Zhang Zoulin the warlord who ruled much of Northern China during the chaotic period of the 1920's.

The PLA initially resisted this professionalizing trend, preferring to teach to the peasants and the rank and file how to read for political purposes vice as a means to military professionalism²¹. However, attitudes changed after World War II and are continuing to change in response to the massive technological changes first identified by the Chinese in Korea and more recently demonstrated by the United States in the Balkans and Southwest Asia²².

Additionally, the concern for righteousness has often translated itself to the rank and file—and

doctrine— of the Chinese military. A reliance on "spirit" is not unique to the Chinese. In the Pacific War the Japanese relied on the same means to attempt to redress the material imbalance but found adversaries every bit as fervent and grim as themselves. On the Chinese side a similar trend has existed but has only emerged as a major factor versus technology in the last two centuries. The foremost modern proponent of this spiritual means was Mao, but it has its roots in the Imperial and eastern traditions²³. In other words the relationship between the martial fervor of the troops and technology, in the Chinese case, has tended to be adversarial as opposed to the mutually supportive role these two factors have tended to play in western armies.

There is also a difference in the ideological make-up of the officer corps, as the previous discussion implies. For the Chinese, both during the Imperial and Communist regimes, officers were expected to attain a certain level of political sophistication. In fact Mao said exactly this — that "war is politics with bloodshed"²⁴. One might then say a political understanding was not only desired but also absolutely essential to the conduct of war. Some observers identify political savvy as a key component in Sun Tzu's concept—"not fighting and subduing the enemy"— in relation to their theses²⁵. They conclude that Sun Tzu was not rejecting coercive violence, but placing the more subtle political methods within the context of efficiently winning campaigns in a war in a way that will enhance the peace and restore harmony in the quickest manner possible.

The Western experience and practice, especially in the British and American traditions, have tended to emphasize the opposite trait. Officers are traditionally expected to remain "above politics" in

¹⁹ Parsons, James Bunyan, *The Peasant...*, op. cit., 22,23.

²⁰ Dreyer, Edward L., "Military...", op. cit., 8.

²¹ Donovan, Peter Williams, *The Chinese Red Army in the Kiangsi Soviet, 1931-1934*. Cornell University, Donovan, 1974.

²² Howle, Roy C., "An Evitable War: Engaged Containment and the US-China Balance". *Parameters*, XXXI-3 (Autumn 2001), 92, 97. A connection between Chinese military modernization and the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs is implicit. The terms "electronic disruption" and "computer attack" are consistent with the verbiage of the proponents of a revolution in military affairs.

²³ Shu Guang, Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950- 1953*. Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1995.

²⁴ Zedong, Mao, "On Protracted War", in Philip Short, *Mao a Life*. New York, Henry Holt, 1999, 365.

²⁵ Johnston, Alistair Iain, *Cultural...*, op. cit., 99. Swaine, Michael D.; Tellis, Ashley J., *Interpreting...*, op. cit., 45, 46.

deference to their civilian masters. Samuel P. Huntington in particular has based an entire theory on this salient point as a means to explain the success, and the tension, of the American civil-military experience. For the Chinese the apolitical stance is anathema to the Chinese practice of war and strategy. Commanders are expected to lead primarily within the political framework. Again, fighting in the correct manner that does not antagonize the peasants or that achieves a termination of conflict due to a political settlement is considered the pinnacle of martial expertise²⁶. This trend spans both the imperial and communist experiences. As noted earlier, Chin Shih functionaries doubled as military commanders suppressing peasant rebellions and barbarian incursions. Similarly, commissars and military commanders were often interchangeable. In both cases political skill was often held in greater esteem than tactical or operational military prowess²⁷.

A reexamination of the trait of suspicion of standing armies/disesteem of soldiers is now in order. For the Chinese the experience includes foreign armies, invading nomadic barbarians, and the warlordism and “banditry” of their own military. One writer also points out a social reason for the lowly status of the soldier. Soldiers historically come from the lowest rungs of society, from people who cannot feed themselves, and must take “the Emperor’s rice”²⁸. The Chinese attitude toward the military was not only grounded in cultural ideology, but more so in actual personal experience and contact on a daily basis with an element of society that both the Mandarin elite and the peasants regarded as execrable²⁹. The traditional school attributes this inferior ranking not only to the rapacity or parasitic behavior of the often underpaid and ill-used soldiers, but to an overall cultur-

al “tendency to disesteem...violence”—violence which the soldiers manifestly represented³⁰.

Recent scholars have pointed out the greater esteem the soldier holds under the communist paradigm in China. However, others explain the evidence in the context of the long term and point out the profound scaling back by Mao and Lin Biao of military prerogatives during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, near the end of the Cultural Revolution the PLA was virtually the only functional institution remaining in China and the day-to-day management of China had been placed in its competent hands. Later, under Deng Xiaoping, the PLA easily transitioned to the functions of economic managers and capitalists. The PLA was brought to heel by the Party through a legal mechanism in 1998 that reduced its ability to wield economic power within the state on the pretext that it has more pressing military missions to perform. Nevertheless, just the notion that the military was allowed such latitude in the historically civilian realm of management supports an argument for increasing esteem for the soldier in Chinese culture³¹.

The final factor that I will use to illustrate the uniqueness of the Chinese way of war is their overall attitude toward the use of violence (war) as a choice of last resort. To review, the standard school of thought argues that the Chinese eschew violence in favor of a strategy or solution of accommodation. Here the issue is one of self-perception versus reality. China perceives herself as peace-loving country that desires nothing more than the “harmony” of the world. However, we need only turn to the last half of the 20th century to find abundant examples and evidence of bellicose behavior by China. Her actions and words often do not match each other.

Several studies have illustrated the paradox of the Chinese case on an empirical level³². Alistair

²⁶ Fairbank, John K., “Introduction...”, op. cit., 10-11. Fairbank, too, uses Sun Tzu extensively in support of his arguments.

²⁷ Donovan, Peter Williams, *The Chinese...*, op. cit., 31-32, 49. For the imperial experience see Parsons, James Bunyan, *The Peasant...*, op. cit.

²⁸ Dreyer, Edward L., “Military...”, op. cit., 14.

²⁹ Parsons, James Bunyan, *The Chinese...*, op. cit. I cite Parsons here because his narrative account provides firm historical evidence for the dysfunctional relationship between the peasants, soldiers, and the Mandarin commanders appointed by the Imperial Court. Here, too, we see most of these peasant rebellions being led by former officers in the Imperial Armies—e.g. Wang Chia-yun, 8.

³⁰ Fairbank, John K., “Introduction...”, op. cit., 25.

³¹ Dreyer, Edward L., “Military...”, op. cit., 21. Mulvenon, James, *Soldiers...*, op. cit., 3, 193-194.

³² Whiting, Alan S., *The Chinese Strategic Calculus of Deterrence*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1975, 202-203. Swaine, Michael D.; Tellis, Ashley J., *Interpreting...*, op. cit., 13 and chapter 4.

Johnston has captured this paradox by positing two types of strategic behavior (called ‘strategic cultures’)—the traditional “Confucian-Mencian” paradigm and the “parabellum” paradigm. This author proclaims that an examination of the seven military classics (including Sun Tzu) and the historical example of the Ming dynasty tend to prove that Chinese strategic behavior is in fact warlike and aggressive³³. More recently, a Rand Analysis makes the same claim in a more direct fashion in its comparison of Confucianism and Sun Tzu. This study argues that supporters of the traditional school misread Sun Tzu in his larger terms confusing the political act of making war with the actual violence of its execution. Modern historical evidence that tends to support the parabellum paradigm includes the example of China’s incursion into Vietnam in 1979³⁴.

More recent Chinese thought (Mao) and experience provide examples of the Chinese approach in a non-Sinocentric global environment. The People’s Republic employs stratagems, political timing, and message transmission that are both elegant and unsophisticated³⁵. For example, the Chinese government used a sophisticated pattern of political and force deployment “signaling” prior to the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict. A similar pattern is observable in China’s violent 1979 conflict with Vietnam³⁶. Finally, Mao used similar signals—often missed by their audience for cultural reasons—to signal rapprochement with the United States in the late 1960’s. Henry Kissinger recalled in reference to the first tentative signals, “...what they conveyed was so oblique that our crude Occidental minds completely missed the point”³⁷.

In another modern example—Vietnam in the mid-1960s—the Chinese approach succeeded in *avoiding* a larger regional conflict. China signaled the United States via force deployments to North Vietnam that she would escalate her direct material support (anti-aircraft troops were already in the country in substantial numbers) should the United States expand the scope of the war in Indochina.

This can hardly be classified as non-coercive³⁸. More often the results have been bloody, if limited, in duration. For example: the Korean War, in 1962 with India, the Taiwan straits in the 50’s, the Soviets in the late 60’s, Vietnam in 1979, the Spratly Islands in the mid 80’s, and most recently Taiwan again in 1996. The common thread, other than conflict, in these examples is a propensity by the Chinese to resort to the political expedient of violent, albeit limited, war or to threaten war using extremely bellicose rhetoric.

The frequent resort China made in the 20th century to the political expedient of violent but limited war is certainly a characteristic of her martial tradition. But why should there have been more warfare at certain times and not at others? The Chinese fight their limited wars for the same reasons today that they have for the last two or three millennia—internal conflict. Most of China’s military history during the 20th Century—if we exclude Japanese intervention—was fundamentally that of internal conflict. Internal instability is manifested externally by China’s behavior along her perceived periphery. It seems no accident that the corruption scandals in the PLA in the late 1990’s were mirrored by bellicose rhetoric abroad. Much of this rhetoric can be itself classified as “domestic,” certainly with respect to the Uighur and Tibetan separatists and from a Chinese perspective if Taiwan is regarded as a renegade province. The behavior is bellicose, but the underlying motivation is both domestic and defensive.

China’s way of war is driven by the maintenance of an authoritarian rule administered by a monolithic bureaucracy. Here the true role of Confucian-Mencian ideas assumes a proper place in the distinctive pattern as part of the cultural context. Confucianism explains the need for stability through the maintenance of righteous and harmonious government. This obsession with harmony, brutally attacked in the 20th Century by Chinese intellectuals and leaders from Sun Yat-sen to Mao, has recently been explicitly resurrected by China’s

³³ Johnston, Alistair Iain, *Cultural...*, op. cit., 249.

³⁴ Jencks, Harlan W., “China’s ‘Punitive’ War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment”. *Asian Survey*, XIX-8 (August 1979), 801.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 801-802. Whiting, Alan S., *The Chinese...*, op. cit., 202-203.

³⁶ Jencks, Harlan W., “China’s...”, op. cit., 801.

³⁷ Short, Philip, *Mao...*, op. cit., 602.

³⁸ Whiting, Alan S., *The Chinese...*, op. cit., chapter 6.

nominally communist leadership. Jiang Zemin, in a recent speech while turning over the reins of leadership to Hu Jintao, "...used terminology from the country's 2,500-year-old 'Book of Songs' to describe the mission, saying the party would build a society reflecting the Confucian ideal of a prosperous, peaceful community"³⁹. This need to maintain order is the motive force behind China's well-documented use of force throughout history—violence, rationally and quantitatively applied, in concert with other stratagems in order to achieve order. Order then is the product of power—power owned and administered by the state.

Another useful perspective that establishes the distinctiveness of the Chinese pattern is from the construct of originality. China's way of war is arguably the prototypical "eastern" model. It is the template for that eastern way of war perhaps more familiar to western audiences by way of the Russian/Soviet experience—concern for borders, paranoia over internal matters, and authoritarian central government. However, reflection (or perhaps refraction) via another arguably "eastern", but distinct, culture (USSR/Russia) is not the real thing.

China's conflicts (coercive behavior) are meant to communicate to many audiences. The realist school is correct—China is neither non-coercive nor pacific. One scholar has clearly outlined a tendency to use violence in ancient Chinese society as a means of sending important societal, religious, and cultural messages⁴⁰. To the nations and interests along the periphery China's signals warn of a perceived encroachment on the "heartland." The Chinese ultimately fear that these perceived encroachments would result in the loss of internal order and stability⁴¹. To the audience within China this sanctioned regional violence sends a message that China's leaders are in control and powerful. To the world at large the message is one that China is not to be trifled with when the issues at stake concern what she perceives are internal security matters.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, there are two distinct, and to some degree opposing, schools of thought regarding China's strategic and cultural approach to conflict. The traditionalist school views China as an essentially pacific nation that frowns on violence in general and the military in particular. The realist school, on the other hand, identifies the traditionalist school's explanation as a self-perceived "myth" which is really a façade hiding China's insecurity and tendency toward both internal and external (albeit limited) conflict. The paradox between the two schools of thought can be resolved when China's pattern is recognized as one that is unique with a lengthy historical pedigree. The Chinese perceive themselves as pacific and non-coercive—but their neighbors and some realist historians see it differently⁴².

The Chinese way of war is more than what they say or what they believe about themselves. It also includes their deeds and what they intend to communicate. China's pattern of strategic behavior is not any one of these factors but a combination of them. The Chinese—in their view—then are provoked to violence because their adversaries will not listen (or do not understand), nor are they sensitive to China's overwhelming need for the appearance of stability and control. For the Chinese appearances translate into reality. This broad generalization agrees substantially with the popular western perception of the oriental concept of "face".

On the surface there are similarities between the Chinese and Western ways of war. These include: civil primacy over the military, fear of militarism, belief in the supremacy of the indigenous culture, a concern with righteous motives and just war, and a tendency to punch in the nose those who threaten their security.

China has now recognized that there is a much larger world beyond its strategic periphery that will not leave China to itself. The globalized world has countered China's self-perceived cultural superiority with an extremely attractive con-

³⁹ Pomfret, John, "China...", op. cit., 23.

⁴⁰ Lewis, Mark Edward, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*. Albany, SUNY Press, 1990, 245-6.

⁴¹ Swaine, Michael D.; Tellis, Ashley J., *Interpreting...*, op. cit., 23.

⁴² Jencks, Harlan W., "China's...", op. cit. Jencks' entire article explicitly makes this point about not only the neighboring Vietnamese seeing this differently, but also the entire world. Tellis and Swaine's chart on p. 48 is also another piece of compelling evidence that contradicts the common myth.

sumer/informational culture of materialism. In this new world (from a Chinese perspective) the old ways have persisted—China continues to communicate in terms of *regionally sanctioned violence* that sends her messages of confidence and power, warning, and—ultimately—insecurity.

China's way of war, then, is one that is motivated by a strategic paranoia about internal harmony that begets a parabellum strategic behavior. At the operational level this strategic calculus translates to a complex and sometimes elegant mixing of all the available instruments of national power to deter, eliminate or minimize the perceived threat or challenge to the internal power base. China's methods have often included outright violence both internally as well as externally along the strategic periphery. Additionally, Chinese military operations have tended to have limited objectives consistent with the higher strategic imperatives discussed. The results are so-called "limited wars"—both in duration and objective, but less limited in terms of intensity (China had over 30,000 casualties in Vietnam in 1979)⁴³.

At the tactical level the Chinese method has often been focused on the art and craft of the leaders vice the individual initiative of soldiers. However, the principal discontinuity of recent years with the Imperial example is the professionalism, and more recently the economic awareness, in the Chinese military. Also, there is the well-docu-

mented tendency of the Chinese to rely on the moral domain of warfare to compensate for their lack of technological means. However, the importance of "spirit" has been challenged in the minds of the Chinese in a profound way by the all too available images of successful technocratic war present via all the various informational media—media which China can no longer prevent from penetrating her borders. Too, how much longer can the Chinese avoid the imperatives of sea power? Nevertheless, they remain a fundamentally continental power and as such this constitutes an essential element of their way of war—despite their desire to perhaps return to the sea power example of the early Ming⁴⁴.

Some pundits have sounded the warning notes for a future China that may go beyond the strategic periphery and that aspires to a role as a (but possibly not as *the*) global hegemon. However, this conclusion seems to go in the face of the historical and cultural Chinese way of war whose principal features are its primacy of civil over military, concern with domestic stability, and linkage of internal disorder with external threat. Because of these features it can be said that the Chinese approach to warfare, at the global strategic level, is basically defensive. China is not a modern global superpower...yet. Neither is China's Sino-centric, defensive way of war that of a modern superpower.

⁴³ Ibid., 812.

⁴⁴ Ji, You, *The Armed Forces of China*. London-NewYork, I.B. Tauris, 1999.