Introduction

Riverine Warfare

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This issue of the *Journal of Chinese Military History* features four articles exploring riverine warfare in premodern China. The articles show that rivers have played an important, but often overlooked, role in defensive and offensive warfare. Just as the distinctive qualities of water – flowing, nurturing, clear when still – helped to make it a “root metaphor” in Chinese philosophy, the watery qualities of rivers made them a fundamental part of military thought.¹

In the military realm, successful armies took advantage of the potential of rivers to flow quickly, transport heavy objects, impede movement, and be stored, diverted, or released.

Wicky Tse’s article, “The Tactical Role of Rivers in Early Chinese Warfare,” shows that many of these qualities were already integrated into warfare in Early China. Examples from *Zhan Guo ce, Mozi*, and the *Zuo zhuan* show that armies vied to control water for offensive, defensive, and logistical advantage. For instance, moats could provide defense for cities built next to rivers, but the same river could be diverted by besieging armies to flood the city or deprive it of access to supplies. In the realm of logistics, Tse shows that early Chinese regimes – much like later dynasties – used rivers to efficiently transport troops, weapons, and provisions. Tse also introduces a theme that runs through all four articles, that riverine warfare cannot be abstracted from the surrounding land. In the second part of his article, he analyzes “shore-based river-crossing campaign.” Rivers had to be crossed, but crossing at the wrong place, or in a

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¹ On the idea that water was a “root metaphor” in Chinese thought, see Allan 1997.
disorderly fashion, made armies vulnerable to attack. How to transition from land to river and back to land became a major tactical concern, sparking creative strategies for deception and river diversion.

Xiaobing Li’s article, “River Defense and Fleet Building: The Song Navy in the Wars against the Jin and Mongol Forces,” considers the broader conditions that made large-scale riverine warfare possible. Li shows that riverine warfare in the Southern Song cannot be understood without reference to the sweeping economic and technological changes of the era. Economically, new regimes of taxation and burgeoning populations, fueled by new rice varieties, provided the money and manpower for massive navies. Technologically, the Southern Song made advances in ship construction and gunpowder weapons. This flurry of innovation was propelled, in part, by the threat of the Mongols, looming just north of the Yangzi River. The Song’s river-based defenses, Li argues, played a key role in keeping the Mongol forces at bay. Ironically, it was only when defectors from the Song reorganized the Yuan navy that its forces were able to prevail. As Li puts it, the “Yuan navy was ‘essentially the Song navy.’”

Michael Chung turns our attention from the perspective of defenders to the perspective of an invading army. In his article, “River Transport and the Effectiveness of the Qing Artillery Corps during the Ming-Qing Transition,” Chung explores how Qing armies in the 1640s used river networks in southern China to quickly deliver artillery to besieging forces. The rapid deployment of artillery, he argues, was enabled by two factors: the availability of river routes and the reserves of cannons at cities next to these rivers. When Qing armies did not have access to river transportation, such as during their earlier invasions of Korea, artillery often arrived days or weeks after the beginning of the siege. Like the other authors, Chung emphasizes that the use of rivers was constrained by surrounding landscapes. Artillery could not be easily moved from one river system to another, delivery of artillery had to be coordinated with the arrival of land-based troops, and topographical obstacles often meant that besiegers had to resort to older ways of fighting.

Kenneth Swope’s article “Boats, Barbarians, and Bandits: Riverine Warfare and the Taiping Rebellion,” draws together many of the themes in the previous three articles. Swope, like Li, is concerned with the broader economic and technological context of riverine warfare. Like Tse and Chung, he is also interested in how rivers could be used for transportation and tactical advantage. Swope shows that both Taiping and Qing forces recognized early on the importance of gaining advantage along the Yangzi River. For the Taiping, a rag-tag navy of seized boats gave them an early advantage, allowing them to sweep down the Yangzi and take Nanjing. However, a confluence of factors soon gave Qing forces the upper hand. Having few well-developed theories
of riverine warfare and a strong sense of urgency, Qing commanders were open to the ideas of statecraft thinkers, the arrival of new technologies such as steamships, and non-traditional sources of information. Swope shows that the Qing adapted swiftly. By the early 1860s, superior technologies, along with adroit coordination of riverine warfare, coastal defense, and land-based attacks, helped ensure Qing victory. Lessons learned in the Taiping Rebellion would be utilized in later campaigns in northwestern China and in the creation of modern navies after the rebellion.

These articles add to a growing body of scholarship on the environmental, economic, and political significance of rivers in Chinese history. Environmental historians, such as Ruth Mostern, Ling Zhang, and Chris Courtney, have shown how river management (and mismanagement) transformed the ecology of China, intensifying agricultural production while also heightening risks of disastrous flooding. Economic historians, such as Meng Zhang and Ian Miller, have examined the role of rivers in economic integration and resource extraction. Stephen Miles and other scholars of local culture in southern China have shown how internal migration and cultural communities took shape around rivers or river systems. Historians of state expansion in the Ming and Qing have explored how the state used rivers to draw new administrative boundaries and facilitate the spread of Han cultural practices and settlement. At the same time, other scholars have noted that rivers could be liminal zones, providing a space for people hoping to evade the state. A number of these historians have noted the role of the military in shaping river systems. Mostern, for instance, argues that military colonies clearing land on ecologically fragile areas around the Yellow River contributed to problems of erosion and sedimentation. Scholarship on the intersection of war and rivers, focused on wars of the twentieth century, has also provided insight into the ecological and demographic devastation caused by intentional flooding. Cumulatively, this work is providing a richer picture of the ways in which China was woven together by its rivers and river systems.

Military historians can make important contributions to this conversation on rivers. There is great potential for collaborative work on the ways in which militarization and garrison-building shaped riverine economies and surrounding landscapes, a topic that Ling Zhang, Ruth Mostern, and Ian Miller have

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2 Mostern 2021; Lander 2021; Zhang 2016; Courtney 2018; Zhang 2021; Miller 2022; Li 2007.
3 Miles 2017; Faure and Siu 1995.
4 Weinstein 2014.
5 Song 2018; Siu and Liu 2006.
6 Lary 2001; Edgerton-Tarpley 2017; Muscolino 2015.
Articles in this issue hint at other questions that could bring military history into conversation with the work of economic or environmental historians. What, for instance, were the short- and long-term consequences of the massive shipbuilding projects or large-scale seizure of ships described by Li and Swope in the Song and Qing? Or, how did the use of rivers for wartime logistics, which could involve dredging, canal building, or diversion, affect their use in the postwar?

These articles also suggest the potential for further research on rivers during times of war. Some of these questions pertain to the temporality of warfare, which, as Chung's data on artillery transport shows, tends to be short and intense rather than protracted and diffuse. Histories of riverine warfare can make us more attentive to the short timespans that structured the lived experience and logistical function of rivers: seasonal change or weather fluctuations, or the time to travel from point to point along or across rivers. By focusing on this realm of lived experience, military historians might also contribute to work by Chris Courtney and others on the sensory history of rivers. The four articles also show the potential for histories of riverine warfare to provide ways of thinking about the adaptation of new technologies in China. Riverine warfare required armies to respond nimbly to rapidly changing conditions and dynamic interplays of land and water. All the articles in this issue show that the mutability of riverscapes spurred innovation and an openness to new technologies and tactics. As Swope observes, these technologies and tactics often flowed from one war to the next, or from one side to another. As a final note, then, I hope these articles encourage other military historians to examine how riverine warfare was shaped by flows of information as well as flows of water.

References


