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JOURNAL OF CHINESE MILITARY HISTORY 7 (2018) 117–118

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Military Power and Political Authority in Late Qing and Republican China

Introduction from the Editor

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The relationship between political authority and military power has been a complex and important historical issue spanning the Late Qing and Republican periods. In pre-1949 China, efforts to develop consistent and enduring patterns of civil-military relations were challenged by poor communications, close local relations between officers and their men, and difficulties produced by rapidly changing social and cultural norms. This special issue will examine military culture and values, military organizations, and contested authority to show the broader social and political boundaries of military power. Although military organizations, configured as strict hierarchies under a single commander, can have rigid and formal procedures, the articles in this issue demonstrate a great degree of initiative and local adaptation.

James Bonk's article concentrates on an informal military culture built around personal loyalties, shared experiences, and individual charisma in the Green Standards, the largely Han Chinese branch of the Qing military. The role of this informal culture was clearly demonstrated in the 1806 Ningshan mutiny, which tested the bonds between officers and their troops. While older scholarship portrays the 1806 mutiny as an example of declining central control over the military, Bonk develops an understanding of an enduring tension in the Qing military between bureaucratic and individual leadership that was renegotiated by the central government, military men, and literati in the early nineteenth century. Daniel McMahon examines multiple cases of Qing military activity against rebels in border regions, finding substantial variation in how military leaders sought to "pacify" large areas with often limited military resources. Qing Imperial laws and regulations mandated clear and direct actions against any challenge to government authority, but military commanders had to make difficult choices that often led to de facto acknowledgment of

many of the political grievances that had precipitated revolts and conflict. Eric Setzekorn's article centers on 1860s Shaanxi, where ethnic conflict was exacerbated by discord between Han local militia and Qing Imperial forces. While these two military organizations would ultimately defeat local Hui Muslim forces, the lack of cooperation and even animosity between the two military formations was extremely high. The ability of diverging military organizations to achieve success runs counter to traditional military norms of unity of command and unity of effort, but appears to have been highly effective in sustaining the Qing empire along the fragile northwestern frontier. Edward McCord examines the ways that military power was openly contested after the fall of the Qing empire in 1911. Political parties, most prominently the Nationalists (KMT) and the Communists (CCP), tried to control local militia forces as part of their broader political aspirations. Militia control reflected a conflict over ultimate political authority: bureaucratic control would favor the Nationalist Party, whereas control by peasant and worker unions would have assured Communist influence over union-based mass militia. Rather than the military being a primary actor in the "Warlord" area, the organization of the military itself became a battleground between these two rival political parties, each vying for control and influence among officers and soldiers.

Through this issue, we hope to reveal that military authority in the Qing empire and Republican China was highly diverse and civil-military relations are a vital element of larger historical developments. Each article challenges conventional understandings of military organizations and gives officers and their men greater agency than the conventional historiography has established. In particular, the notions that local elites were able to co-opt military power or that charismatic military officers gradually took control of units for their own purposes in the 1800-1949 period are not supported by the articles. As in all vast empires, the geographically dispersed and socially diverse environment inevitably led to a large degree of decentralization, but it does not mean that military power from 1800 to 1949 was ineffective, disloyal, or undisciplined.