Book Reviews


Tonio Andrade’s Lost Colony is a tour de force of narrative history that dramatically revises the received wisdom that Europe’s technological and military superiority accounted for its success in dominating much of Asia beginning in the seventeenth century. It is an irresistible page-turner centered on the conflict over Taiwan between the Ming loyalist warlord Koxinga and the Dutch from 1661 to 1662, written in piquant prose that describes the ensuing “mutilation, crucifixion, vivisection, bodies crumpled in creekbeds, and corpses floating in the tides” (180).

The book is divided into five parts: a preamble and closing sandwich three substantive sections that trace the life of Koxinga’s father, Zheng Zhilong, Koxinga’s early career resisting Manchu invasion and rule, and the Sino-Dutch conflict over Taiwan, which comprises the bulk of the narrative. Filled with rich descriptions and insights about many aspects of the Sino-Dutch conflict, Andrade’s study is organized around one insistent central question: “why did the countries of western Europe, which lay on the fringes of the Old World and were backward by Asian standards, suddenly surge to global importance starting in the 1500s” (7)? In seeking an answer, Andrade finds that neither those who posit broad comparability between Europe and Asia before the Great Divergence described by historian Kenneth Pomeranz (the revisionists), nor their critics, who assert Western dominance in areas such as political organization, science, technology, and the military (the counter-revisionists), have been able to provide a wholly persuasive explanation. The problem lies in that most military historians have focused on instances of intra-Asian or intra-European warfare. In order to test claims of purported European military superiority, particularly in fortification and ship design, Andrade examines Europe’s first war with China—The Sino-Dutch War of 1661-1668.

The vivid descriptions of battles and naval tactics in the conflict between Koxinga and the Dutch make it clear that better Chinese strategy could—and did—triumph over better European technology. While Dutch broadside sailing ships possessed a decided edge in firepower, deepwater combat, and the unique ability to sail into prevailing winds over their Chinese counterparts, those advantages could be neutralized in battle. In an early skirmish, the powerful Dutch war-yacht, Hector of Troy, proved itself to be vulnerable to attacks from the rear. It was ultimately destroyed when a spark from a firing cannon ignited its powder magazine (134-136). A Dutch attempt to bombard Chinese fortifications in Zeelandia City with five warships failed when the ships became trapped in shallow waters. The Dutch were
unable to fire broadsides from their larger ships because they were forced to cluster together, resulting in the loss of the flagship *Koukercken*. Other engagements witnessed the skillful use of shallow-water attack boats by the Chinese to stymie the larger Dutch warships, which experienced trouble maneuvering in the waters around Zeelandia Castle (245-248).

Similarly, Andrade demonstrates that another supposed Dutch advantage, the renaissance fortress, with its ability to project “defense in depth” and form interlocking fields of fire, while devastating and often more effective than its ships, was not impregnable and could be negated by Chinese tactics and undermined by poor Dutch leadership (176-177, 224). Most of all, Andrade highlights the fact that Dutch superiority in certain areas did not automatically result in victories. For example, the Chinese deployed landmines to counter Dutch snipers (241), whose muskets, in any case, did not bestow them with any significant advantage over the saber-staves and bows and arrows preferred by Koxinga’s troops (309-310). The point is clear: strategy, leadership, and discipline counted for much in warfare, and it would be a mistake to assume that Western technology always carried the day.

On balance, Andrade finds that the Dutch did not hold any edge over the Chinese in their military discipline or cannon and musket technology. The broadside sailing ship proved itself a formidable opponent in deepwater combat, assuming no leadership errors. The renaissance fortresses built by the Dutch, on the other hand, were devastatingly effective. The war over Taiwan showed that Koxinga was flummoxed by Zeelandia Castle’s defenses (a durable but not insurmountable obstacle), and it took a lengthy ten-month siege and four separate attempts to capture the fortress, and only after a German sergeant defected and showed Koxinga the key to doing so lay in building elaborate counterfortifications (317). Andrade argues that technology alone does not win wars and suggests that Koxinga emerged victorious because of his leadership, adaptability, and willingness to draw upon a rich Chinese military tradition.

Throughout the narrative, Frederick Coyet, the Dutch governor of Taiwan, comes across as an unsympathetic figure whose hapless leadership and abrasive personality undermined Dutch morale along with the defensive efforts. On the other hand, although Andrade asserts that Koxinga was defined by the virtues of righteousness and loyalty as a result of his upbringing and enduring devotion to the lost Ming cause (61), the book seems to paint him, particularly throughout the siege of Zeelandia Castle, as an erratic and foul-tempered leader far from the paragon of probity he is portrayed as during his earlier campaigns in China against the Manchus. Perhaps this is due in part to the nature of the historical sources themselves. The book relies mostly on Chinese sources like Yang Ying’s *Xianwang shilu* for Koxinga’s time in China, and necessarily draws much from Dutch sources of the Sino-Dutch war due to the lack of comparably detailed Chinese accounts. Given that Coyet was treated as a scapegoat for the Dutch defeat and the obvious Dutch bias against Koxinga, perhaps these depictions are inevitable.

In vivid and absorbing language, Andrade brings to life the excitement of battles on land and at sea. Life in besieged Zeelandia Castle emerges as a claustrophobic struggle for survival amidst starvation and unsanitary conditions that made life nasty, brutish, and short. His description of malnutrition and the sufferings of those afflicted with scurvy or beriberi made me want to stock up on nutritional supplements. In conclusion, Tonio Andrade’s *Lost