The History of Military Divination in China

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Introduction

The publication of Chen Songchang’s 陳松長 Mawangdui boshu “Xingde” yanjiu lungao 馬王堆帛書《刑德》研究論稿, in which the full transcriptions and analysis of the three versions (jia 甲, yi 乙, bing 丙) of the Xingde 刑德 manuscripts found at Mawangdui in 1973 were presented to the scholarly world for the first time, was an important event for the study of the Mawangdui manuscripts and of Chinese military history. These hitherto neglected texts throw much light on one complex system of military divination and complement the numerous studies that have appeared over the past thirty years on the other philosophical, medical, and historical manuscripts found in the tomb. This paper will offer some preliminary reflections on the history of Chinese military divination in general within the context of Chinese military practice. It will seek to demonstrate that, although ignored by most previous researchers on Chinese military studies (bingxue 兵學), divination for military purposes (bingzhan 兵占) was one of the fundamental features of warfare in pre-modern China.

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1 This paper is dedicated to the honour of Professor Ho Peng Yoke, former Director of the Needham Research Institute, whose dedicated scholarship on the history of Chinese science has been an inspiration for me and many others round the world. It was prepared with support from the Killam Foundation, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on the first draft of this paper; to my research assistants James Bonk and Margaret Wee-siang Ng; and to Grace S. Fong for catching a number of mistakes. The views expressed and errors that remain are entirely my own responsibility.

2 Chen Songchang (2001).
late Warring States times on, the Chinese structured their theory and practice of war on the tripartite cosmology of Heaven, Earth, and Man. As the Mawangdui silk manuscript text “The Features of Warfare” (“Bing Rong”兵容) states:

兵不刑天，兵不可動，不法地，兵不可(昔)措。兵法不人，兵不可成。

If warfare does not take its form from Heaven, warfare cannot be initiated. If it does not take Earth as its model, warfare cannot be managed. If its form and model do not rely on Man, warfare cannot be brought to a successful conclusion.3

Divination was placed in the ‘Heaven’ section of traditional military encyclopedias, and virtually no such encyclopedia from the Tang through the end of Ming failed to include a section on the topic. In addition, as is evident from Liu Shenning’s 刘申宁 catalogue of military works,4 military prognostication was an important genre of military writing from Warring States times right through to the end of the Qing dynasty. He lists 308 titles in total on military divination.5 In comparison, the genre of biographies of generals did not become an independent form of writing until the Song dynasty at the earliest, despite the fact that biographies of such men who contributed to the safety and welfare of the state had been included in the dynastic histories from the time of Sima Qian’s Shi ji in the Western Han dynasty.6 Thus the owner of the Mawangdui 馬王堆 tomb must have considered the silk manuscripts of Xing and De 嬴德帛書 very valuable

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3 Yates (1997a), p. 133. This view is echoed by the Heguanzi 鶴冠子 that states in section 14 “Administering the Military” (Bing Zheng 兵政), p. 41, in the words of Pangzi 龐子, “The method of using the military is to model it on Heaven, on Earth, and on Man” (literally, “Heaven it, Earth it, Man it”) 用兵之法天之地之人之.


5 These titles he has culled from references in the bibliographic sections of the dynastic histories, encyclopedias, such as the early Song Taiping yulan 太平御覽, and catalogues of rare book collections in China. He does not include in this list chapters on the art of divination in military encyclopedias, nor passages from military prognostications that are included in the astrology treatises (Tianwen shu 天文書) of the dynastic histories, or other relevant texts, such as the Tang dynasty Kaiyuan zhanjing 開元占經, nor yet fragmentary works discovered at Dunhuang, among other sites, for example the text on clouds and vapors (yunqi 雲氣) studied by He Bingyu and He Guanbiao (1985). I have also discovered other titles in rare book collections that are not recorded in Liu’s catalogue.

6 As has been proved by the discovery of the Yinqueshan hoard of military texts in a tomb of Western Han date at Lin’yi 林沂, Shandong, Sima Qian 司馬遷 incorporated into his history, the Shi ji 史記, an independently circulating story about Sunzi as his ‘biography’ of the great military theorist (Shi ji 65, pp. 2161-2162; Ames 1993). Peterson (1992a, 1992b) has recently suggested that Sunzi may not have been an actual historical figure.
possessions and just as important as the copies of Laozi and other manuscripts that have been the subject of intense research since their discovery.

Most of the early works in Liu’s catalogue composed through the Song dynasty are no longer extant. However, the nature of their contents can be ascertained from Tang and Song military encyclopedias, surviving texts from the Ming, as well as from fragmentary prognostication texts that have fortuitously been recovered from archaeological sites, such as those of the Dunhuang library in the early twentieth century and the Western Han tombs at Yinqueshan, Lin’yi, Shandong, and Mawangdui, Changsha, Hunan, in the 1970’s.

Why Divination in Warfare?

However, before we turn to a brief review of the history of military divination, the first question to ask is why was divination practiced in warfare in China? And what were its origins? If one examines the texts that have come down to us as well as the newly discovered manuscripts of divination and almanac texts from such sites as Shuihudi, Fangmatan, and most recently Guanju, we learn that administrative service, law cases, and the daily holding of the court by the ruler were treated as rites that were bounded by strict rules of performance, and carried out only at times that were deemed auspicious. In a similar fashion, it would appear that warfare was treated as a rite, and was thought especially appropriate to divine about, because it involved matters of life and death in which the outcome, and very survival itself, was in the hands of the ancestors, gods, and spirits, and subject to hemerological taboos like all culturally significant activities, in addition to being affected by human factors, such as the competence and morality of the general, the sufficiency of materiel, the level of training of the officers and the justice of the cause. The outcome of wars, therefore, was very hard to predict. As a consequence, and I emphasize this for all types of divination in China, prognostications were always performed within a ritual or ritualized context and setting. For a full understanding of the role and place of divination in Chinese society this context must be considered and appreciated. In this paper, therefore, I shall emphasize more the ritual aspects of

7 Huang Zhengjian (2001).
8 Ye Shan (1998); Yates (1994); Li Ling (2000a); Rao Zongyi (1993).
10 Qin jian zhengli xiao zu (1989); He Shuangquan (1989).
military divination, rather than explicate in detail all the forms and types of divination that were practiced in the Chinese military through the ages.

The Origins of Military Divination

The origins of the application of techniques of divination and selection of timing in warfare are to be found in the early Bronze Age. Evidence for this is to be found in the oracle-bone inscriptions of the Shang and the bronze inscriptions of the Zhou, as well as in the formulations of later texts such as the Zhou li 周禮, and in the Zuo zhuan 左傳. I would argue that the fact that the Shang divined about success and failure of even the most minor of military engagements indicates that war was ritualized in those times in some fashion. The Shang shu 尚書 also records the oaths that the Zhou kings swore in a ritual at the beginning of their campaign to destroy the Shang. 12 This practice transformed in later centuries into the ritual pronouncement of prayers and sacrifices to various spirits and deities recorded in detail in many military encyclopedias. For example, the Song dynasty Wujing zongyao 武經緯要 records the military sacrifice that the emperor Zhenzong 真宗 ordered to be made to Huangdi Xuanyuanshi 黃帝 軒轅氏 in the fourth year of the Xianping reign period (1001). 13

While divination in early China involved crack-making and recording of the oracles, scholars are still not in agreement as to whether or not the inscriptions record questions put to the ancestors or spirits. In the written record of military divination in subsequent times, no questions were ever asked, nor is there any evidence of a god or spirit speaking directly to or through a medium. Experts interpreted signs that were manifested in primarily the non-human world, or judged the appropriateness of any given activity on the basis of its occurrence on days whose auspicious or inauspicious qualities were pre-determined, known, and written down, despite the fact that many of the hemerological systems were mutually incompatible.

In Spring and Autumn times, it would appear that weapons, or at least the ones to be wielded by the generals, were stored in the ancestral temple and taken out only when war had been decided on by the head of state, a decision that was solemnly taken in the presence of the ancestral tablets in that same temple, a practice that continued through the centuries. The ruler also purified himself before issuing weapons to his troops. 14 The Zuo Zhan includes many fascinating details on rituals relating to the practices of war and divinations that took

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place before engaging in battle, but perhaps no speech is more famous than the one recorded under Duke Cheng's year 13 (576 BC). This firmly embeds warfare within the discourse and cultural practice of religious ritual:

劉子曰，吾聞之民受天地之中以生，所謂命也。是以有動作禮義威儀之則以定命也。能者養之以福，不能者敗以取禍，是故君子勤禮，小人盡力。勤禮莫如致敬，盡力莫如敦篤。敬在養神，篤在守業。國之大事在祀與戎。祀有執膰，戎有受脤，神之大節也。

Liuzi said, “I have heard it said that the people receive [the region] between heaven and earth to live in, and this is what is called their fate (ming). From that they have the means to act and create—ritual and right behavior, and the rules of authority and deportment—so as to determine this fate. The able nurture these so as to secure good fortune, while those without ability contravene them and earn misfortune. For this reason superior men diligently observe ritual, and lesser men exhaust their physical strength. In diligently observing ritual, nothing is so essential as utmost respectfulness; in exhausting one’s strength, nothing is so essential as genuine sincerity. That respectfulness consists in nourishing the spirits, that sincerity in attending to duty. The great affairs of the state are sacrifice and warfare. At sacrifices one presides over cooked meat, and in war one receives raw meat: these are the great ceremonies of the spirits.”

In short, warfare was a great ritual, a sacrifice essential for the maintenance of the existence of the dead ancestors and the spirits, as well as for the generation of good fortune for the living, perhaps a form of thanksgiving sacrifice for victory as well as an expiatory rite for engaging in the polluting act of killing. It was justifiable to wage war to preserve the state and the authority of the ruler. These attitudes towards warfare continued to be held throughout Chinese history. To the extent that the Chinese saw the person of the ruler as a religious figure, the Son of Heaven, who was responsible for maintaining the harmony of

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17 See Boileau (1998–1999), p. 91. Boileau points out that by late Warring States and Han times, the sacrifice of blood and raw meat was usually presented to Heaven and distant ancestors, whereas cooked meats that were tasty, or seasoned, were reserved for the more human, recently dead, ancestors. It was only the latter type of sacrifice that was shared in a commensal feast by the participants. However, as he notes, although ritual is conservative, it is not known exactly what the structure and symbolic meanings of sacrifice were in Western Zhou and early Eastern Zhou times.
the cosmos and for the continuation of the sacrifices to his ancestors and the preservation of the imperial line, to that extent warfare was also seen as a religious activity.

In addition, by at least the early Han, warfare was conceived to be a way of eliminating pollution that was harming good order in the world, as is clearly stated in the military chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子: the sages (shengren 圣人) invented warfare in order

![Image of text]

To punish by attacking the forceful and violent, to pacify the disordered world, to smooth the rough, to exorcise pollution, to make the muddy clear, and make danger into peace and calm.¹⁸

This belief was continued for many centuries, for the Great Exorcism (Da Nuo 大儺) that was part of the New Year celebrations in the Han dynasty¹⁹ had become by Tang times one of the five official state military rituals as recorded in the *Da Tang Kaiyuan li* 大 唐 開 元 禮.²⁰

Most significantly, it was essential to purify oneself and avoid polluting sexual activity before attending court, carrying out one’s official duties and engaging in such a ritual activity as warfare.²¹ This purification was a crucial, but not always necessary, marker that separated ordinary social practices from rituals. In many cases, only a slight modification of body movement or verbal inflection was necessary to mark a ritualized act.²² Separation of a particular set of actions from ordinary daily life, performed according to a fixed schedule separated from ordinary time, within a demarcated space, the performance being carried out with a certain demeanor, wearing certain types of clothing, and accompanied by certain forms of language, seems to mark off ritual actions from ordinary everyday activity.²³ Participants also embody the ritual and negotiate with their fellow

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¹⁸ *Huainanzi*, 15, 1b.
¹⁹ Bodde (1975), pp. 75-138.
²⁰ *Da Tang Kaiyuan li*, Baji, 90, pp. 2b-4a.
²² See, for example, the many prescriptions in Book 10 of the Confucian *Analects* (Lun yu); Waley (1964), pp. 146-152.
²³ Depending on the circumstances and the means of the participants, of course. Most commoners could only afford two sets of clothing, if at all, one for winter and one for summer. They would not change clothes for ritual activity, but they would mark ritual activity in some fashion. Here, I mean to distance myself from those who would accept at face value the oft-repeated statement in the *Li ji* that rites (*li* 礼) did not go down to the common people. What the text is talking about is the type of ritual involving the worship of the ancestors with valuable bronze vessels. As Lévi-Strauss (1974) showed in his studies of the tribes of South America, there is no people or culture that did not or do not
participants to create new meanings and transform themselves in relationship to
to their community, both human and extra-human.

By late Warring States times, with the development of the many different
esoteric *shushu* traditions, including Yin-Yang, the application of various
types of prognostication techniques for use by the military must have been gain-
ging popularity. This can been seen from the bibliography of extant works held by
the Imperial Library at the end of the Western Han dynasty and preserved in the
*Han shu* 蒼書. Numerous examples of such texts have been discovered in Warring States and Han tombs in recent years, including Mawangdui. In addition, we
can surmise its popularity by the virulence of the attack in the first section of the
military text later incorporated into the Seven Military Canons (*Wujing qi shu* 武
經七書) in the Northern Song dynasty (eleventh century), the *Wei (Yu) Liaozhi*
尉缭子, that is directed against those who employed Punishment and Virtue
(*Xing De* 刑德) and the Heavenly Offices 天官 in determining when and how
to fight. 24 It even appears in the material record: for example, the mid-Warring
States Dagger-Ax ‘Weapon to Avoid Tai Sui’ (*bibing Tai Sui ge* 避兵太歲戈)
preserves the image of Taiyi and another image of Taiyi is partially preserved on
one of the silks discovered in the tomb at Mawangdui. 25 Techniques for avoiding
the harmful effects of enemy weapons can be found in Chinese military
medicine texts down to late imperial times. 26 Although most of the texts of early
Yin-Yang specialists were lost in the course of transmission over the centuries,
both at Yinqueshan and at Mawangdui, as well as other archaeological sites, late
Warring States and early Han Yin-Yang military texts have been discovered. 27

engage in some kind of ritual activity, however attenuated. It is impossible for the peas-
ants in Bronze Age China (Shang through Zhou dynasties) not to have had their own
rituals. But since they were not recorded by the elite, it is difficult to know what they
were precisely, despite the efforts of scholars such as Granet (1959) to reconstruct them.

the *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法 (*Sunzi’s Art of War*), Du Mu 杜牧, quotes this section of
*Wei Liaozhi* in its entirety in an effort to discredit the interpretations of Cao Cao 曹操 and
Li Quan 李筌 who read much esoteric and Yin-Yang thought into the military classic. It
is from Du Mu 杜牧 (803-852), and Du You’s 杜佑 (735-812) views that today’s ac-
ccepted mode of understanding of Sunzi, which I would call the ‘real politik’ or ‘secular’
interpretation, derives. Their views were reinforced by Song Neo-Confucian scholars. See

25 There has been some debate about the identity of the figure on the dagger-ax *ge* 戈.
See Rawson (1996), item 68, pp. 149-150; Li Xueqin (1991); Li Jiahao (1993); Li Jiahao
(1996); Li Ling (1995-1996); Li Ling (2000b).

26 See, for example, *Jünzhòng yifang beiyao* and *Xìngjūn fāngbiàn biānfāng* by Qiu
Qingyuan.

27 For example, the *Di dian* 地典 was recovered from the Yinqueshan tomb (see Ye
Shan (1998), pp. 87-89), and, most recently, the *He Lì* 唯 (備) 備 was found in Han tomb

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As can be seen from Liu Shenning’s catalogue, military specialists in divination used many different types of techniques. Some were based on prognostications of astral phenomena, such as the Sun (日), the Five Planets (wuxing 五星), and the Twenty Eight Lunar Lodges (ershiba xiu 二十八宿); Taisui 太歳 (Counter-Jupiter); the Field Division System (Fenye 分野); comets, supernovae, thunder, lightning, rain, rainbows, mists and other anomalous heavenly apparitions. Another tradition of using natural phenomena was the system of the Corners of the Wind (Fengjiao 風角) and their associated musical notes. Related to these methods was the so-called “Watching the Qi and Clouds (Ethers)” (wang qiyun 望氣雲) that had a venerable history from Warring States times down to the end of the Qing dynasty. I will provide a brief review of this technique later in this paper. A number of these forms of divination appear in the so-called A and B manuscripts of “Xing De” at Mawangdui 馬王堆帛書《刑德》甲乙篇. Many of these techniques were based on the flows, appearances, shapes, and textures of the cosmic vapor or qi 氣, as Ho Peng Yoke and He Guanbiao (1985) have argued. By Tang, Song, and Ming times, divination by physiognomy, tides, changes in grasses and trees, and the behavior of wild and domestic animals, birds, reptiles, water, fire, and earth, and the movement and positioning of the flags and weapons in the army had also been added to the list of unusual phenomena that were thought to be portents of future events. Divination by tortoise shell was applied in the military sphere, as was omenology from dreams, as can be seen from the following examples taken from Fan Jingwen’s Zhanshou quanshu 战守全書:

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29. For a number of these different techniques, see Wubei zhi 楚技, chap. 186, “Zhan 占”占39, pp. 7881-7913; Zhanshou quanshu 战守全書, by Fan Jingwen (1587-1644), chap. 18. Fan was Vice-President of the Board of War (bingbu shangshu 兵部尚書) and wrote several military works, including a Xu Wujing zongyao 续 武經總要 (Collection of the Most Important Military Techniques, Continued) the only copy of which is held in the Fudan University Library. Fan wrote this latter work because he thought that too many contemporary re-editions of the famous Song military encyclopedia Wujing zongyao 武經總要 failed to describe the latest military technology and techniques, especially gunpowder weapons imported from the West. Thus it is clear that Fan saw no inconsistency between employing the latest “scientific” technology and weaponry and using divination techniques in prosecuting a war and defending against the numerous enemies attacking the late Ming state.
30. Shenji zhidi Taibo yin jing 神機 制敵 太白 陰絃, 10, pp. 738-742.
When the soldiers in the army see water in a dream, when warfare arises, it will be auspicious.

When the general sees [himself?] entering the sea in a dream, the troops will march.

When you see large fish or wild animals in a dream, there will certainly be a great battle. It is appropriate to protect yourself.

When you see in a dream flocks of birds flying every which way (in disorder), bandits will arrive.

When you dream of rumbling thunder, at the site where you dream there will be a great victory.

When you dream of the drums being beaten, if it is a loud noise, there will be a great victory. If it is a small noise, it will be a small victory. If there is no noise, it is inauspicious.

If close to the enemy you dream of a man with two white staffs, the bandits will surely be strong. In battle, you certainly will not be victorious and you will lose soldiers. It is appropriate to mount a firm defense.

If you dream of violent waters roiling turbidly in great waves, if you grasp your weapons and do not fight, it is auspicious.

If you dream you get the flesh of a large fish or a wild animal, if you fight you will surely achieve a great conquest.

In addition, in the early seventeenth century, divination was taken from the procedure of sacrificing a cock by beheading it, and seeing the position and direction in which the head and body fell and whether the bird squawked or jerked its body.31

Among the most important esoteric and arcane divination techniques in the cosmological armoury of military specialists were the Solitary and Empty (Guxu

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31 Zhanshou quanshu, Zibu vol. 36 (vol. 121), 18, 37ab (36, 195-592); Liu Shenning (1990), no. 1546.

32 Wubei zhi, vol. 34, chap. 186, “Zhan jianji”占 剪 雉, pp. 7902-7910. In this divination procedure, the cock’s head represented the diviner’s forces and its body the enemy.
In Liu’s catalogue, eighteen titles of books on the Dunjia method are recorded, and sixteen of the Qimen method, nine of which incorporate both Qimen and Dunjia. These seem to have been the most consistently popular of the arcane methods of divination. More simple “day selection” (zeri 擇日) was also used to determine the date when the army should, or should not, set out on campaign, to choose a date for battle, or location for an encampment, and predictions as to the outcome.

Watching the Qi

The military chapters of Mozi 墨子 contain one of the earliest references to the practice of “Watching the Ethers” Wang qi 望氣 (Watching the Qi), a technique, mentioned by Mark Edward Lewis, that gained prominence in the Han and continued into the Qing. Also known as Wang yunqi 望雲氣, it has been studied by Derk Bodde, the late Han legal authority A.F.P. Hulsewé, and most recently by Michael Loewe and Huang Yi-long and Chang Chih-ch’eng especially in its judicial divinatory application in determining the arrival of the various qi throughout the year by means of twelve pitch-pipes (shier lü 十二律). It was intended that the technical experts would report the arrival of

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33 It is now clear from the Guanju almanac texts that the “Guxu 孤虚 technique originated as early as the Qin dynasty; see Hubei sheng Jingzhou Shi Zhou Liangyu qiao yizhi bowu guan, slips 355-360, p. 133, and slip 260, p. 119, where it is used for divining where a robber has gone and where he has hidden the stolen property. See also Ngo (1976), pp. 193-195.


37 In the Northern Song dynasty, Xu Dong 許洞 recorded many such methods in his Huqian jing 虎鈐經.

38 Zhang Yincheng (2000).

39 Lewis (1990), pp. 139-140, 143-144.


41 Hulsewé (1979).

42 Loewe (1994).

43 Huang Yi-long and Chang Chih-ch’eng (1996).
the qi as it blew off ashes resting on a cloth covering the pitch-pipes and thus they would enable the ruler to correct the calendar. As such, it was closely tied to the ruler’s ritual and religious function of harmonizing Heaven and Earth. In its military aspect, in the Mozi, the general is advised to exercise strict control of experts in the esoteric arts, such as ether-watchers (wangqizhe 望氣者) and shamans (wu 巫), to have them close at hand, and not to permit them to relate their prognostications to the soldiers and officers at large for fear that their manic utterances might scare them. The experts are to report to the general or Defender (shou 守) in charge alone. In fact, experts in prognostications (zhanshizhe 占筮者) came to be regular participants in armies and they appear at least as late as the Wanli period of the Ming, for we find them listed with gunpowder and fuse experts (huoyao xianjiang 火藥匠), carpenters (mujiang 木匠), ironsmiths (tiejiang 鐵匠), cannoneers (dachong shou 大銃手), sea-shell trumpeters (poluo 品嘗), horn-blowers (laba 喇叭), flute-players (haodi 號笛), drummers (gu 鼓), gong-beaters (luoshou 鑼手), cymbalists (shuaiba 摔罅), doctors (yishi 醫士), veterinarians (shouyi 獸醫), bowyers (gongjiang 弓匠), and arrowsmiths (jianjiang 箭匠), as indispensible members of a military camp in the famous general Qi Jiguang’s influential treatise Jixiao xinshu 紀效新書.45

It is difficult to determine the extent of the belief in the esoteric arts and practices in the military, although occasionally we encounter known skeptics, such as Wang Chong 王充 in the Later Han and the scholar Du You 杜佑 in the Tang who rather reluctantly added an appendix on “Various Prognostications concerning Watching the Winds, the Clouds and Vapours” (“Fengyunqi hou zazhan” 風雲氣候雜占) to his section on the military in the Tong dian 通典, quoting in a note to the title a saying derived from the beginning of the early Confucian philosopher Mengzi 孟子, “The seasons of Heaven are not as good as the advantages of Earth; the advantages of Earth are not as good as the harmony among men; therefore I have appended it to the last section” 天時不如地利, 地利不如此和, 故附於末篇.46 He then proceeds to quote extensively from the Taigong [Bingfa] 太公 [兵法] and other earlier texts, such as the as-

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44 Wubei yaolue 武備要略, chap. 5, pp. 23a-25a, explains how these various signals specialists gave commands to the army. Cheng Ziyi, the compiler of this work, also indicates that the sea-shell trumpets were adopted from the Japanese.
45 Jixiao xinshu, 1, pian 1 “Shu wu” 束伍, pp. 11ab [91-92].
tronomical chapters of the Jin Shu 晉書.\footnote{47} Wang Zongyi 汪宗沂 (Taoluzi 韬廬子) at the end of the Qing included in his Yunqi zhanhou 雲氣占候 parts of Du’s formulations but he omitted his skeptical comment.\footnote{48}

A generation or two before Du You 杜佑 in the mid-eighth century, the Daoist Li Quan was of the opinion that prognostication techniques were not efficacious unless exploited by a sage or worthy who was acting in a righteous cause and he justified including these techniques in his encyclopedia in the following General Preface to “Various Prognostications” ("Za Zhan" 雜占) section.

The Canon states: ‘Specialists in the Patterns of the Heavens manifest the good and ill fortune deriving from the Six Harmonies (liuhe).\footnote{50} Military texts write about the successes and defeats of the Six Armies.’ Now I have tied together matters relating to a single battle and have arranged them into sections (pian) with headings. The remaining disasters and changes I have omitted and not written down. Now the Way of Heaven is far off and the Way of Man is close by. The Way of Man is to strategize / plot in Yin. Thus it is said that the Numinous is completed in Yang. Thus it is said an intelligent person possessing numinous intelligence (shenming) is called a sage (shengren). Now a sage harmonizes his virtue / charisma (de) with Heaven and Earth. He harmonizes his intelligence with the sun and the moon. He harmonizes his sequences with the four seasons; he harmonizes his auspiciousness and inauspiciousness with the ghosts and spirits. Thus it is said that he precedes Heaven and yet Heaven does not defy him; he is behind Heaven and yet he respects Heaven’s seasons and moreover Heaven does not defy him. How much more so with Man? How much more so with the ghosts and spirits?

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\item \footnote{47} See also Wei Qipeng (1994), p. 81.
\item \footnote{48} Yunqi zhanhou pian (1894) (Congshu jicheng xinbian 叢書集成新編 (ed.) vol. 25; Taibei: Xinwen feng chuban she).
\item \footnote{49} The Zhang edition reads \textit{wan} 完.
\item \footnote{50} The “Six Harmonies” are most likely Heaven, Earth, and the Four Directions.
\end{itemize}
If a man’s strategies are fulfilling and his tactics perfect, then Heaven and Earth, the sun and the moon, the four seasons, and the ghosts and spirits all harmonize with him. If a man’s strategies are deficient and his tactics failures, then, even though he may cause Da Nao’s Buli, Huangdi’s Boyuan, Gan De’s “Prognostication of the Stars,” Wu Xian’s “Watching the Qi,” Wu Cheng’s “Disasters and Changes,” and Feng Hou’s “Solitary and Empty” to favour his victory, there has never been such a case [that he has gained victory]. That is probably because the Way of Heaven assists the compliant: that is the means whereby he survives and is not destroyed. If a general is worthy and the officers eager and they punish the violent and rescue the weak; attack the unrighteous with righteousness; punish those without Dao whilst possessing the Dao; seize the crooked in a straightforward manner; and attack the stupid with wisdom; what need would there be to worry about the patterns of Heaven? One can be broad and yet liberal; one cannot be grasping and restrictive.

So, according to Li, knowledge and manipulation of technologies to reveal the arcana of the cosmos are of no use or value to someone who is attempting to employ them for illegitimate ends. The direct connection between, and interdependence of, the three realms of Heaven, Earth, and Man cannot be more clearly enunciated; only the sage, acting for the greater good, can harmonize his behaviour with the cosmos and have the cosmos respond to help him bring order to the world. All the esoteric knowledge gleaned from the traces of the ancient masters is not going to assist someone who fails to take care of the human side of military preparations. Thus knowledge of, and compliance with, both human activities and the natural order must be acquired for a general or ruler to be successful in warfare.

Li Quan in the Tang identifies the following categories of qi: “The Qi of a Fierce General” (Mengjiang qi 猛將氣); “The Qi of a Victorious Army” (Shengjun qi 勝軍氣); “The Qi of a Defeated Army” (Baijun qi 敗軍氣); “The Qi of City Walls and Ramparts” (Chenglei qi 城壘氣); “The Qi of Soldiers Hiding in Ambush” (Fubing qi 伏兵氣); “The Qi of Rebellious Soldiers” (Baobing qi 暴兵氣); “The Qi of Battle Formations” (Zhanzhen qi 戰陣氣); “The Qi of Hidden Plots” (Yinmou qi 陰謀氣); “The Qi of the Four Barbarians” (Siyi qi 四夷氣); and the “Far and Near Qi” (Yuansui qi 遠近氣). These may

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51 Shenji zhidi Taibo yinjing, 8, pp. 623-624.
52 Shenji zhidi Taibo yinjing, “Zhanyunqi” 占雲氣, pian 88, pp. 652-679. Xu Dong 許洞 in his Huqian jing 虎鈐經, chap. 17, pp. 371-390, devotes section 169 of his early Song military encyclopedia to the clouds and qi: after a general introduction, he lists only six different types of clouds and qi: those above cities; those of victorious troops; those of a general; those of soldiers hiding in ambush; those of treacherous murderers (jianzei yunqi 炎賊雲氣); and of defeated soldiers. The Wujing zongyao, “Hou ji”, chap. 18, 3, pp. 1971-1996, drops two of Li Quan’s categories, “The Qi of the Four Barbarians” and
be considered typical general categories of qi that could be interpreted in a military context, although by the end of the Qing, Taoluzi had expanded, divided, and refined the varieties of qi to produce a list of thirty alternatives.

When and how did one watch the qi? The Ming military expert Fan Jingwen quotes another Tang divination expert, Li Chunfeng 李淳風, who states:

凡候氣之法, 常以平旦寅時及日晡夜半, 或戊已之日看候敵上, 敵在東, 日出候之, 敵在南, 日中候之, 敵在西, 日入候之, 敵在北, 夜半候之, 乃知敵人動靜盛衰之兆。

The general method of observing the qi is one takes observations above the enemy always at the yin hour at dawn, in the afternoon [from 3-5 pm] or at midnight, or on the wusi day. When the enemy is to the east, observe it when the sun comes up; when they are to the south, observe it at midday; when they are to the west, when the sun sets; when they are to the north, at midnight. Then you will know the omens concerning the enemy’s movement or rest, their rise or decline.

This method clearly shows the correlations that were thought to exist between the relative location of the observer (the ether watchers 望氣者), the enemy and the greater cosmos, the four directions, and the time of day. In other words, in watching the ethers, attention had to be paid to space-time coordinates of the action and those of the players (i.e., both the watcher and the enemy).

Although it seems clear that an individual general could generate qi, the early Song expert Xu Dong, opines:

臣聞百人已上勝敗之氣必俱焉, 是以順之者昌, 逆之者亡, 天地無言, 吉凶以象占, 雲氣有異, 必契災變。占氣之時, 觀氣之首出, 如飲上雲, 勃爵上騰, 氣積而為霧, 氣陰結為虹霓, 哀珥之屬, 不積不結, 散浸一方, 不能為災。

Your subject has heard that the qi of victory or defeat inevitably accompanies [a group of] more than a hundred men.

the “Far and Near Qi,” and adds a final category “Various Prognostications of the Shapes of Qi” (Qixiang zazhan 氣象雜占).

53 Yunqi zhanhou pian, A.

54 Qiankun bianyi lu 乾坤變異錄 quoted in Zhanshou quanshu 18, p. 15b. The passage “When the enemy is to the east, observe it when the sun comes up; when they are to the south, observe it at midday; when they are to the west, when the sun sets; when they are to the north, at midnight” 敵在東, 日出候之, 敵在南, 日中候之, 敵在西, 日入候之, 敵在北, 夜半候之 also appears in the Taibo yinjing section on “Far and Near Qi”, p. 667.
For this reason, if they accord with it, they will be glorious, but if they oppose it, they will be lost. Heaven and earth do not speak. Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are prognosticated through signs. When there is strangeness in the clouds and $qi$, inevitably they portend changes and calamities.

As for the time for prognosticating $qi$, observe the $qi$ when it first appears. Like clouds above a steamer, it suddenly billows up thickly, the $qi$ accumulates and becomes mist $qi$, and the yin $qi$ binds together and becomes a rainbow or a type of halo or ring. If it does not accumulate or does not bind together, but rather dissipates and soaks away in one direction or another, it cannot bring about a calamity.  

In general, $qi$ was conceived of appearing in the five colours of the Five Phases, white, green, vermilion, yellow, and black. There are a few combinations of colours, too. Also important was the direction the $qi$ moved in, or whether it was stationary, whether it came out or entered in, and what shape it took. While He Bingyu and He Guanbiao, following Needham, explain watching the $qi$ within the framework of “associative” or “coordinative thinking,” and suggest that it belongs to the realm of “natural magic which is science in its early form,” it seems to me that one has to stretch such thinking beyond the bounds of the possible or reasonable to explain statements such as the following from the late Ming military writer Fan Jingwen, quoting the Tang expert Li Chunfeng:

在一般情况下，$qi$ 可以出现为五色，白、绿、赤、黄、黑。又有各种组合。重要的还有其方向，或进或出，或聚或散，或合或离，其形状变化万千。而一般对于 $qi$ 的观察，都必须在“蒸气笼中”或“云气内”进行，然后才能作预报。如果 $qi$ 出现得十分相像，那么它就会给你带来吉凶。如《云气统论》所说：“凡气欲似蒸气勃勃而上升，外积结形而後可占。”
If the *qi* either resembles a dead horse; or a man pulling with his hands; or a frightened cock or rabbit; or a dead dog; or pulling an ox; or a man without a head lying down; or a rolled up mat; or an overturned dipper; or a thin old man; or a net that has been spread wide; or a broom; or is vermilion colored and in the image of a person with a thousand or ten thousand heads; or like tiles, gravel, or stones; or like a sandbank; or has the shape of waves in water; these are all the *qi* of a defeated army. You can capture the general.

In addition, Mao Yuanyi (1594-1640), the composer of the greatest and most comprehensive military encyclopedia, the *Wubei zhi*, who had extensive combat experience in the field, includes in his section on “Prognostications” ("Zhan占") a series of esoteric ritual performances and prayers (*Yanrang厭禳*) to counteract baleful influences that a general might encounter in the course of his duties. These, he says in his preface, are not matters that a gentleman (*junzi*) speaks about (*茅子日厭禳君子所不道也*). He describes a ritual to exorcize an epidemic (*ji疫*) which involves the burning of the heads of captured enemy soldiers—we should not be surprised that such rituals were recommended by a late Ming literatus (*shidafu士大夫*) like Mao Yuanyi, since in contemporary late imperial popular culture rituals to exorcize plague demons were quite common, witness the cult of the military deity Marshal Wen 溫元帥 in Zhejiang province analyzed by Paul Katz.57 Mao describes another of these rituals that was intended to counteract the powerful influence of a royal *qi* emanating from an enemy general.

the altar take each of one black dog and one black cock. The general puts on plain clothing, and in his left hand brandishes a sword, and in his right takes the two animals. He stands with his back to the altar, chants the given name and surname of the enemy general, and then kills the animals and buries them three feet deep in the direction where the qi rules. When the qi declines, you will be able to get rid of it.58

This is a fascinating text that deserves a much fuller interpretation than I can give it here. Suffice it to say that in such a period of disorder as the late Ming, it was thought that a “royal qi,” evidently believed to be present independently in the cosmos or generated by an individual’s morally correct behavior, could attach itself to a rebellious general. A loyal general fighting on the side of the Ming emperors could destroy this “royal qi” by creating a powerful cosmic centered ritual space protected by the spirits of the Eight Trigrams, the powerful spirits of the months that we see in Liu Ren, Qimen, and Dunjia divination tradition,59 and other astral deities, and, at the most auspicious moment and under the influence of Yin powers, symbolically kills the enemy general and forces his qi to dissipate. This cannot just be interpreted as natural magic leading toward science, but must be analyzed within the context of traditional Chinese religious and ritual beliefs and practices of exorcism, a burgeoning field of inquiry.60 The late Ming general was, in fact, a powerful exorcist. We must analyze the actions of traditional Chinese armies and the symbolic meanings that they gave to their equipment if we are to understand what they thought that they were doing on the battlefield and on parade.

Concluding Remarks

A hand-copied manuscript preserved in the Rare Books Department of the Zhejiang Provincial Museum, the Kedi wulüe Yinghuo shenji 克敵武略熒惑神機 by the Ming military and firearms expert Liu Ji 劉基 bears a preface dated the eighth month of the third year of Hongwu (1370). This text does not appear with this same title anywhere in Liu Shenning’s bibliography of military works, but

58 Wubei zhi, 188, “Zhan” 41, pp. 7959-7960.
59 Each of the months was assigned one of the twelve chen辰, starting with hai亥 in the first month (zhengyue正月), and each was given an esoteric name; hai亥 was Dengming登明; xu戌 was Hekui河魁; you酉 was Congkui從魁 and so on.
60 See, for example, Edward L. Davis’s brilliant recent study (2001) that demonstrates that the interpretation that elite male neo-Confucian philosophers secularized Chinese thought and practice in the Song is entirely misleading. Richard J. Smith is doing the same for late imperial China. See Smith (1991).
appears to be essentially the same as that reproduced in the *Huolong jing* 火龍經 published under the Yongle 永樂 emperor in the early Ming, providing as it does a fairly complete overview of the latest contemporary developments in gunpowder technology. What is interesting to me in the present context is that Liu begins his treatise on these destructive weapons by placing the use of fire in general within a cosmological framework that could only be interpreted by a general who was a master of divination theory and practices.

火攻之法 以風為勢，風猛則火烈，火熾則風生，風火相搏，斯能勝。故為將者當知風候，以月行之度準之。月行於箕軫張翼四星（箕在天十度半軫在天十七度張在天十七度翼在天十八度），則不出三日必定有大風，數日方止。仰觀星宿，光搖不定，亦不出三日必有大風，終日而止。黑雲夜蔽斗口，風雨交作（雲自北方起者，風必大）。黑雲飛塞天河，大風數日（雲如彘形者，名天豕渡河）。月暈而青色數圍主風無雨（青主風 黑主雨）。月沒，黑雲相接，來朝風作。風來十里，揚塵動葉。風來百里，飛砂飄瓦。風來千里，力能走石。風來萬里，能拔木。如天之時而善用之，斯萬戰而萬勝矣。The standard method of attacking by fire uses the wind as its situational advantage [or 'propensity' as François Jullien translates the term]. When the wind is fierce, fire rages; when fire is intense, then the wind grows. Wind and fire rely on each other and they can [be used] to gain the victory. Therefore, a general must know about the conditions or periodicities of wind. Measure them by means of the degrees that the moon travels. If the moon travels in the four constellations Ji, Zhen, Zhang, and Yi, then within three days there inevitably will be a great wind and only after several days will it stop. Look up and observe the constellations and the lunar lodges. If they tremble and are not stable, then also within three days there definitely will be a great wind that will stop at the end of the day. If black clouds cover the Mouth of the Dipper at night, then wind and rain will be produced together (note: if the clouds arise from the north, the wind will certainly be great). If black clouds fly and block up the Heav-

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61 Compare with the hand-written manuscript *Huolong shenqi zhenfa* 火龍神器陣法 reprinted in the *Zhongguo bingshu jicheng*, vol. 17, pp. 1-170.


63 The note reads: Ji is 10.5 degrees in the heavens; Zhen is 17 degrees; Zhang is 17 degrees; Yi is 18 degrees.
enly River, there will be a great wind for several days (note: if the clouds resemble the shape of pigs it is called the Heavenly Pig fording the River). If there is a moon that is haloed with several rings of green light, there will be mainly wind without rain (note: green is in charge of wind; black is in charge of rain).

If when the sun sinks, black clouds assemble together, at dawn a wind will rise. If the wind comes from ten li, it will raise the dust and shake the leaves. If it comes from 100 li, it will carry sand and blow off tiles. If the wind comes from a 1000 li, the force will be capable of tumbling stones. If the wind comes from 10,000 li, the force will be capable of uprooting trees. If one follows Heaven’s seasons and is expert at using them, then one will be victorious ten thousand times in ten thousand battles.

The text goes into great detail concerning the generation of wind and how one can forecast its arrival and length of duration on the basis of the appearance of astral and qi phenomena. It concludes by reiterating the necessity of comprehending and harmonizing one’s activities with the cyclic movement of the Heavens.

How did traditional Chinese achieve such harmonization with the rhythms and patterns of the cosmos? They organized their camps and formations according to the patterns of the stars and constellations in the sky. They emblazoned their flags and pennons with the signs of the constellations, the images of astral deities, and the Eight Trigrams. They coloured these flags and the uniforms of the soldiers according to the primary symbolic colours of the Five Phases 五行.

Their generals were embodiments of traditional social morality as well as experts in esoteric patterns and ritual performance. And they employed experts in military divination to ensure that the movements and the rituals accorded with greater cosmic patterns. Of course, they also had to be conversant with latest military techniques and technologies, had to provide adequate logistical support for their armies, and had to be sufficiently literate and politically astute to maneuver within the political whirlpool of the Chinese bureaucracy if they were to rise to positions of power and survive the attacks of both internal and external enemies.

I would also like to note that early military divination texts were attributed to ancient sages and spirits, such as the Yellow Thearch (Huangdi 黃帝) and the Lord of the Wind (Fengbo 風伯), as Li Quan mentions in the passage quoted above, in addition to being anonymously written, as it seems the Mawangdui “Xing De” texts were. These practices continued in later ages. But from Song times on, many works on military divination were attributed to famous generals who were best known for their tactical and strategic skill as well as their literary abilities, individuals such as Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 of the Three Kingdoms pe-
riod, Li Jing 李靖 of the early Tang, Liu Ji 劉基, the gunpowder expert of the early Ming, and Qi Jiguang 戚繼光 (1528-1587) of the late Ming. It is not clear whether these attributions have any historical basis, although they are consonant with the accepted notion that brilliant generals had to have such arcane knowledge if they were to be successful.

Finally, I want to point out that many, if not most, techniques of military divination, were the same as those used in other spheres of cultural life. *Qimen Dunjia 奇門遁甲*, for example, as the Ming scholar Gan Lin 甘霖 records, was used for divining the weather, starting buildings and gardens, success in the examinations, visits to superiors, farming, silkworm production (a woman’s activity), capturing escaped slaves and bondservants, hunting, wealth generation, travel, involvement in law cases, robbery, marriage, conception and birth, loss of articles, eating and drinking, and so on. However, some techniques, like Watching the Ethers and Xing De, and divination by means of cock-killing and observing the behavior and movements of animate and inanimate objects in or near an army or its encampments, were particular to the practice of military divination.

With the full publication of the Mawangdui “Xing De” texts, we are in a much better position to understand the development of military divination in the period of the establishment of the first Chinese empires, when it underwent its first major expansion. However, this paper has but skimmed the surface of what is a very long and complex tradition, one that deserves much fuller treatment than I have been able to give it here. The significance of military divination should be recognized not only within the history of China’s military tradition, but also within the tradition of China’s esoteric arts and techniques, itself deserving of greater study, especially in the Tang and post-Tang period. Professor Ho Peng Yoke has led the way in exploring this tradition and I look forward to many more of his erudite studies in the coming years.

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