

**Homer Lea, "Can China Fight," *World Today*, February 1907: 137-146.**

Ignorance of the primary laws of military science and a profound contempt for the soldiers of nations other than their own are as marked characteristics of all countries today as during other ages. The United States is no more an exception in this regard than are nations whose prowess we affect to despise.

Some time after the Spanish-American war I was conversing with a gentleman, a university graduate, on the unpreparedness of the United States to engage in any but a disastrous war with a first-class power. My remarks were received with amazement and incredulity.

"Why, sir!" he exclaimed, "we are good for any three of them!"

I endeavored to make a comparison between the numerical and technical strength, as well as the training and discipline of one European army and the forces available in our own country. This comparison was lightly waved aside as unworthy of consideration.

"Every American household," he informed me, "possesses either a shotgun or a rifle or a revolver. We would at once seize these ready weapons and drive the enemy into the sea!"

As regards officers, he assured me that every American is a born general; and as for technical knowledge or discipline, the simple valor of the American volunteer would prove more than an effective substitute.

This magnificent disdain for foreign armies is unfortunately widely prevalent throughout this country as well as in other lands. It is a species of patriotism, but even more a species of national conceit. And it is this vanity which, more than any other factor, has always been responsible for the unnecessary deaths of innumerable thousands, as well as for great national disasters. Empires and whole nations have fallen because of it.

It is this national conceit that has been a source of China's misfortunes during the last half century. In this period it has taken eight wars, the loss of several tributary kingdoms and the occupation of her ancient capital on two occasions by the forces of foreign nations, to teach the great empire to distinguish between it and true patriotism.

Occidentals have become accustomed to regard the Chinese soldier with a contempt as sublime as ignorant. Their deductions are based, not on the military capacity of the Chinese people, but on the results of wars between nations in the zenith of military efficiency, supplied with every modern invention, and China during a period of political decadence, possessed of armies without equipment, without training, without organization, without officers. Such deductions are, therefore, manifestly untrue; no comparison can be made between the fighting qualities of nations except when they are to a relatively high degree equally equipped and organized. Furthermore, this belief in the incapacity and pusillanimity of the Chinese soldier is due to the West's ignorance of the military history of this ancient land. Europe and America know China only during a period of political decadence, in which, as among all nations, military instincts and aspirations have been repressed and debased by corrupt civilian officials, and by a lettered autocracy blinded by bigotry; for both classes know that a military renaissance means their downfall.

A consideration, brief as it might be, of the martial qualities of the Chinese, shows that no nation possesses a military history so extensive, so full of vast wars and endless

marches. Nor are the annals of any people more crowded with campaigns of great generals or more illumed with heroic deeds than those of China.

The evolution of the Chinese empire, as that of other nations, has been through the battlefield. The trumpet here has heralded in new epochs; from the crash of combat have come new liberties; from the life-blood of innumerable myriads has sprung new national strength; while in the ashes and ruins of these wars have been buried outworn customs and political, corruption. Every one of the twenty-five dynasties that have reigned over China was founded by successful generals; and each of them, on the eve of its dissolution, has heard from surrounding armies the melancholy taps of its approaching end.

Civilians and scholars have played but a small part in the political development of China. They have never founded dynasties, but have always been conspicuous in their downfall.

China during her long existence has seldom if ever been free for any length of time from the necessity of warfare, either with foreign foes or internal rebellions. The awfulness of these wars is hardly comprehensible. For instance, in the wars during the decline of the Tang dynasty in the eighth century, the population was reduced thirty-five millions in fifty-two years. At the battle of Chongli, during the sixth century, nearly three hundred thousand soldiers were slain on the field of battle or drowned in the turbulent waters of the Hoaiho. Actions are unnumbered where losses exceeded one hundred thousand. In a battle on the willow-fringed banks of the Euho, during the civil war in the fifteenth century, nearly a million and a half men were engaged. The fighting lasted for several days, from the dusk of dawn until night stopped the carnage. When the battle ended, the corpses of hundreds of thousands were strewn over the millet-fields and wide, sandy plains of Techau.

During the Taiping Rebellion, fifty years ago, not less than twenty millions perished. The once well-tilled fields of many provinces became jungles, through which browsed the shy, spotted deer; rice-fields sank into marshes, where the wild duck winged its solitary way; and once populous towns became the haunts of wild beasts.

The conquest of China has been accomplished twice; once by the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his descendants; once by the Manchus. Both of these conquests occurred during periods of political decadence, such as we have witnessed throughout the nineteenth century.

During the Tartar conquest, China was divided into two rival kingdoms, each on the verge of political dissolution. Yet it took these terrible Mongols, swooping down from their desolate fastnesses in the deserts of Shamo, under the greatest conquerors the world has ever produced, seventy years to effect the conquest of this leaderless and disunited empire. In much fewer years, the whole of central and western Asia, as well as eastern Europe, echoed with the triumphant hoof-beats of these wild horsemen, and bowed submissively before their cow-tail banners. Asia, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Roumania and Bosnia were conquered and plundered by them before China accepted their dynasty of Yuen. The people's defense of their nationality and liberties was as great in its heroism as it was long in its duration.

The siege of Sianying endured for five years. After four years, a portion of the defenses, called the city of Fanching, was captured, the garrison fighting to the end; from

street to street, from house to house, not a single soldier survived the combat; and the triumph of the Mongols was only over the cinders and ruins of the city

In some sieges, where the defenders saw no hope of continuing the contest, entire populations immolated themselves on their thresholds; and the besiegers, scaling the deserted walls, invaded but a savage solitude, inhabited by the corpses of its citizens.

Nations contemplating the conquest of China would do well not to mistake dynastic for national weakness; nor the pusillanimity of politicians for a characteristic of the people. They should remember that while Japan drove an undisciplined, unarmed and leaderless Chinese force out of Korea in 1894, in the seventh century a Chinese army on the same battlefields destroyed the combined armies of Japan and Korea, and the flames from four hundred war-junks of Nippon lit up with lurid glare the bitter waters of the Yellow Sea. Again in the sixteenth century, the greatest of Japanese soldiers, Hideyoshi, invaded Korea, boasting that with his mighty host he would invade the country of the Great Ming (China) and fill with hoarfrost from his sword the whole sky over the four hundred provinces. But on these same battlefields the Japanese were again defeated and driven to Fushan. Armaments and military efficiency vary, but national courage is constant. China needs only to remedy the first.

It might be well to notice that the same principles that inspired the United States to intervene in behalf of Cuba caused China to go to the rescue of the Koreans, This intervention in behalf of neighboring kingdoms, either to save them from foreign oppression or from the anarchy of rebellion, has occurred on many occasions, and has been accomplished with paternal solicitude and unselfish honor. In no instance can it be charged to China that advantage was taken of these opportunities to acquire power or territory or to impose her customs on the kingdoms she had succored. Their rights and liberties have in no instance been violated.

The Emperor Yonglu, who put down a rebellion in Tonquin, at the solicitation of the Tonquinese king, gave the following instructions to his generals on the eve of their departure:

“Spare no efforts to capture Li Kima (the rebel), but be careful yourselves not to commit the crimes you are going to punish. Maintain carefully discipline among your soldiers, and do not increase the troubles with which that country is agitated. Respect the burial places and houses of the inhabitants, their goods and also their wives and daughters. Spare the lives of those who surrender. If I hear of any one of you breaking these orders, all of his services shall be forgotten and I shall punish him with severity.”

In 1791 the Goorkhas, the people of an independent Indian kingdom on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, invaded Tibet with an army of twenty to thirty thousand soldiers, tempted thither by the fabulous wealth to be found in its lamaseries and temples. Degarchi, the second city to Lahassa, and the vast lamasery of Teslu Lumbo, were captured. The Tibetans appealed to Peking, and General Sungfu was ordered to their assistance from Sining, a thousand miles northeast of Lahassa. This force traversed the barren snow-swept wastes of Kuku Nor; it passed over the crags of Dakzy, through the gorges of the Mur Ussu, and across the ice-fields of Shiubden Gomba. No army in the military annals of the world ever made a more stupendous or terrifying march than Sungfu's, across the wild Roof of the World.

The maneuvers of the Chinese commander were carried out with such vigor and skill that he forced the Goorkhas into line of battle on the north slope of the Himalayas.

As is their custom, the Chinese presented to the Goorkhas conditions by which they could return peacefully to their own country. This ultimatum included the surrender of a renegade lama, the spoil taken from the lamaseries, a promise of better conduct in the future and a recognition of the suzerainty of China.

The Goorkhas haughtily rejected the conditions, and a battle ensued on the plains of Tengri Maiden, at an altitude of nearly three miles, which resulted in the Goorkhas abandoning the field and much of their booty. The Chinese pursuit was carried on with vigor, and a second defeat was inflicted at Kirong Pass. Halfway between Daibong and Kirong the Goorkhas defended the passage over a chasm for three days; and their final stand was made only twenty miles from the Goorkha capital on the cliffs over the gorge of the Tadi.

The valor of the Goorkhas in this last desperate battle was such that the advance of the Chinese was checked. General Sungfu, turning his artillery on both forces as they came together on the edge of the cliffs, calmly assured his own troops that as soon as the Goorkhas were destroyed the fire of the guns would cease. So the artillery continued to play impartially on the whole mass of combatants until the Goorkhas and many thousand Chinese had been swept over the precipices, down through the blue haze, to where the torrent of the Tadi boils among its black bowlders.

Military men acquainted with the Goorkhas know them to be the bravest fighters in the Anglo-Indian army, and will appreciate what heroic efforts the Chinese soldiers must have made to capture their defensive positions at an altitude where physical exertion is accompanied oftentimes by excessive pain. This campaign forms, without a doubt, one of the most remarkable exploits in military history, and shows what a Chinese army properly led is capable of accomplishing.

Naturally it is asked, if the Chinese possess such military capacity, why is it that they are so far behind western nations? The reasons are, as heretofore stated, primarily due to China's period of political decadence during the last century, a century that has been productive in the Occident of every military weapon, instrument and utensil now used. Secondly, that while the military evolution of western nations is the successive and simultaneous evolution of many countries interdependent, as are their languages, laws, and religions, that of China is purely Chinese; they have worked it out themselves, alone and unaided, as they have their language, laws and customs.

The earliest Chinese military books treat most sensibly on modes of marching, the necessity of having plans of the enemies' countries, prohibiting the troops from harrassing the people, ways of building bridges, security and information, castramentation, outposts, sentries, discipline, major and minor tactics.

Chinese engineers constructed suspension bridges five hundred feet long, with a roadbed of twelve feet over great chasms and gorges, twenty centuries before they were used in Europe.

During the Tang dynasty, the national army was organized into 895 regiments, giving a standing force of about nine hundred thousand. These soldiers were trained individually as well as collectively.

In the seventh century, pensions were granted to the widows and orphans of those who died in the service.

At the siege of Taiyuen, in the eighth century, mines and counter-mines were used, the besiegers losing over sixty thousand men in less than a month. During the tenth

century, promotions from the ranks and throughout all grades were regulated by examinations. In the twelfth century, armored cars holding twenty-four soldiers were placed on the line of battle, proving especially effective against cavalry.

In such a manner, antedating that of Europe, might the military evolutions of China be traced. But the time has now come when customs and tactics and armament superior to anything ever produced within her boundaries are being adopted. The past can not and will not be forgotten, but the glorious deeds that illumine its pages will only serve as inspiration for heroic acts in the future. At the present time, the rehabilitation of China is taking place, though the world makes but little note of this Herculean task. Not only has it been necessary to clean out the Augean stables of political indifference and corruption, but to adopt a system entirely alien, something heretofore never done by the Chinese.

While wonderful changes are now taking place in China, much yet remains to be accomplished. Heretofore, during this dynasty, the armies of the empire corresponded to our militia. Each province raised its own army, the result being that in no two provinces were the military forces similar in any particular. One would have the German system and German instructors; others, French or Japanese or English or Russian, etc. This difference in military systems gave rise to an endless variety of armament and general equipment. Formerly, after troops had been more or less trained by foreign instructors, they were turned over to Chinese officers who had acquired their position by bribes, influence or literary standing, but who knew absolutely nothing about handling their commands.

The enormous amounts of money squandered on these useless armies will, if wisely expended, place China in a few years on an armed equality with other powers.

The nationalization of the provincial armies has not as yet been undertaken. To accomplish it would be practically to do away with these forces and deprive civilian officials of all military authority. This is the next step that must be taken. A general staff at the capital must control and direct the entire military establishment of the empire, and the military schools throughout the provinces must be uniform in their instruction, and placed under its jurisdiction. By these plans, not only in a comparatively short time, can an army of half a million to a million soldiers be raised, but can be maintained at less expense than the former and present provincial armies. In time of war there will be the same unity, cohesion and effectiveness as is found in the Occident, and not the chaos or worthlessness that have characterized China's forces during the late period of her political decadence.

Certainly no country has better material to make soldiers of than China. Possessed of wonderful powers of endurance, the Chinese are able to undergo cheerfully a vast amount of fatigue. They never complain of hardships they know to be necessary. They never get drunk, and a provost-marshal is seldom if ever needed. Gentle in the ordinary times of peace, in war they are exceedingly daring and reckless of life. Their intelligence to grasp and their capacity to remember the most intricate details of technical instruction, as well as their calm patience, make them especially valuable in modern warfare, while their veneration for authority makes discipline, an army's foundation, a task of easy accomplishment.

Those who love peace as well as justice will rejoice in this military reformation of China. As a defenseless nation, it has already been productive of many wars; and,

continuing under the same conditions, would be responsible for as many more. But a strong China, armed for the protection of her rights, will give a quietus to those very ambitions that her military weakness has invited.