

## REVIEW

Ralph D. Sawyer, with the bibliographic collaboration of Mei-chün Lee Sawyer, *Ancient Chinese Warfare*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

Reviewed by  
John S. Major\*

Ralph Sawyer has long been recognized as the pre-eminent translator of early Chinese military texts.<sup>1</sup> With *Ancient Chinese Warfare*, the first of a planned two-volume set (*Western Chou Warfare* is in preparation), Sawyer draws on a comprehensive perusal of the scholarly literature on the military history of late Neolithic and early Bronze Age China and a professional lifetime's ruminations on that subject to produce an extremely stimulating account of how war was waged, offensively and defensively, with what weapons and technology, tactics, logistics, and strategy, in the earliest phases of Chinese civilization. The book is in two parts: The first is a survey of warfare from the late Neolithic period through the Shang dynasty; the second consists of a series of detailed studies of special topics.

The book opens with a study of late Neolithic warfare, couched (unwisely, in my view) in terms of the struggle between two mythical figures, the Yellow Emperor and the rebel Chi You, figures that are known only from sources written thousands of years after the events they supposedly relate. The careful reader will find that Sawyer regards the antagonists as legendary personifications of two tribal alliances that contended for control of part of the East Asian heartland, and suggests that it is possible to tease out from the mythical accounts some germs of fact about the beginnings of warfare in China. Maybe so, but that seems like a bit of a stretch. The greater danger is that the unwary, of whom there will be many in the ranks of Sawyer's non-Sinological readers, will be misled into thinking that the conflict between the Yellow Emperor and Chi You involved real battles between real people. This chapter has a flavor that is distinctly odd.

Sawyer next turns to the question of fortifications, in two very detailed and informative chapters. As many scholars have noted,

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1. Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

wall-building seems to have been a characteristic of Chinese culture from very early times onward. Sawyer demolishes the official theory (based on Marxist notions of “primitive matriarchy” at the root of Chinese history) that the deep ditches surrounding the Yangshao village of Banpo and other villages of similar date were constructed to keep out wild animals; he points out that the profile of such ditches—a steep, leg-breaking drop along the outer wall of the ditch, and a sloping killing-field on the inner wall—is perfectly designed to defend against attacking humans. He describes with precise data the ditches and walls of several Neolithic towns and cities, and gives a gratifyingly clear and comprehensive account of the pounded-earth technique of building such walls. Sawyer is surely correct in seeing wall-building as evidence for warfare and the fear of attack; he also is correct in raising the question, unanswerable on present evidence, why many such walls were far more massive than simple defense would seem to require. Building such walls involved a huge commitment of resources; Sawyer estimates that to construct the walls of Zhengzhou would have taken ten thousand workers eighteen years, assuming that they labored ten hours a day, 330 days per year.

With a chapter on the Xia, we are again in mythical territory, with Yao, Shun, the San Miao, and Yu the Great standing in for more general processes of state formation and territorial expansion. The Xia (if a state with that name ever existed) was still, so far as we now know, a pre-literate society that left no records, so evidence for its policies and actions must be inferred from archaeological evidence and gleanings from such later texts as the *Zhushu jinian*.

The Shang dynasty, and in particular its middle period, is, in contrast, copiously documented through the medium of oracle bone inscriptions. Sawyer accordingly devotes the greater part of his historical survey to the Shang, and especially to the reign of Wu Ding. That monarch, as is well known, was almost obsessively devoted to oracle bone divination, causing bones to be cracked and questions posed and answered on a wide range of royal concerns. Sawyer is at his best here, drawing from the spare and formulaic oracle bone inscriptions a surprisingly rich and detailed account of Shang warfare—campaigns undertaken, victories won, captives brought to the capital to be sacrificed—along with an extensive vocabulary of weapons, fighting, and death. Separate chapters deal with Shang military organization, and troops, intelligence, and tactics. Sawyer’s historical survey ends with the demise of the Shang, making one impatient for the promised volume on Zhou warfare.

The second half of the book consists of eleven special studies. These begin with a brief history of metallurgy in China and continue with

early weapons and the axe; knives, daggers, and swords; the *ge* dagger-axe; and spears and armor. Four chapters are devoted to chariot-related themes, beginning with the chariot itself, and going on to a consideration of the horse in early China, the practicalities of the chariot in battle, and the difficulties and limitations of the chariot. The special-topics chapters conclude with a consideration of ancient logistics. These chapters stand on their own, and can be read and enjoyed singly by anyone browsing through the book. They are full of fascinating information, such as a discussion of the many technologies that had to be mastered in becoming a chariot-equipped military power, involving horse-wranglers and wheelwrights, harness-makers and charioteers. In other chapters the reader will find answers to questions he or she might never have thought to ask, such as why swords were so late in entering the Chinese arsenal, or why the dagger-axe was the infantry weapon of choice in China for well over a thousand years, and how its form and function evolved over time.

Despite some features that strike me as being a bit eccentric, this is overall a richly detailed, highly readable, very enjoyable account of the important subject of warfare in the early East Asian heartland region.