

REFERENCE MATERIALS

The Chinaman As A Soldier

W. MACHELL *

I make no excuse for putting forward this peculiar phase of the Yellow Terror. History ever repeats itself, and when I speak on the Chinaman as a soldier, I quite expect the idle sneer of the nose-end politicians, who, because a thing is not now an established danger, argue that it never can be. Wiseacres of this class will laugh at the following resume of the qualities of the Chinese soldier:-

“The old notion is pretty well got rid of, that they are at all a cowardly people when properly paid and efficiently led; while the regularity and order of their habits, which dispose them to peace in ordinary times, give place to a daring bordering on recklessness in time of war. Their intelligence and capacity for remembering facts make them well fitted for modern warfare, as do also the coolness and calmness of their disposition. Physically they are on the average not so strong as Europeans, but considerably more so than most of the races of the East; and on a cheap diet of rice, vegetables, salt fish, and pork, they can go through a vast amount of intrigue, whether in a temperate climate, or a tropical one where Europeans are ill fitted for exertion. Their wants are few, they have no caste prejudices, and hardly any appetite for intoxicating liquors.”

Such however are the conclusions drawn from experience with Gordon’s “Ever Victorious Force” during the Tai Ping insurrection. Much uncertainty exists as to the term “Chinese soldier.” The so called “Braves” are strictly speaking, irregular levies, called into existence and disbanded as occasion may require, though among foreigners the word has come to be used in the sense of regular soldiers. It is not of these “Braves” that I speak in any way. The Chinaman as a soldier is no new theme. There was a time when the idea of using him in that capacity was very strongly taken up in Hongkong. In 1880 Mr. CREAGH spoke highly of the Chinaman’s soldierly qualities, and Governor HENNESSEY proposed to the Viceroy of India to raise in

* Mr. Machell of Queen’s College, Hongkong, read this paper at one of the meetings of the “Odd Volumes,” Hongkong, in the early part of this year. The first copy forwarded to us for publication some months ago was miscarried. The long illness of Mr. Machell prevented him from sending a second copy earlier - *Editors S.C.M*

Hongkong, Chinese regiments to garrison India. Doctor BENNIE is equally emphatic in his admiration for the Chinaman as a soldier.

The present British Commander-in-Chief, Sir J.H. GRANT, and OLIPHANT in his account of the Earl of Elgin's Mission, all strongly advocate the claims of the Chinaman as a soldier.

All these saw the Chinaman at home, serving foreign masters who caught him wild, yet trained and utilised him with astonishing rapidity and success.

May the present company of Chinese Submarine Miners in British Service in Hongkong be only the beginning of a force that will aid in holding that Empire which has been increased 20 times whilst its army remains the same. Let us refer again to the "Ever Victorious Army" and note a few of its achievements. In February 1862, at the capture of Tseedong at the outset of the operations against the Tai Pings, "the Chinese fought most bravely, and in fact the difficulty was in keeping them back." Again we learn that

"Ward a force was now some 5,000 strong. It was well armed with percussion muskets, and had a very good artillery offered by men of all grades and questions. One Chinaman alone was commissioned Wonge-poo, who greatly distinguished himself before Admiral HOPE on one occasion.

At the repulse before Tai-tean the officers and men fought most bravely, and it was the good front shown by the rifles that prevented the defeat being a rout. The sergeant major of their rifles, a Chinaman, showed great bravery and though he received six bullets through his clothes, he would not return till ordered back."

The account of the capture of Wokong (13th Oct., 1863) says:-

"Now commended one of the hardest fights the force had ever had. The rebels fought with desperation, and it was three hours before we dislodged them, having been forced to move the guns up the canal to within forty yards of their works, without the rebels leaving. The latter kept up admit and well directed fire, and were well furnished with firearms. Even after the capture of the first stockade they made signs of holding on to the second, and even to the third and fourth.

Our loss was heavier than at any place we had hitherto fought, being ten killed and thirty six wounded. Three officers were wounded. We pursued them ten miles and then returned. They made stands at two positions on the road, but evacuated them on the approach of the guns.

The rebels here fought better than we had expected, and certainly astonished Commodore Oenorxe's secretary, who had come up to see Major Gordon."

These extracts establish as proved facts, that the Chinaman as a soldier:

(1) has great natural courage, (2) is amenable to rapid and effective organization, (3) has good rallying power, and (4) can fight long and stubbornly against heavy odds. GORDON'S army had always to face vastly larger forces, and operated in a country difficult beyond conception.

A writer in *Cornhill*, 1864, speaks of an attack on Soo-chow of which he was an eye-witness:

“In this soldier-like army, accounted in uniforms of dark serge, and distinguished by green turbans wound round their heads in lieu of caps, armed with Tower muskets, and delivering a regular fire with readiness and effect, it would have been difficult for a stranger to the events of the last five years to recognise the despised Chinese, to whom the possession of martial capabilities has so persistently been denied. Such a stranger must have viewed with surprise the firm regularity with which these troops executed the ordinary manoeuvres of the field, and the alacrity with which they sprang forward at the bugle-call to encounter an enemy of their own race and language (in many cases their village kindred) who outnumbered them far beyond the proportion of ten to one.”

And a summary of the operations against the rebels states that

“During the active operations which resulted in the province of Kiang Su being wrested from them, there had been constant and severe fighting. The rebels as a rule fought most gallantly.”

I have chosen this campaign of GORDON's as the only truthful one in Chinese History from which it is possible to estimate the relative fighting value of the Chinaman as a soldier 30 years ago. And I assert that it places the courage, powers of organisation, endurance and fighting capacity of the Chinaman as a soldier in a very favourable light. At Chau-Chufu, 28th April, 1864.

“Major GORDON and to the PE-TAI (Li Hung Chang) and explaining to him the approach by trenches, obtained a party of Imperialists every night to make these advances, close to the edge of the ditch. GORDON used to lay the tapes down, and after explaining the work to the mandarins, would find that they fully comprehended the work, and executed it in first rate style in perfect silence. Thus in a few days a series of trenches were made right down to the edge of the ditch, by which an advance could be made under cover.”

And at the siege of Nankin, June to September, 1864,

“The Imperialists had constructed a roadway with brushwood for 3 miles across a morass, which enabled them to communicate with the Yangtse river without a long detour.

It was a wonderful work, and showed their pertinacity.”

In a camp of instruction formed by GORDON near Shanghai at the close of the campaign:-

- (1) The men were kept under their native officers;
- (2) And an attempt made to make the Chinese commence a nucleus of a regular army.

The troops took to it heartily and learnt quickly, but little encouragement beyond words was given by the Peking authorities.

This ended the first sustained and practical lesson on the Chinaman as a soldier, and things military reverted to the old routine.

The reversion to the old order of things had some show of excuse. During the negotiations as to the command of the “Ever Victorious Army” after Ward's death, we find the Chinese authorities requesting the new commander to bear in mind the Chinese nature of the force and

not to make it anti-Chinese while learning foreign discipline and drill. It certainly was anti-Chinese under Ward and Burgevine, and during the whole of its existence. And in a review of the nature and attitude of the force when it returned to Quinsan 15th May, 1864, this paragraph occurs:

“The fact is Chinese troops are very good under their own officers, but put them under Europeans and they become perfect rebels to their own government. Any force under Europeans officers will before long be anti-Chinese.”

The force was broken up and, as before said, things military in China remained as before. At this old routine, it is interesting to glance for a moment.

“The theory of war has received more attention among the Chinese than its practice, and their reputation as an unwarlike people, is as ancient and general among their neighbours as that of their seclusion and ingenuity. The Mongols and Manchus, Hans and Tartars all despised the effeminate braggadocio of Chinese troops, and easily overcame them in war, but were themselves in turn conquered in times of peace. Minute direction are given in books with regard to the drilling of troops which are seldom reduced to practice. The puerile nature of the examinations which candidates for promotion in the Army pass through, proven the remains of ancient hand-to-hand encounter, and evinces the low standard still entertained of what an officer should be. Personal courage and brawn are highly esteemed, and the prowess of ancient heroes in the battle field is landed in songs and embellished in novels. The uniforms of the Chinese troops are not even calculated to give them a fine appearance when drawn up for parade, and no one, on looking at them, can believe that men dressed in loose jackets and trousers, with heavy shoes and bamboo caps could be trained to cope with Western soldiers.”

The progress of China in real civilisation is not to be fairly measured by their attainments in war: although it has been said that the two best general criteria of civilisation among any people are superior skill in destroying their fellowmen and the degree of respect they pay to women. China falls far behind her place among the nations, if judged by these tests alone: and in reality owes her present advance in numbers, industry and wealth mainly to her peaceful character and policy.

Many treatises upon the art and practice of war exist: one of which, called the “*Soldier's Manual*” in eighteen chapters, contains some good directions. The first chapter treats of the mode of marching, and the necessity of having plans of the country through which the army is to pass, and cautions the troops against harassing the people unnecessarily—not a useless admonition, for a body of Chinese soldiers is too often like a swarm of locusts upon the land. The second chapter teaches the mode of building bridges: the need there is of cautious explorations in marching and of sending out scouts. This subject is also continued in the next section, and directions are given about castrametation, placing sentries and keeping the troops on the alert as well as under strict discipline in camp. The rest of the book is chiefly devoted to directions for the management of an actual battle, sending out spies beforehand, choosing positions

and bringing the various parts of the army into action at the best time. The hope of reward is held out to induce the soldier to be brave, and the threats of punishment and death if he desert or turn his back in time of battle. The utility of music in encouraging the soldiers and exciting them to the charge is fully appreciated. The various grades of officers in the Native Army, and the portion of troops under each of them, stationed in the garrisons and forts in different parts of the provinces, are all arranged in a methodical manner which will bear examination and comparison with the army of any country in the world. The native force in each province is distinct from the Manchu troops, and is divided somewhat according to the Roman plan of legion, cohort, maniple and century over each of which are officers, from colonel down to sergeant. Nothing is wanting to the Chinese Army to make it fully adequate to the defence of the country but discipline and confidence in itself for lack of practice and systematic drilling have made it an army of paper warriors against a resolute enemy.

No knowledge of tactics, gunnery, engineering, fortification or even letters in general seems to be required of candidates for military honours, and this explains the inefficiency of the army, and the low estimation its officers are held in. Military distinctions not being much sought by the people and conferring but little emolument or power, they do not rank high in public estimation.

The construction of forts and towers presents no other evidence of science than the erection of lines of massive stone wall.

In recent times mud defences and batteries of sand bags have proved a much safer defence than such buildings against ships and artillery, and show the aptitude of the people to adopt practical things.

Though not particularly resolute on the field, the Chinese soldier stands well to his guns, when behind a fortification of whose strength he is assured. The forts which have recently been constructed under supervision of European engineers are rapidly taking the place of native works in all parts of the country.

But the organisation is hopelessly out of date. Though theoretically so admirable, it loses sight of the fact that the issue to which all military operations tend, is a battle.

Organisation, equipment, drill, all aim at the one result of fitting the soldier to take his place in the fight. There, superiority, moral or physical is essential.

Moral superiority arises from:

- (1) Stricter discipline,
- (2) A better cause and
- (3) Previous successes,

and its elements must be carefully established and cultivated in time of peace. Physical superiority depends on numbers, training and weapons, but is only decisive when there is full co-operation of the whole force when the enemy is met with.

It is just here that the Chinaman as a soldier can and will become a great and irresistible force. He has merely to learn that physical superiority depends on massing numbers on a certain

point at a certain time. The weapons he can readily buy or make, and he is the best of material for the training. Then with the third line so numerous, that any success could be pursued till it reached a total rout, and any repulse met by an unflagging second attack, the brilliant successes of Napoleon could be repeated to the dismay not of Europe only but the world. The recruiting ground for such a force is vast beyond measure.

Dr. HENRY of Canton, says of Kau-kong, a town in the Sai-tsin district of the neighbouring delta:-

“During the war at the close of the Taiping rebellion a census was taken with a view to estimate the fighting strength of the people, and it was found that Kau-kong alone could furnish 300,000 able bodied men ex-soldiers. The limits of this town lie within a space five miles wide and seven or eight long. The town is composed of coteries of villages around the main center of trade.”

We thus see that for an army the men are on hand, for this is equally true of other districts in the empire.

Pugnacity is not lacking either, for Dr. Wells Williams refers to the ferocity and frequency of clan-fights. Guzettes contain accounts of these contests: in one foray, 120 villages were attacked, and thousands of people killed.

In Shun-tak, a district between Canton and Macao, 1,000 men were engaged, armed with spears and fire-arms, and 36 lives were lost.

Travellers in the country still bear testimony to the frequency and ferocity of these clan-contests.

The Chinese have a saying that “No good man becomes a soldier,” meaning that a man can make a better living in other pursuits. Soldiering is not in fact a profession to which any Chinaman resorts willingly-but that is entirely due to bad pay and the worst possible treatment. Once given good pay and fair treatment, the millions represented by the emigrant at the top and the bandit at the bottom of the social scale, would adopt soldiering with alacrity. To realise how closely the question is affected by pay - just think of a man, habitually getting \$1 a month instead of \$6, his due, and getting even that month’s pay in arrear. Food is but a question of honest administration. Given that and no army could be more easily and effectually fed than a Chinese force, even of millions.

Clothing too, is easily dealt with. No vital change is needed. The Chinaman as a soldier has no false ideal of smartness to which he need sacrifice personal comfort, and freedom of muscular exertion. He will adapt himself to boots and a cap as readily as the Japanese.

It is in drill that the Chinaman as a soldier can and will score over all competitors. By utilising his tireless patience for continued monotonous exertion, a marvellous and terribly effective standard of nobility and fine discipline is possible. You can call him out from dawn to dark, and parade, practise, and drill him, - a feat which would drive the mildest European force into open mutiny, whereas your Chinaman as a soldier will ask no more than his rice time and an occasional interval for a pipe. On this phase of the question I can speak from personal

experience, for in 1892, I had to prepare fully 800 boys for a show parade in physical drill. They were ignorant of the rudiments even of squad and company drill. Yet, working early and late, before the regular hours of study and often for an hour after, they learned in six weeks to present an exhibition of trained perfection in no way inferior to other and smaller companies, the members of which had been regularly practised for years. What is more, they drilled equally well with the rear rank in front, and, by their study, intelligent movements on the final parade enabled me to extend their line right across the ground, and by forming quarter column to either flank at will, defeat an attempt that was made to oust them from their rightful position as premier school. For five years before this, I had drilled and manoeuvred a small company of mixed European and Chinese lads, and still hold the opinion formed then that Chinese are the material for soldiers and need only the right man to lead the way. There are difficulties, it is true, in his way, but they are removable—are being removed, though slowly—and the time is at hand when well clothed, well fed, well armed and well led, the Chinaman as a soldier will be a greater menace than the Turk at the gates of Vienna, or the Russian at Port Arthur.

It is imperative that some note should be taken of the latest appearance of the Chinaman as a soldier. As such he may be said to have utterly failed in the China-Japan War. But was it a failure in any comparative sense? Was it not rather the inevitable result of a contest between raw material, badly fed, armed and led, and a foe well fed, armed and led? I can hardly say that the Japanese were ably led. At no stage of the operations were the Japanese called on to face any serious tactical or strategical problems. Had the Chinese been led by officers of even limited acquaintance with modern tactics, the Japanese advance might have been to Chinese prisons and not to victories. It is well to bear in mind that though the Chinese have long had German military instructors, their duties have not extended beyond drill. We hear nothing of their exercising executive command or teaching Chinese officers to exercise it in the field. Tradition, too, was with the Japanese. Undoubtedly men fight better when conscious that a nation looks on and expects great things.

There is an inheritance of heroic example which is necessary to a nation's life; death and defeat, if they are confronted with greatness of soul, raise the spirit of a people. The thought that brave men in a life-and-death struggle nobly met their end, not bowing to calamity but facing it unappalled, fires the minds of their fellow-soldiers and raises the heroic temper of the nation. On the question of *èlan* ("go") the Chinese were nowhere. In a rhyming History of England there is the following reference to the Battle of Agincourt:

"Twas was a damp day in October when 100,000 knights drew up before an army
that marching days and nights.

Were few, and sick, and weary, but when did Britons know a pain, a fear, a sorrow
in front of any foe?"

Shakespeare points out for us the mutual trust and indomitable spirit of that gallant little army that idolised its young leader. And when reference is made to the China-Japan war, it must be remembered that the "daimyo" regime is of the very recent past, and that the rank and file

of the Japanese soldiery transferred to the officer that old spirit of “lead on, we follow,” which was still instinct in them. It was far otherwise with the Chinese. It would be hard to say exactly of what they had least. They seemed to lack everything, even the power to run away. Certain it is they had no tradition to spur them to great deeds, no knowledge of or confidence in their leaders. But it was the system and not the man that failed. One extract from an article by Professor Douglas. “On Some Peking Politicians” will be enough to show this.

“It is notorious that at the outbreak of the war between China and Japan, Shang was commissioned to buy in Europe rifles and ammunition for the campaign. The result is well known. The weapons proved to be next to valueless. But, as it turned out, this was of no great importance, for the ammunition provided was so ill adapted for the purpose that it is difficult to imagine circumstances under which they could have been of any use.”

As Peking becomes more and more a power and the provinces and provincial autonomy in things military give way to a central staff control, and the soldier becomes the hope of the oldest Empire in the world. I confidently predict that the Chinaman as a soldier will command the world’s attention and respect.

Russia is, as regards China, “too much with us, late and soon.” Is that great Empire to find in China the drilled and armed millions with which to crush remorselessly those daring spirits whose teaching is even now molesting her despotic peace? It looks very much as if this were the case. But would Russia stop at that? Will she not rather, after scotching all aspirations for liberty by the free use of mercenary troops, seek, as did the great Napoleon, universal empire, and, more fortunate than he was, achieve it by using the Chinaman as a soldier.

Source: *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 1897: 129-135