



2011-040

Ralph D. Sawyer, *Ancient Chinese Warfare*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Pp. xiv, 554. ISBN 978-0-465-02145-1.

Review by David A. Graff, Kansas State University (dgraff@k-state.edu).

A consultant and independent scholar based in Massachusetts, Ralph Sawyer is best known to both academic historians and a wider public for his path-breaking 1993 translation (with Mei-chün Lee Sawyer) of the *Seven Military Classics* (*Wu jing qi shu*);<sup>1</sup> although “Sun Tzu’s Art of War” (*Sunzi bingfa*) had often been translated, several of the less celebrated works in the eleventh-century collection were for the first time made accessible to a non-specialist Western audience. Sawyer has since published several Chinese military and philosophical texts in translation as well as other books on the Chinese military tradition.<sup>2</sup> The latter consist largely of passages translated from traditional Chinese writings, arranged chronologically and interspersed with Sawyer’s commentary; the overall flavor is very similar to the compendia (*leishu*) produced by Chinese scholars in the Qing dynasty and earlier. The book under review here is rather different; it is the first of at least two comprehensive volumes on the military history of early China, a work that has been decades in the making.

*Ancient Chinese Warfare* begins at the beginning, with the archaeological remains from Neolithic times and the early myths and legends that may shed light on their military and political significance. It concludes shortly before the demise of the Shang dynasty in (probably) 1045 BCE. The Zhou conquest of the Shang and the climactic battle of Muye will figure in Sawyer’s second volume, which will deal with the Zhou dynasty up to ca. 771 BCE.

Although filled with many lesser claims and assertions, this first volume does not argue for any central thesis beyond the obvious one that armed conflict has had a very large role in Chinese history—something misleadingly downplayed by earlier generations of Chinese scholars and Western Sinologists.<sup>3</sup> In reaction, Sawyer here addresses almost every conceivable aspect of war, with a level of detail as exhaustive as the extant sources (and the publisher’s bottom line) allow. To judge by his extensive bibliography and ninety-one pages of notes, Sawyer has collected and digested every relevant book and article in English, Chinese, and, apparently, Japanese, including even obscure, dry-as-dust Chinese excavation reports. The great virtue of this volume is that it makes the refined gist of that material more immediately accessible for both specialists and non-Sinologists. However, every virtue has a concomitant vice. While *Ancient Chinese Warfare* is certainly an indispensable reference tool, it is far from a sprightly narrative history to be read cover-to-cover for enjoyment.

Before this book, there was not much available in English on the military history of China in Shang times and earlier: a few articles on specialized topics (such as the chariot), some outdated books on weapons as works of art or artifacts,<sup>4</sup> summaries in more general studies,<sup>5</sup> a few relevant oracle bone inscriptions,<sup>6</sup> and a mediocre translation of Yang Hong’s important book on ancient Chinese arms and armor.<sup>7</sup> A

1. Full title: *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).

2. Including *The Tao of Spycraft: Intelligence Theory and Practice in Traditional China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), *Fire and Water: The Art of Incendiary and Aquatic Warfare in China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), *The Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China* (NY: Basic Books, 2007), all in collaboration with Mei-chün Lee Sawyer.

3. This might have been a radical position several decades ago, but recent scholarship (Sawyer’s included) on Chinese military history and the much heralded “rise of China” have already done much to change perceptions.

4. E.g., Max Loehr, *Chinese Bronze Age Weapons* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan Pr, 1956).

5. Such as Kwang-chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1980).

6. Translated in David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: U Cal Pr, 1978).

quick survey of the contents of Sawyer's book indicates how much more has now been made available in the twenty-five chapters and 414 pages of its main text. Organized along both chronological and thematic lines, *Ancient Chinese Warfare* opens by recounting the "legendary conflict" between the Yellow Emperor, progenitor of Chinese civilization, and his violent rival, Chi You. Next, two archaeologically oriented chapters trace the development of fortifications in Neolithic times, and another two examine the material remains and political and military organization of the Xia (or Hsia) dynasty (ca. 2200–1750 BCE). Chapters 6–13 deal with the Shang dynasty, its capital and settlement sites, its political history and armed conflicts with rival polities (especially during the reign of the aggressive King Wu Ding, ca. 1200 BCE), and its military institutions, organization, and battle tactics. Then come chapters (14–19) on ancient weaponry: one devoted entirely to metallurgy, another to spears and armor, and another to archery. Chapters 20–23 offer careful treatments of Shang chariots and horses. Chapter 24 attempts to address the elusive, often neglected subject of logistics. The book concludes with a chapter bearing the quintessentially Sawyer-esque title, "Musings and Imponderables."

I will not attempt to touch even cursorily on all the topics in this very wide-ranging book. Instead, I will identify a few issues that deserve special attention: the pervasive problem of evidence, the role of violence in Chinese history, and the place of the chariot in ancient warfare. Any study of China's very early history must rely on three major sources: archaeological finds, oracle-bone inscriptions on cattle scapulae and turtle shells (mostly from the late Shang capital at Anyang), and accounts written much later in Chinese history (such as the first few chapters of the *Shi ji* or "Historical Records" of Sima Qian, ca. 100 BCE). Sawyer also sometimes (for example, in his discussion of archery) extrapolates backward from the better known practices and techniques of later periods. Where these bodies of evidence corroborate one another or at least point in roughly the same direction, assertions can be made with considerable confidence. This is true in particular of the period from ca. 1250 BCE onward, for which oracle-bones are available. For earlier eras, the level of uncertainty is much higher, and scholars have drawn radically opposing conclusions from the same evidence. Western Sinologists, for instance, have generally taken a skeptical view of the Xia dynasty, while Chinese authorities assume its existence as a given, but disagree sharply over specifics. Against this background of sometimes "acrimonious" debate, Sawyer's exposition often evinces a tentative, double-edged quality: readers must alertly differentiate among the author's own propositions, those he is challenging, and those he is merely repeating for the record. Here, for example, is his bottom line on the Xia:

The resulting portrait depicts a transition from scattered Neolithic settlements to a few dominant fortified towns, accompanied by social stratification, economic differentiation, and gradual immersion in warfare of unspecified character. Thus, given the current startling discoveries and plethora of references to the Hsia throughout Chinese history, it seems more reasonable to assume that a proto-state known as the Hsia emerged through vigorous, aggressive action than to dogmatically assert its nonexistence and then examine the era's military history. Moreover, despite being dubious or perhaps even worthless, it is also necessary to scrutinize traditional historical accounts and conceptions because of their impact on military and political thought in subsequent ages (61).

Sawyer's assessment of a Shang stronghold unearthed by archaeologists also conveys the uncertainty involved in evaluating this sort of evidence:

Yüan-chü's abandonment despite persistent threats from the western quarter suggests that exposed fortresses lacked the tactical power necessary to function as control points in relative isolation. The Shang may have withdrawn its forces as part of a revised strategic approach or simply decided that the bastion had become an indefensible logistical burden because of its inability to rely on locally produced foodstuffs. Nearby relatively mobile steppe peoples such as the Kung and T'u-fang may have already been exerting enormous pressure, but the bastion's disuse could equally be evidence of imperial weakness or debauchery. However, even after vanquishing the local aggressors, King Wu Ting apparently chose not to reoccupy it or station a permanent garrison there, a decision that suggests the ad hoc nature of Shang military efforts, the difficulty of exerting control

---

7. *Weapons in Ancient China* (NY: Science Pr, 1992).

at a distance, an overall contraction of Shang military power, and perhaps a general disinclination to maintain standing border forces despite having erected numerous strongpoints on the perimeter (140–41).

Now, the ambiguity of the evidence and the difficulty of interpreting it allow scholars studying the Shang and earlier periods to draw only tentative conclusions, but Sawyer's peculiar approach to problematic evidence causes further difficulties. More than once, he scrupulously points out that some ancient text—for example, the “Oath of Tang” in the *Book of Documents*—is now recognized as a later forgery rather than an authentic Xia or Shang document, yet then detects some kernel of truth, a “vestigial” or “remnant” memory, that somehow redeems it as valuable evidence for the study of early China. As if questionable source materials could ever yield more than questionable interpretive structures or conclusions.

Sawyer does, nevertheless, present some cogent arguments, for example, concerning the centrality of violence in the early Chinese world, a leitmotif of this volume. He contends that signs of intercommunal violence may be found as far back as the early Neolithic in China, that such conflicts led to the gradual emergence of powerful chiefdoms and states, and that the Shang regime glorified the martial prowess that gave it an advantage over its neighbors and rivals. He has no patience for claims that the Shang, the Xia, or even the Yellow Emperor based their authority on superior virtue or moral influence as opposed to raw coercive power. The textual, archaeological, and inscriptional evidence he deploys is overwhelming and his conclusions are consistent with those of Western specialists in Chinese military history who have been influenced by, among other studies, Mark Edward Lewis's influential work on the Zhou dynasty.<sup>8</sup> Viewed in this light, the scorn Sawyer heaps on the notion of rule by virtue is rather odd: he is tilting at long-dead Confucian scholars rather than modern authorities, who have, for the most part, long ago abandoned that untenable position.

More interesting is Sawyer's extensive treatment of chariot use in ancient Chinese warfare, which draws on not only familiar evidence but also comparative data from ancient Europe and the Near East and modern experiments using “martial artists well trained in ... traditional weapons” (386). He endorses the view that the chariot was developed outside China and appeared quite suddenly, rather late in the Shang period, as a fully developed weapon system; the archaeological record, he notes, offers no clear evidence of real chariots before the reign of King Wu Ding. For the rest of the period under consideration, chariots were only minor supplements to overwhelmingly foot-soldier armies. They probably served as command vehicles, platforms for observers and archers, and “battle taxis,” but their crews could not have engaged in close combat—even using long-hafted weapons—without dismounting, for the physical dimensions of the vehicle would have rendered such efforts nugatory if not suicidal.

Sawyer provides a fascinating litany of the structural weaknesses of Shang chariots, which could break down and leave their crews in the lurch, especially in wet, wooded, or mountainous terrain, where infantry could easily outmaneuver them. The development of chariot warfare on a large scale well after the end of the Shang dynasty presupposes accepted conventions regarding when and where combat should take place, conventions that loomed large in the more chariot-centered warfare of the Spring and Autumn period (722–481 BCE).

The few true Anglophone specialists in the warfare of Shang and earlier times will not find much entirely new information in *Ancient Chinese Warfare*. But for the rest of us, the book marks a major advance in the state of our knowledge, a rich repository to be mined not only by historians of China but also world historians, scholars of comparative military history, and students of the origins of war and the state. Its impact will be substantial, far-reaching, and unsurpassed for many years to come.

---

8. *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Pr, 1990).