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HARMONY AND WAR: CONFUCIAN CULTURE AND CHINESE POWER POLITICS

Yuan-kang Wang
THIS BOOK is about the power politics of Confucian China. In general, Confucianism favors harmony and condemns war. The Great Wall of China is often said to be the symbol of an enduring Confucian strategic culture that is pacifist, antimilitary, and defensive. As Beijing engineers its rise on the world stage, Chinese leaders have employed the Confucian precept of harmony and benevolence to allay international fears of an increasingly powerful China. Did Confucianism constrain China's decision to use force in the past? Did Chinese leaders consistently adopt a defensive grand strategy? Were Chinese war aims limited to border protection and restoration of the status quo ante? Most important, what can we learn from the past to shed light on the strategic trajectory of an ascendant China in today's world?

To answer these questions, I examine Chinese military policy during the Song dynasty (960–1279) and the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Based on a review of the important strategic decisions made by the Chinese leaders during these two periods, I argue that relative power concerns were at the heart of Chinese strategic choices; Confucian culture failed to constrain Chinese use of force. Instead, China was clearly a practitioner of realpolitik, behaving much like other great powers have throughout world history. Chinese decisions to use force were predicated on leaders' assessment of the relative strength between China and its adversary. Moreover, Chinese grand strategy was not consistently defensive but, rather, was correlated with the country's relative power: China tended to adopt an offensive grand strategy when its power was relatively strong and a defensive one when its power was relatively weak. In addition, Chinese leaders have not restricted their war aims to deterrence and border protection but at times adopted expansive goals such as acquisition of territory, destruction of enemy power, and total military victory.
Notwithstanding the dominance of an antimilitarist Confucian culture, warfare was not uncommon in Chinese history. What caused Chinese leaders to practice realpolitik was anarchy. The anarchic structure of the system forced Chinese leaders, despite their training and socialization in Confucian discourse, to pursue power and even to go to war if necessary. In short, anarchy trumps culture.

In writing this book, I came to subvert many of the deep-seated beliefs that I had acquired in my early education. While growing up in Taiwan, I received instructions in Chinese history and Confucian classics at school. The narratives that I was taught corresponded with conventional wisdom: a peaceful Confucian culture had produced a state that was defensive-minded and avoided outward expansion; the Chinese world order was constructed according to the way of the king (wang dao), not the way of the hegemon (ba dao); and Chinese territory expanded by the spreading of Confucian culture, not by military force. This study challenges all of these standard articulations. In a sense, this book is also a journey of self-reflection.

I have incurred a long list of scholarly debts along the way. The stimulating intellectual environment at the University of Chicago nurtured me and this project. John Mearsheimer, in particular, encouraged me to ask an important question and undertake a study of Chinese military history using international relations theory. There were times when I doubted whether political scientists, whose minds focus on the present, would be interested in a study of China’s distant past, but John’s unflinching support and encouragement over the years kept me focused on the research. This book would not have been possible without him. I also thank two other members of my doctoral committee. Charles Glaser was generous in providing useful insights and critiques and cheerfully responded to my requests for help. Robert Pape sent many hours with me over coffee discussing my project and helped me sharpen my argument. I benefited immensely from their insightful advice and suggestions.

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