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REVIEW ESSAY

“Real Men Die Wrapped in Horsehide” and Other Tales of Modern Military Heroism

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D. Colin Jaundrill. *Samurai to Soldier: Remaking Military Service in Nineteenth-Century Japan.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016. 248 pp. $40 (cloth).

Nicolas Schillinger. *The Body and Military Masculinity in Late Qing and Early Republican China: The Art of Governing Soldiers*. New York: Lexington Books, 2016. 428 pp. $110 (cloth); $104 (e-book).

Within the popular trade book market, military history continues to occupy a prominent place. Within the academy, by contrast, it has remained a hard sell. Whereas growing numbers of scholars trained in sociology, anthropology, or political science have moved toward critical (and often feminist) military studies, historians have by and large hesitated. Granted, military history is a peculiar field of inquiry. Its reputation for embracing rather than speaking truth to power persists. Its boundaries appear impenetrable to the capricious turns of the writing of history in the profession at large, be they cultural, visual, global, or of yet another kind. So, indeed, why should historians of everything-but-the-military care about the transition from “samurai to soldier” in modern Japan or “the art of governing soldiers” in modern China?

Readers of D. Colin Jaundrill’s and Nicolas Schillinger’s recent books might point out that in Japan, for instance, the nation-state was the overpowering frame of reference for late nineteenth- and twentieth-century manhood and that this nation-state rested on the rise (and then fall) of the soldier as a dominant paradigm of masculinity. One could also recall another intriguing development in the modernizing, imperialist, and militarist nation-state: the rhetorical,

ideological, and actual entanglement of the male body with national population concerns. I refer to the way individual male bodies and minds were self-consciously, actively, and aggressively interconnected and amalgamated with the national body politic when military authorities (along with schools) retrieved information from the bodies of twenty-year-old men during the course of the military physical exam.

The molding of soldiers' minds that historian Jaundrill describes in *Samurai to Soldier: Remaking Military Service in Nineteenth-Century Japan* was informed by the intense analytical and disciplinary medical gaze onto soldiers' physiques. Military health examiners recorded ad nauseam every aspect of the young men's bodies they laid eyes on. In thus documenting their willingness to join the military, as well as their fitness for doing so, recruitment officers and health examiners essentially created the reputation of the male population in entire prefectures. They registered the conscripts' character as simple and naïve, took note of stubbornness and bigotry, and were quick to describe those who seemed to resent the military as "lazy" and "effeminate"—while also taking note of when the number of draft dodgers was particularly high. Their data informed pretty much every population norm and policy for decades to come.

Jaundrill and historian of China Schillinger (*The Body and Military Masculinity in Late Qing and Early Republican China: The Art of Governing Soldiers*) have given us two books full of excellent reasons for historians to take the militarism of modernity most seriously. Despite the similarities across modernizing nation-states, as well as of notions of the modern man across national boundaries—on the surface at least—Jaundrill and Schillinger have two rather different puzzles to solve. In Japan, the modern soldier emerged from a long-standing warrior tradition. In China, the modern military emerged from the previous social and cultural *neglect* of the military; it was instead shaped to overcome the "sick man of East Asia" (*dongya bingfu*) notion that was omnipresent around the turn of the twentieth century. Jaundrill takes interest in the ways in which the crafting of the modern Japanese military stretched out over several decades, as well as in the question of how the modern soldier came to be informed by a contradictory relationship to samurai ideals, which were first embraced, then increasingly dismissed, and eventually recast as spiritual predecessors.

For military masterminds, such shifts meant no less than first declaring the warriors of the late Tokugawa era to be "arrogant layabouts who wear two swords and call themselves warriors" (173), only to ideologically appropriate them once those warriors had become

militarily and politically irrelevant. In the long run, the invention and appropriation of (a warrior) tradition turns out to be as much a part of Japan's "modern soldier" as breaking with and distancing from it had been. Nor had that samurai culture, technology, and thought been previously static and monolithic. Rather, a small but solid body of scholarship has taught us otherwise, and has variously emphasized how dynamic the samurai class, its norms and conduct, and its views of itself had been.[1]

Jaundrill brings a considerable degree of discipline to the object of his analysis. He pursues his narrative firmly within the confines of the military, relegating cultural, social, and military-societal matters largely to the margins. *Samurai to Soldier*, thus, moves methodically from discussing the impact of the Western military technology of musketry (chapter 1), to attempts at reform prior to the Meiji Restoration (chapters 2 and 3), to the impact of the institution of universal military service (chapter 4), to the first deployment of the military after the Meiji Restoration to counter the Satsuma Rebellion (chapter 5), and, finally, to the creation of the serviceman that achieved a certain level of completion by the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 (chapter 6).

This is an enthralling story with numerous twists and turns, two of which I found especially intriguing. First, the introduction of mandatory military service not only constituted a substantial change but also was the result of decades of discussions and implementations of military reform. The Conscription Decree, promulgated on November 28, 1872, as an imperial edict, laid the cornerstone for Japan's ability to mobilize its forces on a national scale. According to the decree, soldiers were to be drafted from all over the country. Their task was declared to be the "protection of the nation." Yet the introduction of the conscription system was long disputed among bureaucrats and ideologues, both before and after its introduction.

Second, the "samurai to soldier" shift was eventually achieved once an enormous effort had been invested, one that affected all aspects of the military. Initially, key obstacles for manning the armed forces lay in a long list of possible exemptions to the draft (in the first half of the Meiji era, only about one in thirty twenty-year-old men was drafted), as well as in the numerous strategies young men employed to dodge it. Eliminating most exemptions began that shift. Next came a longer-term process that involved both the reformulation of military ideals and the conscious crafting of a positive conscript identity, part of which was the appropriation of some notion of a "samurai spirit." Lastly, modern Japan's first major war, the Satsuma Rebellion

in 1877, laid bare gross deficiencies in supplies, medicine, and morale—concerns theretofore recognized only by a group of dedicated leaders. Thereafter, these deficiencies informed the reforms to come.

We already know a fair amount about the role the modern Japanese military played in inspiring innovations in science and public health, as well as in more generally modernizing society at large.[2] Jaundrill provides a much-needed inverse perspective on what such innovations meant for the military by elucidating how the enormous conscription obstacles were overcome. Besides, it is always worth conveying just how much resistance young Japanese men offered, as well as how the nationalism and patriotism that eventually drove them into the military and, later, to war were neither natural nor immediate.

Particularly in light of the indoctrination and propaganda of the 1930s and early 1940s and, perhaps even more so, of the Self-Defense Forces' elaborate recruitment campaigns of today, it is important to note, as Jaundrill does with considerable skill, that to be recruited, young men of the late nineteenth century also needed reason to feel good about being a soldier, whether due to benefits, reputation, or public image. The military visionaries realized they needed to craft a "positive identity for servicemen" (168) if they wanted them to fully embrace the desired virtues of loyalty, goodness, deportment, and honesty. After more than a decade of draft dodging being the primary obstacle to building a modern armed force, they, discursively at least, shifted from coercive discipline to appeals to the nobler aspects of servicemen's spirit (172). Historians of military and war in the Japan field have much favored writing about earlier periods—or of the Imperial armed forces of the twentieth century, particularly of the Asia-Pacific War. *Samurai to Soldier: Remaking Military Service in Nineteenth-Century Japan* constitutes an important missing link between these two strongholds.

While men's minds intrigue Jaundrill, it is men's bodies—à la French sociologist Marcel Mauss's *techniques du corps*—that frame Schillinger's analysis of the modern military man in *The Body and Military Masculinity in Late Qing and Early Republican China: The Art of Governing Soldiers*. Just like their contemporary Japanese counterparts, Chinese officials realized that the average Chinese male body was terribly flawed due to a long-standing lack of attention to its cultivation, so much so that even Japanese contemporaries commented on Chinese men's physical inferiority long before China lost the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895.

Reforming that body in an effort to produce a modern, functional, loyal combatant required enormous investment in more than one generation of young men.

In a lengthy introduction, Schillinger provides a panoramic overview of common connections public intellectuals and policy makers made concerning men's bodies in a range of modern nation-states in formation. Indeed, thought leaders and policy makers around the world were quite obsessed with the male body and variously recognized it as the prime medium of power, the locus of a muscular Judaism, and the stuff of myth making—as a kind of human motor or an organism resembling the nation-state.[3] It should not come as a surprise, then, that much of this historical scholarship arose from analyses of homosocial male communities, the military (along with prisons and factories) prototypical among them.

In the modern China field, however, the study of masculinity is still wide open.[4] Accordingly, Schillinger's introduction sets a spacious stage for the Chinese story, whose Chinese particularities remain somewhat vague. In six chapters, Schillinger takes us from the drill in the new armies (chapter 1), to daily life (chapter 2), and uniforms (chapter 3), to analyses of the martial spirit (chapter 4), citizenship (chapter 5), and school education (chapter 6). But whereas one might imagine this project being a terrain of intellectual struggles, Schillinger offers an almost conflict-free narrative—at least about the adoption of Japanese systems after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, a narrative whose driving logic comes down to the superiority of German medicine and the Prussian and Japanese militaries, as well as the intrinsic connections among the three.

Having read *The Body and Military Masculinity* after absorbing Jaundrill's description of the complicated, contradictory, lengthy, and sometimes tortured transition in Japan from the warrior class to the modern military, I was left doubting that the concept of such superiority, as well as the suitability of both Western and Japanese ideas in the Chinese context, could be accepted as smoothly as Schillinger suggests they were. Perhaps, as he writes, "the body became the prime object of governance through which instructors and officers gained access to the mind and were able to create a demeanor of habitual submission" (96). Yet was such an intrusive strategy pursued against next to no resistance or attempts at evasion, nor transformed in the process of translation and adaptation? After all, opium addiction, prevalent in the army as elsewhere, not only "posed a serious threat for the military strength of the state" (109) but is also a rather difficult habit to overcome.

Be that as it may, the fact that the Newly Created Army's (*Xinjian lujun*) recruitment and organizational model was based entirely on the German conscription system was a radical change from what had previously been a lifelong occupation with neither defined psychological or physical requirements nor medical examination and monitoring. The visionaries' efforts of shaping and reshaping the body didn't just enormously affect individual men's bodies and minds; they also shaped the role and meaning of the new military in society. That reshaped, ideal body informed concepts of a strong and functional military, a healthy populace, and a sufficiently modern nation. And yet, though Foucauldian notions of body and power lurk everywhere in the narrative, Schillinger unfortunately does not pull them into the light of his analytical gaze long enough to critically engage with them in a Chinese context that is so dramatically different from Foucault's France.

These issues aside, Schillinger has compelling and intriguingly gruesome stories to tell. For instance, the penal code for the new army was strongly shaped by the new status of the male military body: given the investment in its training and disciplining, it appeared too precious to be harmed or destroyed. And yet, though "death by a thousand cuts"—the complete dismemberment of the convict—was replaced at the beginning of the twentieth century by imprisonment and incarceration and the concepts of reeducation and redemption, such changes resulted more from foreign criticism on the grounds of the traditional punishments being inhumane than from any self-initiated sense of reform. In addition, being "precise and without ambiguity," as punishment of soldiers was supposed to be, the penal code stipulated beheading for a multitude of offenses, ranging from "erratic and slow behavior during drill and battle" to the rape of women (117). In light of the organized mass rape by German and Japanese armed forces during World War II, it is unfortunate that Schillinger doesn't elaborate on the significance of that particular crime for the new armed forces of China.

In his description of the making of Chinese "professional patriots," Schillinger is careful to note that the concept of "dying heroically in battle" (228) had existed in China's past as well—but only at the beginning of the twentieth century was it conflated with patriotism and revived with rhetoric about the "martial spirit of Japanese culture." And so when critics of the military claimed that "real men die wrapped in horsehide," he unmistakably referred to military men's sacrifice of their lives as necessary in order to make China one of the world's strongest countries (229).

Considering the demise of the Qing dynasty in 1911, historians tend to see as failures the kinds of military reforms Schillinger discusses. Yet these reforms did have lasting effects on Chinese society and culture, especially in terms of the reconceptualization of modern military men. In fact, Schillinger concludes that, even in the twenty-first century, the army (again) "seeks to promote physical discipline, military masculinity, and other aspects of military culture among society in general" (327). Indeed, the creation and re-creation of military masculinity remains an ongoing project in China, Japan, and elsewhere.

Fast-forward to today: at least one current Chinese military public relations video spits out its appeal not in the speech pattern of a military order, but in the rhythm of rap: "Always have the task on your minds, always have the enemy in your eyes, always carry responsibility on your shoulders and passion in your hearts. The war can break out at any time. Are you ready?"[5] Similarly, renewed anxieties about the "sick man of East Asia" among the current-day political class in China are not about "physical weaknesses, [the] lack of courage, military spirit, martial aspiration, and true masculinity" (2), as they were at the turn of the twentieth century. Instead, China's army commanders recently declared that the mobile phone game Honor of Kings was among the greatest threats to national defense—that the game had infiltrated soldiers' and officers' daily lives so as to undermine their combat-readiness.[6]

With these two books, Jaundrill and Schillinger have both turned the next corner of the historical analysis of military establishments in modern East Asia. They apply different critical methodologies to show the enormity of resources that have been invested in establishing and maintaining the military. They show how militaries as institutions shape and transform societies and how they have aggressively—and sometimes subtly—shaped and reshaped social processes and identities. Now, the rest of us just need to listen—or, rather, read.

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Notes

1 Key works in English include Farris (1996), Ikegami (1997), Vaporis (2008), and Friday (1992).

2 Key works include Yoshida (2002), Frühstück (2003), and Low (2005).

3 I am referring to the following works: Foucault (1977), Rabinbach (1992), Frühstück (2003), Diehl (2005), and Presner (2007).
4 Key books include Brownell and Wasserstrom (2002) and Brownell (1995).
5 Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTdOnDSPZ_Q, accessed on December 2, 2017.
6 This was reported in *The People's Liberation Army Daily* (cited in Strittmatter [2017]).

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