

The Global and the Local of a Technologically Entangled Process of Military Innovation – The Curious Parallels between sixteenth-century Dutch and Chinese Army Reforms

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In the sixteenth century new types of European gunpowder weaponry found their way to East Asia. Firearms were of course not new to the area and had even been invented there, but the new muskets and cannon that the Portuguese introduced to Japan and China were more powerful and accurate compared to their East Asian counterparts. In the course of the sixteenth century these new weapons made an impact on the warfare between the Ming Empire and the so-called *wokou* “Japanese” pirates. This conflict sparked a flurry of military experimentation and innovation which was reflected in the surge of military manual and statecraft treatise publication activities after the second half of the century. Much of this innovative knowledge along with many of the innovators later found their way to the northern frontier to bolster the defenses against the Mongols. Later still, southern Chinese troops would pour into Korea to come to the aid of the embattled Choson dynasty against the invasions of Hideyoshi at the close of the century, a gesture of aid which included the transfer of military knowledge as well. Less well known is that many of the initial innovators were activist Neo-Confucian literati and professional military men affiliated with the *xinxue* “school of the mind” movement led by Wang Yangming and Zhan Ruoshui. The famous general Qi Jiguang also belonged to this group, and it were his innovations and training manuals that eventually found their way to Korea.

Meanwhile, back in Europe, a remarkably similar group of activist scholars and military men connected to the Dutch Neo-Stoic movement were dealing with the challenge and promise the new firearms posed. For many historians, the resulting revival of ancient Roman methods of training and drill, in combination with the introduction of firearms led the way to the modern well-disciplined European army. Attention has also been paid to the Neo-Stoical philosophical underpinnings of these reforms and the convergence of interests between military men and the scholastic community which facilitated the reform.

In this paper I will argue that personal ties and shared ideological commitment between scholars and military men were also essential in shaping the success of Qi Jiguang’s career and his efforts at military reform of the armies of the Ming Empire. This paper will show that in both the Dutch Republic and Ming China, new activist philosophies came to the fore which broke down social barriers and which allowed the free spread of military ideas and their implementation in practice. Finally, the paper will point out that the resulting military programs became vehicles to indoctrinate the soldiers and officers with a very similar set values derived from Neo-Stoicism and Wang Yangming Neo-Confucianism respectively, emphasizing self-discipline, suppression of desires, obedience and steadfastness. These were important values to facilitate the implementation of new tactics which were intended to exploit the advantages of the new gunpowder weaponry. Both reforms, which were entangled by the same technological changes, were enshrined in practical training manuals which would remain templates for future military reforms and could be considered export successes as well.