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## Paradoxical Coexistence of Prognostication and Warfare

by  
Ralph D. Sawyer

Victor H. Mair, Editor  
*Sino-Platonic Papers*  
Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6305 USA  
vmair@sas.upenn.edu  
www.sino-platonic.org

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## Paradoxical Coexistence of Prognostication and Warfare

Ralph D. Sawyer

The massive Chinese military corpus -- an essentially continuous, datable repository of martial theory, practice, techniques, and tactics -- equally preserves important materials on administrative beliefs, economics, and technological history. Moreover, in consonance with warfare having emerged within a vibrant divinatory context, several of the later texts encompass extensive chapters devoted to prognosticatory beliefs and divinatory practices despite the primary thrust of martial thought over the intervening centuries having been reoriented to excoriating them.

As thousands of oracle bones have revealed, plastronomy and the Shang were heavily intertwined, with affirmation or blessings being sought for a wide variety of undertakings, especially warfare.<sup>1</sup> Although somewhat less fervently, the Chou continued to employ divination to determine the auspiciousness of military actions, though recourse was increasingly to the distinctive milfoil stalk tradition whose theory and methods were eventually codified as the *I Ching*.<sup>2</sup> However, commencing with the Spring and Autumn period, the interpretation of dreams, omens, unnatural, and bizarre phenomena increasingly supplemented these formal,

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<sup>1</sup> The *Shuo Yüan* purportedly preserves an example of a military attack being forewarned by plastronomy. For his own purposes Hsien Chen of Chin, who had distinguished himself at the battle of Ch'eng-p'u, persuaded Duke Hsiang, ruler of Chin, to attack Ch'in. However, Ch'in became aware of Chin's approaching army through routine divination that coincidentally indicated it would be auspicious to attack the invaders, a tactic they successfully executed. ("Ching Shen.")

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the *I Ching's* role in the *Tso Chuan*, see Kidder Smith, "Zhouyi Interpretation from Accounts in the *Zuochuan*," *HJAS* 49, No. 2 (1989), and for an overview see Michael Loewe, "Divination by shells, bones and stalks" in *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1994). In evaluating the relative importance of different types of divination for state purposes, the *Shang Shu* (undoubtedly composed centuries after the dynasty's demise) gives slight preference to the turtle over the newer milfoil, but assigns even greater weight to the opinions of men. It also notes that seasonal activities and correlated phenomena offer additional forms of verification, with extremes generally foretelling inimical situations. (See "Hung Fan" and "Ta Yü Mo.")

highly ritualized practices, especially among men of lesser rank.<sup>3</sup>

The Warring States period witnessed the evolution of the proto-scientific explanatory systems of *yin* and *yang*, the five phases, and various concatenations of auspicious and inauspicious days,<sup>4</sup> yet it was still felt that divination should be performed to confirm the prospects for success before mounting an expedition or initiating an attack.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the mid to late Warring States' *Liu-t'ao* (*Six Secret Teachings*) included three astrologers on the command staff, holding them responsible for "the stars and calendar; observing the wind and *ch'i*; predicting auspicious days and times; investigating signs and phenomena; verifying disasters and abnormalities; and knowing Heaven's mind with regard to the moment for completion or abandonment."<sup>6</sup>

Coincidentally attesting to the unwavering strength of popular belief, beginning with the *Art of War* and the *Ssu-ma Fa*, the classic Warring States military writings warned against the debilitating effects of omens and portents and stressed the need to diffuse their impact.<sup>7</sup> For example, in "Nine Terrains" Sun-tzu admonished commanders to "Prohibit omens and eliminate

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<sup>3</sup> Prior to the battle of Ch'eng-p'u, Duke Wen of Chin reportedly observed unusual celestial phenomena and experienced a strange dream. (However, as the incident is recorded in the *Shuo-yüan*, "Ch'üan Mou," it can only be taken as reflecting belief as of the date of composition rather than the seventh century BC.) Separately, the *Shuo Yüan* ("Ching Shen") notes that "ominous phenomena are the way Heaven warns the son of Heaven and the feudal lords, while nightmares are the way it warns officers and officials."

<sup>4</sup> As attested by the numerous bamboo strip calendars and almanacs recovered over the past decade that have been reported in such publications as *Kao-ku*, *Wen-wu*, *Kao-ku yü Wen-wu*, *Chung-kuo Che-hsüeh-shih*, and *Early China*.

<sup>5</sup> "Planning for the State," the *Wu-tzu*. "When a ruler who has comprehended the Tao is about to employ his people, he will first bring them into harmony and only thereafter embark on great affairs. He will not dare rely solely upon his own plans, but will certainly announce them formally in the ancestral temple, divine their prospects by the great turtle shell, and seek their confirmation in the Heavens and seasons. Only if they are all auspicious will he proceed to mobilize the army."

Individuals, as well as armies, reportedly also profited from intelligence gleaned from knowledge and skill in these practices. At the end of the Former Han, Jen Wen-kung, a noted practitioner of esoteric methods, escaped the violence spawned in Wang Mang's era by foretelling its arising and moving into the hills with his family. (*Hou Han Shu*, "Fang-shih Lieh-chuan.") Perhaps not coincidentally, he had earlier been entrusted with secretly investigating the strategic situation along the provincial borders.

<sup>6</sup> "The King's Wings," the *Liu-t'ao* (*Six Secret Teachings*).

<sup>7</sup> In "Determining Rank," the *Ssu-ma Fa* proposes eliminating the effects of baleful omens through sound government and righteousness: "Charge the people with good faith, approach them with strength, establish the foundation [of kingly government], and unify the strategic power of All under Heaven." (For a translation of the complete passage, as well as the entire *Ssu-ma Fa*, see Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* [Westview Press]).

doubt so that they will die without other thoughts.” Even the seventh of the *Seven Military Classics (Wu-ching Ch'i-shu)*, the late T'ang *Questions and Replies*, cites Li Ching as having said, “The successful employment of the masses lies in them being of one mind. Unification of mind lies in prohibiting omens and dispelling doubts.”

However, at the break of day commanders could not help musing on forthcoming events as they anxiously observed the clouds hovering over the enemy, the *ch'i* rising from the encampments, strange star configurations, or a halo around the moon. Moreover, as subsequently exemplified by General Tung Chuo's actions in the Later Han dynasty, it was gradually realized that the enemy's consternation and dispirit at witnessing inimical signs could readily be exploited.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, the late Warring States *San-lüeh (Three Strategies)* initiated the advocacy of exploiting every opportunity presented by states or troops paralyzed by their effects simply by characterizing states that relied upon divination as targets for easy conquest.<sup>9</sup>

However, amid the unremitting advance of tactical military science throughout the Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods, certain circumstances and battlefield situations

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<sup>8</sup> One of the commanders of an army of some 100,000 infantry and cavalry dispatched to crush a barbarian force, they were standing off against the enemy after an indecisive engagement in the eleventh month when “that night there was a meteor like a flame whose light stretched out a hundred feet, illuminating both camps so that the horses and donkeys all whinnied and brayed. The barbarians, feeling it was inauspicious, wanted to return to their stronghold of Chin-ch'eng. When Chung Chuo learned of it he was elated. The next day he launched a coordinated attack with the other commanders that severely defeated the enemy, killing several thousand of them.” (“Tung Chuo Lieh-chuan,” *Hou Han Shu*.)

The strength of widespread belief in the validity of predictive phenomena may also be seen in a Former Han dynasty incident that deliberately exploited its currency. Once Ch'in and then the Han had reunified China, the government's military focus shifted to the dangers posed by the various nomadic border peoples. The famous Han dynasty general Chao Ch'ung-kuo, who was active during Emperor Wu-ti's aggressively martial reign and successfully specialized in border affairs, presented a memorial that stated in part: “Just now the five main stars emerging in the east presage great advantages for China and great defeats for the barbarian peoples. T'ai-pai is high in the sky, so daring to lead troops deep into enemy territory and engage in battle will be auspicious, but not daring to do so will be baleful. If our generals urgently strike, by relying on the advantages of Heaven to execute the unrighteous the realm will be preserved and there will not be any future doubts.” He subsequently received permission to take action against the Hsien-ling and succeeded in vanquishing them. (Chao's tactics are reprised as the historical illustration for chapter 92, “The Impoverished,” of the *Pai-chan Ch'i-lüeh*. [For a translation, see Sawyer, *One Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*.])

<sup>9</sup> “Middle Strategy,” *San-lüeh*. A similar view appears in the *Hu-ch'ien Ching*, while earlier in the Warring States the *Liu-t'ao* (“The Army's Indications”) asserted that troops “talking incessantly of ill omens, a myriad mouths confusing each other” number among the important indications of weakness. (The *Three Strategies* also state: “Prohibit mediums and shamans from divining about the army's good or bad fortune on behalf of the officials and officers.”)

were deemed so certain to result in victory or defeat that divination could be foregone.<sup>10</sup> Beginning with the *Art of War* which advocated the ruthless practice of knowledge based warfare and stressed human agency in intelligence gathering, strategists began to directly oppose all prognosticatory practices.<sup>11</sup> More stridently, the *Wei Liao-tzu* composed at the end of the Warring States period dedicated its initial chapter, entitled "Heavenly Offices," to forcefully denying that divinatory practices had any efficacy at all. Citing their irrelevance in such famous historical clashes as the Yellow Emperor's sweeping conquests and the Shang's defeat at Mu-yeh, the author concluded that they were "simply a matter of human effort."<sup>12</sup> This view was subsequently reiterated by the great T'ang general Li Ching who asserted that at a crucial moment in the Chou's quest to overthrow the Shang, the reputed progenitor of strategic studies known as the T'ai Kung had rejected not just the validity, but the very possibility of performing divination.<sup>13</sup> Victory and defeat were thus reduced to superior planning, effective command and

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<sup>10</sup> "Evaluating the Enemy," the *Wu-tzu*. "There are eight conditions under which one engages in battle without performing divination and six circumstances in which, without performing divination, you should avoid conflict."

<sup>11</sup> In "Employing Spies," possibly a late accretion to the text, the *Art of War* states: "The means by which enlightened rulers and sagacious generals moved and conquered others, that their achievements surpassed the masses, was advance knowledge. Advance knowledge cannot be gained from ghosts and spirits, inferred from phenomena, or projected from the measures of Heaven, but must be gained from men, for it is the knowledge of the enemy's true situation."

<sup>12</sup> "Heavenly Offices." The passage runs: "The Ch'u general Kung-tzu Hsin was about to engage Ch'i in battle. At that time a comet appeared with its tail over Ch'i. According to such beliefs, wherever the tail pointed would be victorious and they could not be attacked. Kung-tzu Hsin said: 'What does a comet know? Those who fight according to the comet will certainly be overturned and conquered.' On the morrow he engaged Ch'i and greatly defeated them. The Yellow Emperor said, 'Putting spirits and ghosts first is not as good as first investigating my own knowledge.' This means that the Heavenly Offices are nothing but human effort."

<sup>13</sup> According to Book III, *Questions and Replies*:

T'ang T'ai-tsung inquired: T'ien Tan entrusted their fate to the supernatural and destroyed Yen, while the T'ai Kung burned the milfoil and turtle shells yet went on to exterminate King Chou. How is it that these two affairs are contradictory?"

Li Ching replied: "Their subtle motives were the same. One went contrary to such practices and seized the enemy, one accorded with them and implemented his plans. In antiquity, when the T'ai Kung was assisting King Wu they reached Mu-yeh where they encountered thunder and rain. The flags and drums were broken or destroyed. San Yi-sheng wanted to divine for an auspicious response before moving. This then is a case where, because of doubts and fear within the army, he felt they must rely upon divination to inquire of the spirits. But the T'ai Kung believed that rotted grass and dried up bones were not worth asking. Moreover, in the case of a subject attacking his ruler, how could there be a second chance?"

control, and astute battlefield practices.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, because several epoch-making, historical victories had been achieved despite extremely baleful indications, many military thinkers who willingly conceded that omens and signs must proceed from Heaven explicitly denied that they inevitably presaged an irreversible outcome.<sup>15</sup> For example, despite retaining numerous chapters devoted to divinatory systems and prognosticatory interpretations, the *Hu-ch'ien Ching* states:

Whenever a commander moves troops, Heaven will inform the realm of men about forthcoming defeats and victories with *ch'i*. However, anyone who enjoys victorious *ch'i* cannot simply rely on it, but should order their armies and

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Now I observe that San Yi-sheng expressed his motives at the beginning, but the T'ai Kung attained his subsequently. Even though one was contrary to and the other in accord with divinatory practices, their reasons were identical. When I previously stated these techniques should not be abandoned, it was largely to preserve the vital point of *ch'i* before affairs have begun to manifest themselves. As for their being successful, it was a matter of human effort, that's all."

The T'ai Kung's biography in the *Shih Chi* also relates his effort to stiffen the troops when the omens for attacking the Shang proved inauspicious and heavy wind and rain, both ill portents, arose at the critical moment. To justify his disregard for such overwhelmingly baleful signs he claimed that the overthrow of the ruling house could hardly produce favorable indications. (This may be understood as referring to the moment of action rather than the enterprise in general, because in "Opening Instructions" in the *Liu-t'ao* he stresses that revolutionary activity cannot be undertaken on personal responsibility alone: "If there are no ill omens in the Tao of Heaven you cannot initiate the movement to revolt. If there are no misfortunes in the Tao of Man your planning cannot precede them. You must first see Heavenly signs and moreover witness human misfortune; only thereafter can you make plans.")

<sup>14</sup> "Martial Plans" asserts, "If you raise the Worthy and employ the talented, even if the hour and day are not auspicious your affairs will still be advantageous. If you make the laws clear and are cautious about orders, without divining with the turtle shell or milfoil you will obtain propitious results. If you honor achievement and nurture effort, without praying you will obtain good fortune. It is also said that "the seasons of Heaven are not as good as advantages of Earth; the advantages of Earth are not as good as harmony among men" and "The Sages of antiquity stressed human effort, that's all. There was nothing auspicious nor abnormal; it was merely a case of perfecting oneself, or not perfecting oneself, in human affairs."

<sup>15</sup> In its initial chapter, "Heavenly Offices," the *Wei Liao-tzu* notes:

According to the Heavenly Offices, "deploying troops with water to the rear is referred to as 'isolated terrain.' Deploying troops facing a long ridge is termed 'abandoning the army.'" When King Wu attacked King Chou of the Shang, he deployed his troops with the Chi River behind him, facing a mountain slope. With 22,500 men he attacked King Chou's hundreds of thousands and destroyed the Shang dynasty. Yet, hadn't King Chou deployed in accord with the Heavenly Offices?

The Ch'u general Kung-tzu Hsin was about to engage Ch'i in battle. At that time a comet appeared with its tail over Ch'i. (According to such beliefs) wherever the tail pointed would be victorious and they could not be attacked. Kung-tzu Hsin said: "What does a comet know? Those who fight according to the comet will certainly be overturned and conquered." On the morrow he engaged Ch'i and greatly defeated them.

rectify their essence, ponder their plans, make their orders strict, and correct their rewards and punishments. Then they will accord with Heaven and Earth's blessings. Anyone who relies on correct, victorious *ch'i* without ordering the army's administration, who is dissipated and lazy, will be defeated. In this way they can convert victory into defeat.

Similarly, how can anyone who encounters the *ch'i* of defeat invariably be defeated? By strictly enforcing their instructions, cautiously employing their wisdom in making plans, upbraiding themselves, accepting that the guilt lies with them, and reverently according with Heaven's missive, they can change defeat into victory. Shouldn't a commanding general who has not received any indication of defeat or victory establish policies to cultivate his virtue?"<sup>16</sup>

This bifurcation incontrovertibly becomes visible with the T'ang and Sung military manuals.

The centuries following the Warring States, in part due to the impetus of *Hsüan-hsüeh* ("Dark" or "Abstruse Learning") and the gradual burgeoning of both Taoism and Buddhism, saw the evolution and development of numerous divinatory methods and thoroughly systematized prognosticatory beliefs requiring abstruse skills, intricate observations, and esoteric knowledge, including Yang Hsiung's deliberately arcane *T'ai-hsüan Ching*, various temple systems, highly sophisticated almanacs, and the *Ling Ch'i Ching*.<sup>17</sup> The *Shih Chi*, *Han Shu*, and *Sui Shu* treatises on astronomy and astrology composed from the Han through the T'ang contain numerous passages correlating observable phenomena with prognosticatory interpretations, including many with military implications. One particularly interesting series associates *ch'i* manifestations with the army's component forces<sup>18</sup> while similar indications, including predictions about the auspiciousness of engaging in battle or the size of enemy forces, are provided by cloud

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<sup>16</sup> The admonitions in the final paragraph, while often found in passages warning generals who hold a clear strategic superiority not to become lax, are unusual within prognosticatory sections and bear noting as evidence that false confidence was to be allayed. ("Cloud *Ch'i* of Defeated Armies.")

<sup>17</sup> The *T'ai-hsüan Ching* has been translated by Michael Nylan as *The Canon of Supreme Mystery* (State University of New York Press, 1993) and the *Ling Ch'i Ching* by Ralph and Mei-chün Sawyer (Shambhala, 1996, Westview reprint, 2004). Several different sets of temple divination slips are reproduced in Werner Banck's *Das Chinesische Tempelorakel* (Taipei: Ku-t'ing Shu-chü, 1976).

<sup>18</sup> "The Book of Heavenly Offices," the *Shih Chi*.



formations, especially those that suggest animals and earthly phenomena.<sup>19</sup>

By including lengthy sections devoted to these beliefs and systems, the T'ang and Sung military writings reflected this prognosticatory thrust. Four of the ten topical divisions in the *T'ai-pai Yin-ching*, the first datable text to encompass these diverse materials, are allotted to various divinatory beliefs and methods. The early Sung *Hu-ch'ien Ching* devotes some 45% of the 430 pages in a contemporary reprint to these practices, many of the sections simply being expansions of *T'ai-pai Yin-ching* formulations. And fifteen percent of the 2,340 pages in the lengthy *Wu-ching Tsung-yao*, an encyclopedia of military knowledge compiled just a few decades after the *Hu-ch'ien Ching* in the mid-eleventh century, and four of the ten volumes in the massive *Wu-pei Chih* completed in the last decades of the Ming dynasty also embrace this tradition.

These extensive materials naturally focus upon field assessments and the generalized requirements of military intelligence. Recurring, discernible conditions and circumstances are correlated with observations that are then systematically interpreted by distinctive methods inherent to the various theories and derived from the premises of the individual systems. Major topics include selecting an appropriate day for initiating a campaign, predicting victory or defeat, determining the basic advisability of engaging the enemy, fathoming enemy commanders,<sup>20</sup> predicting the existence of ambushes, discerning the enemy's location, deciding where to encamp, determining whether to assume the tactical role of a guest (aggressor) or host (defender), warning of as yet unseen threats, and deciding the moment to dispatch spies and agents. Prognosticatory theory also had applications in the realm of counter-intelligence, with the *T'ai-pai Yin-ching* containing a brief chapter on *ch'i* phenomena that warn of subversive

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<sup>19</sup> In his chapter entitled "The oracles of the clouds and winds" (found in *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China* cited below), Michael Loewe provides some examples of military prognostication from cloud formations based upon recently recovered texts, as well as incidents of wind interpretation in a military context.

<sup>20</sup> One of the chief concerns of military intelligence was learning the identity and characteristics of opposing generals so that flaws might be exploited with appropriate psychological measures and field tactics. Therefore, virtually all the military texts that contain prognosticatory material devote lengthy sections to their *ch'i* indications. While the information thus gleaned -- primarily whether the general is fierce or timid, ruthless or stupid -- is limited, it might still be acted upon to save the army from an unexpected defeat. (There is in fact a detailed historical progression from Li Ch'üan's T'ang dynasty *T'ai-pai Yin-ching* to the Sung dynasty *Hu-ch'ien Ching* and *Wu-ching Tsung-yao* organized around the topic of "Cloud Ch'i of Generals.")

activities.<sup>21</sup> Other works preserve guidelines for employing complex star systems to evaluate the credibility of emissaries<sup>22</sup> and discover the existence of secret plots.<sup>23</sup>

Several prominent systems utilize various combinations of the stars, Chinese zodiac, and the sequential series known as the “Ten Stems and Twelve Branches” (for Heaven and Earth respectively) that generates the sixty designations for the individual days in traditional calendrical science. For example, this cycle of sixty is employed in a *Hu-ch'ien Ching* chapter devoted to determining an auspicious day for sending the army forth to designate certain days in the various lunar months (such as the “Nine Uglies” and “Six Impoverishments”) on which the initiation of military activities should definitely be avoided. Other inimical days include those when the moon’s phases (which visibly emblemize *yin*’s activity) are unstable and therefore deadly and purely numerical combinations that presage calamity. Unifying them all is the general principle that “On days when Heaven’s *ch'i* is severed you cannot send the army forth or launch an attack.”<sup>24</sup>

Theories based upon the five phases, *yin* and *yang*, and even the sixty-four hexagrams of the *I Ching*, abstracted from their original context and converted into time and space markers with an intrinsic hierarchical order and inherent, dynamic inter-relationships, similarly provide the foundation for both singular theories and complex hybrid systems.<sup>25</sup> Other celestial phenomena of importance include the appearance and orientation of rainbows; the direction, ferocity, and duration of the wind; the nature and activity of innumerable stars, their positions in various constellations and the zodiac, and important conjunctions; comets, meteors, and shooting stars; the characteristics of the sun and moon, as well as their positions and eclipse activity; the sky’s general appearance; rain; and various seasonal activities and discordances.

However, the most important and esteemed practice consisted of detecting and observing subtle *ch'i*, primarily in its visible manifestation as mist, vapor, clouds, smoke, fog, and other atmospheric phenomena that form, float, and disperse for indications about current and future

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<sup>21</sup> “Yin-mou *Ch'i*” or “*Ch'i* of Secret Plots.”

<sup>22</sup> “Shih Lai Hsü-shih Chan,” *Wu-ching Tsung-yao*.

<sup>23</sup> *T'ai-pai Yin-ching*, “Yin-mou *Ch'i*” or “*Ch'i* of Secret Plots.”

<sup>24</sup> “Ch'u-chün Jih,” *Hu-ch'ien Ching*.

<sup>25</sup> Over the centuries several well known arrangements for the sixty-four hexagrams evolved that, once codified, permitted their employment in both abstract and concrete ways.

events.<sup>26</sup> Although there is a vague continuum ranging from early, observationally based battlefield phenomena, including the dust columns from chariot advances<sup>27</sup> through indications of life in an encampment to clouds and vapors, it originally constituted a distinct tradition. Moreover, official credence was often granted to complex *ch'i* practices that included imperially sanctioned efforts to determine the first stirrings of seasonal *ch'i* and thus fine-tune the calendar.<sup>28</sup>

The *Liu-t'ao* is the earliest military writing to preserve evidence of such practices in the martial realm. Amid a broad discussion of “indications of victory and defeat that will be first manifest in the enemy’s spirit” and other materials relating to battlefield assessment in general, a chapter titled “The Army’s Indications” includes a prognosticatory passage that premises the prospects for conquest upon the characteristics of the *ch'i* coalescing about the enemy’s fortifications.<sup>29</sup> Typical pronouncements include, “when you attack city walls or surround towns,

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<sup>26</sup> Despite philosophical interpretations and extensive theorizing, *ch'i*'s exact nature remains elusive, conveying diverse meanings in different contexts. In the military writings *ch'i* clearly refers to something at least vaguely substantial, tenuously existent, visible only to practiced eyes in the most subtle cases, but to everyone in its densest concentration. While always entailing a metaphysical aspect, it included the vapors or mists rising above a lake or early morning field, those visible over an army, and the panoply of colors in an imperceptibly moisture laden sky.

<sup>27</sup> The *Art of War* includes guidelines in “The Army’s Indications” that provide evidence that tactical information was derived from dust observations at least as far back as the Spring and Autumn. (For further discussion and examples, see “Field Intelligence” in Sawyer, *The Tao of Spycraft*.)

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the practice of determining seasonal progressions by watching for a *ch'i* response amidst the ashes of appropriate pitch pipes, see Huang Yi-long and Chang Chih-ch'eng, “The Evolution and Decline of the Ancient Practice of Watching for the Ethers,” *Chinese Science*, No. 13 (1996), pp. 82—106.

Derke Bodde broached the subject in 1959 with his article entitled “The Chinese Cosmic Magic Known as Watching for the Ethers” reprinted in *Essays on Chinese Civilization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 351—72) and A. S. P. Hulsewe added further information two decades later with “Watching the Vapours; an ancient Chinese technique of prognostication” (*Nachrichten* 125 [1979], pp. 40—49.) Michael Loewe subsequently expanded the discussion with a series of interesting articles on it and other aspects of divination — such as “The oracles of the clouds and winds” — conveniently gathered in a work entitled *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994). Unfortunately, while all three provide examples of military cases from the general literature, especially the dynastic histories, little use has been made of the military writings. (Two articles in Chinese also provide useful discussions: Ho Kuan-hu, “Hsien-Ch'in Liang-Han Chan-hou Yün-ch'i chih Chu-tso Shu-lüeh,” *Chung-kuo-shih Yen-chiu*, 1988: 1, pp. 133—9, and Ch'en P'an, “Ying-ch'ao Tun-huang Hsieh-pen Chan-yün-ch'i-shu Ts'an-chüan Chieh-t'i,” *BIHP* 50:1 [March, 1979], pp. 1—27.)

<sup>29</sup> Another chapter, “The Five Notes”, reprises an already antique method for assessing the enemy’s situation by noting which of the five fundamental notes responds to the sudden yells of a nighttime reconnaissance force. The text concludes, “These signs of the five phases are evidence to assist in the conquest, the subtle moments of success and defeat. These subtle, mysterious notes all have external

if the color of their *ch'i* is like dead ashes, the city can be slaughtered. If it drifts out to the north, the city can be conquered.”

More generally, unusual *ch'i* might range from the extremely simple with direct consequences -- such as a reddish diffusion in the sky presaging great bloodshed -- to the most intricate and complex, including dragons gamboling and headless dead men. For example, a chapter in the *Hu-ch'ien Ching* that essentially continues Sun Pin's effort to characterize cities susceptible to attack and echoes the T'ai Kung's early *ch'i* indices, titled “Cloud *Ch'i* above Cities,” opens with the statement “Whether you want to advance your army and attack a city or the enemy is coming forth to besiege you, you should investigate the auspiciousness and balefulness of the clouds and *ch'i*.”<sup>30</sup> It subsequently concludes, “Now the *ch'i* for victory or defeat above a city are such. If they indicate victory for the enemy you cannot attack, but if defeat you should attack. When victory lies over you, it will be advantageous to send the army forth and advance to attack. When defeat is indicated over you, you should solidify your walls, clear the fields, and mount a strict defense. All cloud *ch'i* manifests the mind of Heaven and Earth, so how can you not be cautious !”

The emergence and preservation of these complex prognosticatory systems whose very intricacy suggests that they were more likely intellectual figments than practical and practiced, while no doubt a manifestation of the human quest to resolve doubt and maintain psychological functionality amidst life threatening situations, essentially defies explanation in the face of numerous battlefield realities and the strong condemnatory tradition initiated by the Warring States military classics.<sup>31</sup> However, note should be taken of three highly constrained

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indications. When the enemy has been startled into movement listen for them. If you hear the sound of the *pao* drum then it is *chiao*. If you see the flash of lights from a fire then it is *cheng*. If you hear the sounds of bronze and iron, of spears and halberds, then it is *shang*. If you hear the sound of people sighing it is *yü*. If all is silent, without any sound, then it is *kung*. These five are the signs of sound and appearance.”

<sup>30</sup> Distinctions in the text between clouds, *ch'i*, and cloud *ch'i* -- whatever their essence and phenomenal correlates -- are maintained in the translation. (For an extensive discussion of *ch'i* prognostication and numerous examples, see “Historical Practices and Their Rejection” in the section on Prognostication, Divination, and Nonhuman Factors in Sawyer, *The Tao of Spycraft*, as well as “Martial Prognostication” in the compilation volume edited by Nicola Di Cosmo titled *Martial Culture in Imperial China* [Harvard University Press, forthcoming].)

<sup>31</sup> However, despite the plethora of data and ever increasing real time micro-management of the battlefield, contemporary Western military literature on commanders employing intuitive (otherwise termed

rationalizations preserved in the military corpus itself, all conceived in traditional Warring States terms of a resonance existing between Heaven and Man. The *T'ai-pai Yin-ching* chapter on cloud *ch'i* states:<sup>32</sup> "When Heaven and Earth mutually respond, *yin* and *yang* mutually interact, it is termed *ch'i*. When *ch'i* accumulates over a long time it becomes clouds. In all cases things attain form below and *ch'i* responds above. Thus it is said, 'By fathoming the *ch'i* one will know affairs, by looking at the *ch'i* know people.'"

The late Sung *Hu-ch'ien Ching* adds: "Wherever there are more than a hundred men, the *ch'i* of victory or defeat will be concretely visible. Those who accord with it will flourish, those who contravene it will perish. Heaven and Earth do not speak, so auspiciousness and balefulness must be fathomed through symbols. Unusual *ch'i* invariably entails disaster and change."<sup>33</sup> And even though the late Ming *Ping-fa Pai-yen* emphasized experience, natural phenomena, and human responsibility, it still acknowledged the potency of signs under the rubric of "Heaven":

Farmers recognize the signs of clearing and rain, boatmen know the direction of the wind. What need is there for them to read different books or grasp other interpretations? They gain experience through their affairs and verify their observations through constant discussion. Their eyes see phenomena and their minds absorb them.

If they can be focused, how much more so the wise who have penetrated the mysteries of *yin* and *yang* and the five phases; who synthesize the entirety of sounds, appearances, vapors, and flavors, who have extensive comprehension of the books on the vast night skies, who are practiced in the arts of divination, calculation, and phenomenal observation? With one look they recognize auspicious omens and ill portents, with one silent glance comprehend misfortune and blessings, good fortune and calamity.

Few are the human affairs and season of Heaven that can be simply pondered out. Therefore, one who knows Heaven becomes wise, one who knows

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"experientially based" or "enlightened insight") aspects of decision making abilities, while couched in "rational" terms, perhaps veers not too distantly from the unconscious recognition and / or projection of battlefield factors vaguely expressible in terms of mood, context, abnormalities, or miasmatic *ch'i*.

<sup>32</sup> "Fathoming Cloud *Ch'i*," *T'ai-pai Yin-ching*.

<sup>33</sup> "Yün Ch'i T'ung-lun" or "General Discussion of Cloud *Ch'i*."

Heaven is knowledgeable. To attain victory through relying upon Heaven is spiritual!<sup>34</sup>

Finally, an additional, though inadequate, partial justification for some, but certainly not all the many complexities of these extensive prognosticatory systems may be seen in Li Ching's cynical justification for visibly continuing them despite their claimed insubstantiality. Queried whether the divinatory practices of *yin* and *yang* could be abandoned, he replied: "They cannot. The military is the Tao of deceit, so if we apparently put faith in *yin* and *yang* divination, we can manipulate the greedy and stupid."<sup>35</sup> Li clearly valued the ability of divinatory practices to obscure fundamental realities, to mystify and deceive just as the animal names and notes that had long been appended to the various formations, noting that "this was the cleverness of the ancient

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<sup>34</sup> The text then enumerates several weather phenomena that, while hardly omens, should prompt increased vigilance: "When strong winds blow be careful about whirlwinds. When the myriad stars move about it will be rainy and wet. When clouds and fog converge from all directions be wary of ambushes and surprise attacks. When there are violent winds and heavy rain, rumbling of thunder and lightening intertwined, quickly prepare your strong crossbowmen and cautiously guard against sudden attacks by the enemy. Those who excel in employing such circumstances will never fail to exploit an opportunity, those who excel at defense will never fail to respond to changes. Heaven always lies with men but only the wise are able to rely on it to seize victory. What further evidence does one need to seek?"

<sup>35</sup> Book III, *Questions and Replies*. The full passage runs:

The T'ai-tsung asked: "Can the divination practices of *yin* and *yang* be abandoned?"

Li Ching said: "They cannot. The military is the Tao of deceit, so if we apparently put faith in *yin* and *yang* divinatory practices we can manipulate the greedy and stupid. They cannot be abandoned."

The T'ai-tsung said: "You once said that selecting astrologically auspicious seasons and days are not methods of enlightened generals. Ignorant generals adhere to them, so it seems appropriate to abandon them."

Li Ching said: "King Chou perished on a day designated as *chia-tzu*, King Wu flourished on the same day. According to the astrologically auspicious seasons and days, *chia-tzu* is the first day. The Shang was in chaos, the Chou was well governed. Flourishing and perishing are different in this case. Moreover, Emperor Wu of the Sung mobilized his troops on a 'going to perish day.' The army's officers all felt it to be impermissible, but the Emperor said, 'I will go forth and he will perish.' Indeed, he conquered them."

Speaking with reference to these cases, it is clear that the practices can be abandoned. However, when T'ien Tan was surrounded by Yen, Tan ordered a man to impersonate a spirit. He bowed and prayed to him and the spirit said Yen could be destroyed. Tan thereupon used fire-oxen to go forth and attack Yen, greatly destroying them. This is the deceitful Tao of military thinkers. The selection of astrologically auspicious seasons and days is similar to this."

military strategists.”<sup>36</sup> No doubt, in casting an eye over early military history, he had in mind the sort of desperate situations wherein dispirited troops could only be motivated to act by the sudden appearance of some extraordinary phenomena such as highly auspicious omens or spiritual apparitions. Although he never asserted that they should be fabricated as necessary (in the style of T’ien Tan), the implications are clear. Nevertheless, artificially scripted and concocted manifestations, presumably being limited in quantity and sophistication as well as directly under the commander’s control, offer no explanation or justification for the ever increasing proliferation witnessed in the subsequent military manuals.

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<sup>36</sup> Formations were traditionally designated by simple rubrics such as “geese,” “square,” and “round,” a variety of *yin yang* correlates, and some strange appellations. The full passage in Book II of *Questions and Replies* runs:

The T’ai-tsung said: “The four animal formations also have the notes *shang*, *yü*, *wei*, and *chiao* to symbolize them. What is the reason for this ?”

Li Ching replied: “It is the Tao of deceit. By preserving them one is able to dispense with them. If you dispense with them and do not employ them, deceitfulness will grow ever greater. The ancients obscured the names of the four formations with those of the four animals together with the designations of Heaven, Earth, wind and clouds, and moreover added the notes and associated phases of *shang* and metal, *yü* and water, *wei* and fire, *chiao* and wood. This was the cleverness of the ancient military strategists. If you preserve them, deceitfulness will not increase further. If you abandon them, how can the greedy and stupid be employed?”

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