Chinese Military Banners

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

On the back wall of the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) third floor, Chinese Ceramics Gallery, almost blocked from view, is a Qing Dynasty 18th century, embroidered silk-satin military banner. Its green colour identifies it as *not* belonging to one of the more famous Eight Banners of the Manchu Army (recruited from the Manchu tribes that conquered China and launched the Qing Dynasty in 1644), but from the Green Standard Army. This was a category of military units consisting of ethnic Han Chinese who had previously served the Ming rulers, but after 1645 were deployed by the Manchus as infantry support to help maintain law and order along China's northern borders. Enlistment and service was generally for life and postings to the distant frontier posts were usually for periods of three to five years.

Military banners were used to identify a distinct group of fighting men, to portend martial power, raise troop morale and signal troop deployments. As stated in Chapter Seven, *Military Combat*, of the *Art of War* by Sun Tzu: "Because [the soldiers] could not hear each other, they made gongs and drums; because they could not see each other, they made pennants and flags. Gongs, drums, pennants and flags are the means to unify the men's ears and eyes."

Chinese military banners usually featured a variety of Chinese characters or animals. For example, the *History of the Sui Dynasty* (*Shuishu*) records that the cavalry battalion of each Sui army carried banners decorated with lions; other battalions had different animals on their banners. Genghis Khan's Mongol banners portrayed the golden head of a wolf.

Chinese banners were usually granted only to senior Chinese generals, but "when special circumstances justified a foreign holder, the banner signified his own might as well as Chinese military backing, thus effecting a psychological impact on his enemy."[1] Other psychological advantages could be won by flooding a battlefield with large numbers of assorted banners, confusing the enemy into thinking their opponent's numbers were larger than fact. Even the mere presence of military banners carried a threat – when the Chinese Emperor Jiajing (Qianlong's successor, r. 1796-1820) appeared in Jehol to confirm the power of the Yellow-hat sect of Vajrayana Buddhism, it was recorded that he "filled up the spaces in the heaven and earth with different kinds of offerings *and innumerable military banners*."[2]

It is one of the more curious facts of Chinese history that it was such military banners that played a major role in the West's discovery of China's silk. During the first century BCE, Rome was aggressively expanding its empire into Central Asia. In 53 BCE, seven Roman legions led by Marcus Licinius Crassus encountered an army of Parthian tribesmen. It was in this battle, today known as the Battle of Carrhae (today the Turkish town of Harran) that the Roman legionnaires first encountered the colourful silk military banners borne by their Central Asian opponents (the Scythian army). It is written that "apart from the terrible efficiency of the Parthian archers, one of the factors which contributed to the utter demoralisation of the legionaries [*sic*] was the sight and sound of the banners which the Parthians unfurled near the end of the day."[3]

ACM's 18th century, Qing Dynasty embroidered silk-satin military banner, photo by Gisella Harrold

Some people may find the ACM's military banner oddly placed in a gallery that also features showcases of the tomb figurines once buried to accompany deceased members of China's elite into the nether world, but it is aptly placed. Military banners date back to at least the Shang Dynasty (ca 1500 - 1050 BCE). In fact, scholars trace a little-known Chinese military rite to the Battle of Carrhae -- during the Han Dynasty. This rite of blood sacrifices to banners "appears to have been widespread throughout late Imperial China and continued in Chin and Taiwan during the modern era."[4]

Most blood sacrifices to Chinese military banners consisted of the usual victims – horses, oxen, sheep, pigs and cocks – but human sacrifices (usually captives or prisoners) were not unknown. A blood oath usually accompanied the ritual to solidify camaraderie and one's allegiance to the troop or army. Song, Ming and Qing histories all record the sacrifice of human victims to military banners, very often those of rebel armies. So the next time you are in the Ceramics Gallery, please take the time to view the banner on display and consider the colourful history of Chinese military banners.

1 Zhenping Wang, *Ambassadors from the Islands of the Immortals: China-Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period.* University of Hawaii Press, 2005, p. 19.
2 L. A. Waddell, "Chinese Imperial Edict of 1808 A.D. on the Origin and Transmigrations of the Grand Lamas of Tibet" in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, (January 1910), p. 77.
3 Ronald Currie, "Silk" in *Silk, Mohair, cashmere and Other Luxury Fibres* ed. by R. R. Franck. Cambridge, England: Woodhead Publishing Limited, 2001, p. 3.
4 Paul R. Katz, "Banner Worship and Human Sacrifice in Chinese Military History" in *The Scholar's Mind: Essays in Honor of Frederick W. Mote"* ed. by Eugene Perry Link. Chinese University Press, 2009, p. 107.

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