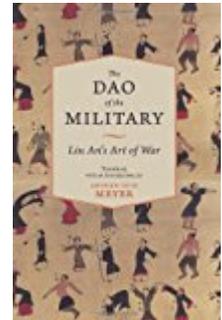




Andrew Seth Meyer, trans. *The Dao of the Military: Liu An's Art of War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. \$19.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-15333-1.



Reviewed by James Bonk

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In *The Dao of the Military: Liu An's Art of War*, Andrew Meyer ably introduces and translates “Bing lüe” (An Overview of the Military), the fifteenth chapter of the second-century BCE text, the *Huainanzi*. Meyer's translation of “Bing lüe,” which comprises the second half of the book under review, was originally part of a larger translation project involving Meyer, John Major, Sarah Queen, and Harold Roth. Their complete translation of the *Huainanzi* was published by Columbia University Press in 2010. Meyer's introduction is an insightful and highly readable addition to his earlier translation. In it, he provides a concise history of shifting relations between political regimes, warfare, and cosmologies that lay behind the particular emphases and concerns of “Bing lüe.”

Meyer's translation of “Bing lüe” adds to the already substantial number of translated military writings from Early China. *Sunzi's Art of War*, which Meyer addresses at some length in his introduction, is one of the most frequently translated works of the Chinese tradition. Other milit-

ary classics from Early China have been translated by Ralph Sawyer.[2] Meyer does an excellent of explaining why a translation of the “Bing lüe” is an important addition to this existing body of translated military writings.

The importance and particularity of the “Bing lüe” is due in large part to the fact that a great deal is known about the immediate context of its creation. Unlike *Sunzi*, whose precise date and author remain unknown, we know that the *Huainanzi* was produced by a group of scholars gathered by Liu An (179?-122 BCE), the king of Huainan (a vassal kingdom of the Han dynasty [206 BCE-220 CE]), in the second century BCE. We also know that the work was presented to the Han emperor Wu in 139 BCE. According to Meyer, the *Huainanzi* was “designed to be the perfect curriculum for the emperor in training, a distillation of all knowledge the monarch would need in ruling the world” (p. 1). The “Bing lüe,” like other chapters in the work, provided a carefully organized synthesis of earlier thinking and a platform for presenting the particular concerns of its patron, Liu An. These con-

cerns, as Meyer indicates, were primarily a result of Liu An's rather precarious kingship. In the early Han dynasty, vassal kingdoms were giving way to a homogeneous bureaucratic system of prefectures and districts. Liu An was not only writing a useful manual on statecraft, but also presenting a plea for the continuation of his kingdom.

Meyer places “Bing lüe” within four broader contexts that illuminate the chapter's relation to an earlier tradition of military writings and reflection of Liu An's kingly concerns. First, he locates the “Bing lüe” within a tradition of military writings. Second, he examines the place of “Bing lüe” in the *Huainanzi*. Third, he looks at the work in the context of the court of Huainan. Fourth, he attempts to delineate the relationship between the “Bing lüe” and the strands of thinking that would eventually coalesce into the Daoist church.

In his explanation of the first context, Meyer focuses on a comparison between *Sunzi*, a work that was produced during the Warring States period (771-221 BCE), and the later “Bing lüe.” Both works, he notes, marked a radical departure from thinking on military matters during the first centuries of the Zhou dynasty (1045-256 BCE). During the early Zhou, warfare provided a venue for the demonstration of aristocratic values—such as individual valor—and the performance of ritually significant actions, particularly blood sacrifice (p. 9). Warfare during this period, Meyer suggests, contributed to the “dynamic homeostasis” that characterized the first several centuries of the dynasty.

With the weakening of the Zhou emperors from the eighth century BCE, warfare among the vassal states grew in frequency and scale. These states increasingly relied on large conscript armies whose success depended more on discipline than martial valor. Meyer suggests that the implications of this shift were presented with striking clarity in *Sunzi*. Unlike the earlier emphasis on the heroic martial figure and the ritual shedding of blood, *Sunzi* offered a perspective that was “materialist, instrumentalist” and a view of

the military commander as less a hero than a master of the “secular dynamics that ruled the battlefield” (p. 21). This shift from the Zhou to the Warring States has been described by others, such as Mark Edward Lewis, but Meyer extends the story into the Han dynasty.[3] While “Bing lüe” shared *Sunzi*'s essentially materialist conception of warfare, it did not concur with the notion that warfare should aim to profit one combatant state at the expense of the other. Written within an empire that did not recognize any other legitimate sovereign authorities, “Bing lüe” redefined the military as a punitive organ.

The shifting relationships among various types of regimes and the implications of these shifts for the military is also key to Meyer's understanding of the “Bing lüe” within the context of the Huainan court. The prevailing concern of the Huainan court, according to Meyer, was expressed by a line which opened the chapter: “in antiquity” the military had “sustained the perishing and revived the extinct” (pp. 37, 91). The kingdom of Huainan stood at one end of a long process of territorial consolidation. The hundreds of vassal states that coexisted during the Zhou were gradually swallowed up by a handful of powerful competitors. When one of these competitors finally defeated the others to form the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE), it attempted to impose a regular bureaucratic rule over its entire territory. Early Han rulers had allowed the reemergence of vassal kingdoms, such as Huianan, but the trend toward bureaucratic rule was clear. At the same time, the normative values of the Zhou period—associated with Confucius—remained powerful. Among these values was the idea that the ancestral line of an enemy should not be completely extinguished by war, but “sustained” or “revived.” For Liu An, this sustenance and revival of hereditary kingdoms (such as his own) was not only close to his own interests, but, as depicted in “Bing lüe,” essential to the creation of a larger polity that reflected the ultimate “fractal” order of the cosmos (p. 49).

While “Bing lüe” drew on Confucian traditions, Meyer suggests that the chapter also contained strands of thinking that distinguished it from the mainstream of these traditions. He argues that these strands would eventually coalesce into the Daoist church. These aspects of “Bing lüe” were particularly apparent in the depiction of the military commander. Meyer argues that the self-cultivation that “Bing lüe” prescribed for military commanders was distinct from that espoused by Confucians. For the latter, self-cultivation was a matter of learning through textual study. In “Bing lüe” self-cultivation engaged both mind and body through “breathing meditation, yogic exercise and dietary regimen” (p. 61). It was through these practices, “Bing lüe” asserted, that a general could attain a “spiritlike” perception of the world, a quality that was essential to success in warfare (pp. 63-64). While Meyer is successful in showing parallels between “Bing lüe” and the later Daoist church, he does not provide adequate evidence for his assertion that if “the *Huainanzi* had never been written, the emergence of what we now know as the Daoist church would have been far less likely” (p. 73).

Despite Meyer's excellent introduction, much of the translated text will be enigmatic to the non-specialist reader. Footnotes to the text provide information on variant characters and obscure historical references; however, they do not provide explanations of or commentary on difficult passages. Thus, while Meyer's introduction provides a framework for approaching the translated text, this text still demands careful reading and some knowledge of the Chinese tradition.

As I have mentioned, Meyer's translation of the “Bing lüe” adds to the already substantial number of translated military writings from Early China. The growing number of translations from this period, along with a substantial body of secondary scholarship on the relation between state, society, and military in Early China, brings into relief the much less developed scholarship on milit-

ary history in the later imperial period. While military treatises from Early China continued to be studied in later periods, many military commanders recognized--as has Meyer--that these works provided not timeless lessons for all military commanders but responses to historically specific conjunctures. By the late imperial period, works by contemporaries such as Qi Jiguang (1528-88) had largely supplanted these military classics as a source of inspiration and guidance for military commanders in the field. Meyer's work not only contributes to our general understanding of Chinese military thought, but reminds us of the need for and value of translations of military works from later periods.

[2]. Ralph Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

[3]. Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

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