

Military Efficiency

(A little Chinese story)

Lima Barreto

[*Eficiência militar (Historieta chinesa)*, which was first published in the *Careta* newspaper in Rio de Janeiro in 1922, translated by Francis K Johnson.]

Li-hu Ang-Pô, the Regent of Canton, which was part of the Chinese Empire – “the Celestial Empire” or “the Middle Kingdom,” as it was called – had noticed that his army didn’t look at all warlike; nor had it demonstrated, in the most recent manoeuvres, any great military aptitude.

As everyone knows, during the ancient Chinese regime, the powers of the Regent of Canton were akin to those of an absolute monarch. He governed his province as a kingdom inherited from his parents, and his word was law.

The only restriction on his powers was the obligation to pay a hefty annual tax into the treasury of the Son of Heaven. The latter was comfortably ensconced amongst dozens of wives and hundreds of concubines in the mysterious imperial city of Peking but was invisible to the great masses of his people.

Having realised what a miserable state his army was in, Li-Hu Ang-Pô, the Regent of Canton, began to wonder what he should do to raise the morale of his army and make it more like... more like an army. As a result he doubled the soldiers’ rations of rice and dog meat; but this greatly increased the military expenditure of the kingdom; so, to mitigate that problem, it occurred to him – or rather, it was pointed out to him – that all he need do was double the taxes on fishermen, potters, and collectors of human manure (one of the main occupations in the labyrinthine city of Canton).

After a few months, he decided to test the success of the measures he’d introduced to enhance the pride, enthusiasm and martial vigour of his trusty soldiers. This took the form of general manoeuvres that would take place, when the cherry trees came

into blossom in the spring, on the Plane of Chu-Wei-Hu – “Happy Days Plane” in our language. So, in due course, about fifty thousand Chinese soldiers, comprising infantry, cavalry and artillery, set up camp on the Plane of Chu-Wei-Hu under silk tents – silk being as common in China as cotton is here.

The commander-in-chief of that extraordinary army was General Fu-Shi-Tô, who’d begun his military career as a rickshaw-puller in Hong Kong. Indeed, he’d been so competent at that trade that the English governor had taken him for his own exclusive service.

The latter fact gave the General exceptional prestige amongst his countrymen because, although they generally detest foreigners – especially the English – they nevertheless respect the dreaded “red devils,” as they call the Europeans.

Having left the service of the British governor of Hong Kong, Fu-Shi-Tô could have no post in his own country other than general of the army of the Regent of Canton; and once appointed to that post, he immediately showed himself to be an innovator, making improvements both to troops and to ordnance – in recognition of which he was awarded the solid gold medal of the Imperial Order of the Dragon. It was he who replaced the cardboard cannons of the Cantonese army with those of Krupp, earning billions of taels in the process by way of commission, which he shared with the Regent. The French firm Canet wouldn’t have been so generous, which convinced him that Krupp’s cannons were better. So it’s clear that the ex-servant of the governor of Hong Kong knew a thing or two about artillery.

Li-Hua Ang-Pô’s army had been camping for over a month on Happy Days Plane, when the Regent decided to go and inspect the manoeuvres before conducting the final review.

Together with his retinue, which included his brilliant hairdresser Pi-Nu, he set off for the beautiful plane, fully expecting to see manoeuvres befitting a genuine Teutonic army. He was imagining glorious victories and how his profitable position as almost-king of the rich province of Canton would be secured for ever. With a powerful army at hand, no-one would dare to try and oust him.

When he arrived, he observed everything attentively and with curiosity. At his side, Fu-Shi-Tô explained strategies and tactics

with a breadth of knowledge indicative of someone who had studied the Art of War between the shafts of a rickshaw.

But the Regent wasn't happy. He'd noticed hesitancy and lack of élan in the troops, lack of speed and accuracy in the manoeuvres, and lack of obedience to the commander-in-chief and the officers; in short, instead of an army that should have been able to threaten the whole of China – should it wish to oust him from his comfortable and profitable position as Regent of Canton –, instead of all that, a decided lack of military efficiency. He pointed this out to the General, who responded thus:

“Your Most Excellent, Venerable, Powerful, Gracious and Celestial Highness is right; but those defects can easily be put right.”

“How?” asked the Regent.

“Simple! Our current uniforms are too similar to the German. We'll make them more like the French, and that will fix everything.”

Li-Hu Ang-Pô pondered for a few moments, remembering that time he was in Berlin, the banquets the court dignitaries of Potsdam had laid on for him, the welcome he'd been given by the Kaiser and, above all, the taels he'd received via General Fu-Shi-Tô... It would be ingratitude on his part; but... He pondered a bit more until, finally, he barked out an order:

“Change the uniforms! Immediately!”

