

BOOK REVIEWS

## *Inked: Tattooed Soldiers and the Song Empire's Penal-Military Complex*

By Elad Alyagon. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, Harvard University Press, 2023. xii + 257 pp. \$49.95 (cloth)

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Of the multiple ways in which scholars have endeavored to approach the study of Chinese military history, whether in its traditional or modern articulation, the investigation of its social dimensions has been by far the least pursued and therefore least well understood. Moreover, customarily, for no premodern period has the aversion to inquiry into the social underpinnings of the military been more pronounced than the Song dynasty (960–1279), largely because of its reputation as an age of the ascendancy of civilian rule over the earlier ones of martial dominance. With the advent of the Song, the formerly elite calling of the militarist underwent rapid professionalization but also “plebianization,” and any even cursory examination of the conventional sources available to us on Song military affairs suggests that—with conscription rather than volunteerism now functioning as its main recruitment tool—such a social history, even if achievable, could be hardly more than a kind of unrelenting exposé of the oftentimes appalling conditions that prevailed for the destitute masses and members of the underclass pressed into its service.

To be sure, this military dystopia is what we find portrayed foremost by Elad Alyagon in his *Inked: Tattooed Soldiers and the Song Empire's Penal-Military Complex*. However, also afforded to us is a rare portal for beholding the military as perhaps the most historically maligned—and assuredly so in the subsequent literature of the imperial era—of Song dynastic institutions. Impressively, Alyagon has achieved this objective in a most novel way, by focusing on the identifying as well as stigmatizing marking that linked so many subjects together as comrades-in-arms—namely, the tattoo, which emerged during this time as the mark of the soldier. Alyagon's entire book centers on the social ramifications that, for better or worse, resulted from the real or fictive cohesion denoted by this military body emblem.

Apart from its introduction and conclusion, *Inked* consists of eight logically sequenced chapters. In Chapter 1, observing the customary bifurcation of the Song dynasty into its Northern (960–1127) and Southern (1127–1279) components, Elad Alyagon, in his own words, “describes the breaking of the political and social power of soldiers through the transformation of the military into a tiered organization with a hierarchy of status, duties, and pay during the Northern Song” (24). This initial

chapter discusses in stark detail the transformation of the military of the Tang dynasty (618–907), which had been fundamentally aristocratic, over the course of the Five Dynasties era (907–960), into an institutionalized preserve for men of commoner background or lower who were disinclined to serve but could not escape on account of simply being able-bodied. We learn that tattooing—always, at that time, of the face—was therefore at first a kind of branding, meant to identify deserters, who upon capture were promptly executed. With the establishment of the Northern Song, by which time the military had effectively been criminalized by the admixture of petty thieves and other malefactors into it, a Rotation System was imposed, whereby troops were periodically transferred, often at a great distance through forced marches, to serve under different commanders, in order to preclude any individual general’s amassing of power. Largely owing to its inefficiencies, the Rotation System was discontinued by the late eleventh century but, at the prefectural military level, a system of labor service, akin to the customary civil system of *corvée*, remained operative, even if it was not fully realized. However, what is most important is that a new social category of soldier, occupying a position between the plebian respectable (*liang* 良) and unrespectable (*jian* 賤), was installed, lasting until the very end of the Song period.

Chapter 2 focuses on the emergence of tattooing in the mid-ninth century CE as a form of body ornamentation that became principally identified with the military. In contrast to how tattoos had been viewed in the fairly recent past, their bearers now experienced them as elective symbols of “pride, masculinity, and defiance” (41). This period, however, as well as its accompanying sentiments, was brief, as the era of coercive military tattoos ensued with the founding of the Song in the mid-tenth century. These military tattoos named the bearer’s battalion and became—in effect—standardized as a crudely collectivist premodern equivalent of identifying “dog tags.” Also discussed in this chapter is the Song reintroduction of penal tattoos on the face, especially for such infractions as desertion (*taozou* 逃走); the nearly always imperfect and permanently scarring removal of tattoos; and the military tattooing of individuals outside the regular armies.

Chapter 3 deals in depth with the sources and nature of the human capital with which the Song military was stocked, what Alyagon aptly calls “the raw material fed into the military machine” (60). Even the immature male members of military families, residing along with wives and siblings in military camps, provided the Song armies with the most easily accessible source of military manpower. Song armies also included local militias and ethnically non-Han units. However, what Alyagon most importantly brings to light is the sundry cast of others who could be readily conscripted and mobilized. This cohort included convicts and various otherwise undesirable types, like refugees, but also those who had been pressed into service against their will. Regardless of their origin, Alyagon describes how their tattoos served as a kind of common denominator interlinking and collectivizing all these groups.

Chapter 4 of *Inked* is evocatively captured and encapsulated by the image of a wooden staff or stick, which became used as an implement of bodily measurement, thus giving rise to the so-called “Wooden Standard.” Despite our impulse to assume that it was used punitively, the original purpose of this stick was that of measuring men’s bodies and specifically their height because, under the Song, “soldiers’ bodies determined their assignment, their terms of service, and their career trajectory, from recruitment and until discharge, from youth to old age, from the prison citadels through the regular armies and to the ranks of beggars in the big cities” (86). The measuring of

height, however, was merely the threshold, because candidates for recruitment thereafter had to pass additional tests, such as horsemanship and vision, to be conscripted and deployed. Upon passage of this battery of tests, the conscript received the generic facial tattoo of “battalion” (*zhihui* 指揮) and was then promptly escorted to his assigned unit where the name and number of the battalion would be added for complete identification.

Chapter 5 of *Inked* centers on the makeup of the military family within the penal-military complex of the Song dynasty. This subject assuredly warrants distinct consideration because, perhaps more than anything else, the conscription of a conscript’s family members along with him was a signature feature of the system. While never legally enforced nor universal, these instances of mass familial induction, including not only brothers and sons but also wives and daughters, became the normative expectation. Such was especially true of men who entered military service as a penalty for the commission of a crime. Over time, the practice developed to the point that unmarried women found guilty of crimes would be married by the state to soldiers as a punishment.

Most salient among the traits typical of the Song military family, however, was a sub-subsistence, truly impoverished standard of living. Military life for the highly ranked offered some opportunities for the accumulation of wealth, whether in a legitimate capacity or through illegal activities such as bribery and extortion. But as Alyagon observes, “[m]ost soldiers did not rise through the ranks, and military families tended to have male members serve as common soldiers across several generations” (117), sharing a lifelong destitution. What seems to have mattered most about military families to the Song state was the ability to wield their presence like a blunt instrument to spur their men to fight more desperately or to punish either soldiers in the field or the families themselves for a transgression committed by any one member.

In Chapter 6, following logically upon his consideration of the military family, Alyagon concentrates on the factors of individualized and collective resistance against the Song penal-military complex. The two key forms were desertion, which was commonplace, and mutiny, which was not. Much that Alyagon offers here reinforces the preceding chapter, such that they are even well considered in tandem. That is largely because the sufferings of military family often bore heavily on and even catalyzed resistance. What the sixth chapter adds is the key reality of the exploitation of common soldiers by their superiors. As Alyagon writes, “Soldiers’ superiors used them to generate income through a variety of ways: skimming their salaries, tampering with the measurements for distribution of grain, renting out soldiers’ labor outside of camp, and forcing soldiers into taking loans or selling parts of their income” (145). The drive to escape such exploitive conditions, even if it was no more liberating than a transfer in location, understandably sparked a variety of tactics of resistance, which—in addition to desertion and mutiny—also included simple flight, deceptive misrepresentation of one’s identity, and debilitating self-mutilation.

Chapter 7 is the only one in which Alyagon has elected to diverge from his reconstruction of the demeaning connotations of tattooing, as the procedure was undergone and endured by the common Song-era soldier, and instead undertake a reconsideration of the tattoo as an honorable badge of loyalist pride. In the process, he also refocuses our perspective as readers, turning us away from the broad and bleak landscape of military anonymity thus far considered and redirecting us to the reconstituted theaters of

war in which the heroes Di Qing 狄青 (1008–1057) and Yue Fei 岳飛 (1103–1142) operated. The two men—despite their humble backgrounds—came to be regarded as the two most celebrated tattooed generals in China’s imperial history. Thus, the chapter itself both conforms with all the deliberation that has preceded it and also curiously departs from it. Alyagon details at length how, near the middle of the tenth century, at what still was the beginning of the Northern Song, Di Qing’s tattoos, which were prominently facial, precipitated his loyalty being questioned. By stark contrast, Yue Fei’s tattoos, which were most prominent on his back and putatively applied to his skin as a youth by his own mother, became symbols of heraldry and spirited loyalty to the state. Alyagon sees the lived experiences of Di Qing and Yue Fei as having reflected a transforming trend in the messaging of tattoos from Northern to Southern Song times. Against the escalating backdrop of warfare, the tattoos adorning the Song military man increasingly signaled loyalism; this messaging in turn led to a changed perception in how the bearers of those tattoos were regarded, one that was much more favorable than in the past.

Alyagon opens Chapter 8 by continuing to describe a florescence in tattooing along loyalist as well as customary lines during the Southern Song—with penal tattoos being continued and becoming ever more intricate. However, unsurprisingly, all was to change with the early thirteenth-century rise of the Mongols, who valued the clear-skinned over the tattooed largely because they themselves lacked the convention, forbidding the tattooing of their own bodies. “When the Mongols advanced into Song territory, they captured soldiers and commoners and grouped them according to their skin,” writes Alyagon (205), with a descending ranking of the clear-skinned, those with tattooed extremities, and those with tattooed faces. For some decades thereafter, military tattooing continued to proliferate. Nevertheless, with the dismantling of the Song penal-military complex by Mongol invaders, mass tattooing as state-sanctioned enterprise came to an end, and the formerly near-ubiquitous appearance and importance of the tattoo waned precipitously.

Whereas it is doubtless also true for China’s imperial history in general, secondary works specifically on the Song have always tended overwhelmingly to favor the telling of the stories of the elites. Only rarely do the stories of Song commoners, not to mention those of persons of underclass status, become historicized, and those few accounts typically occur only as glosses on the lives of emperors or scholar-officials of eminence or both. Consequently, by concentrating for a change expressly on the lives of the soldiers comprising the Song military, even as anonymous as they were, Elad Alyagon has managed a rare achievement. Indeed, it is one that is perhaps best captured by his own words: “A strange thing happens when one focuses the historical lens directly on these soldiers. The historical record, seemingly quiet about the lives of soldiers, blossoms in quantity and clarity. Through the right lens, individual faces of soldiers stare back” (21). Thus, with *Inked*, Elad Alyagon has succeeded in illuminating the living conditions of yet another group *in* history whose story has too often been lost *to* history. Readers will find this rebalancing, fleetingly achieved through their own encounter with *Inked*, to be as refreshing as it is enlightening.