

The Military Force of Toungoo Dynasty in the 16th Century During the Burmese-Siamese War

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Toungoo Dynasty was a powerful feudal regime in the history of Burma. Upon the rise of Toungoo Dynasty, it sought to extend territory by arms, starting to have wars with the Empire Ming (China), Ayutthaya Dynasty (Siam/Thailand) and Lan Xang (Laos). The war between Burma and Siam lasted for more than two centuries, from 1548 to 1810. However, from strategy view, the whole Burmese-Siamese War was the game between China (Ming and Qing Dynasties) and Burma (Toungoo and Konbaung Dynasties). In the whole process, most of the fierce battles took place in the 16th century, the inception phase of the war. So, the 16th century was a very important period for us if we want to have a research on the military force of Toungoo Dynasty.

Keywords: Burma, Toungoo Dynasty, Tabinshwehti, Bayinnaung, Siam, Ayutthaya Dynasty

I Introduction

Toungoo Dynasty was an important feudal regime in the history of Burma which was built by military means. This system deeply influenced the development of Burma. Until modern times, in Burma, military governments still appear now and then.

In the 16th century, Burma had the best military potentials in Southeast Asia because of its special military system, letting it have the ability to mobilize a large army when the wars came. Benefiting from the Empire Ming's conservative policy and the relatively weak military power of other Southeast Asian countries, Toungoo Dynasty rapidly started its expansion. The Burmese-Siamese war was the most important event during this era. That's why I select the Toungoo Dynasty's army of this period as my research object.

However, the research on the military force of Toungoo Dynasty in the 16th century has some difficulties. We mainly need to face two problems. Firstly, the related records are too few. As we all know, the most famous Burmese history book is *Glass Palace Chronicle* (1833). However, this history book has too many exaggerated descriptions such as the army consisted of 72,000,000 soldiers (Li, Yao, Cai, & Wang, 2010). In order to better keeping the truth, we must find some historical facts from the records of China and Siam. What's worse, many Burmese antiques especially some ancient weapons were destroyed during its days as a British colony. Therefore, the best references are some statues and paintings.

II The Brief Introduction of the Burmese-Siamese War

Toungoo Dynasty was built by Tabinshwehti (1516-1550) in 1531. In 1550, Tabinshwehti was assassinated when hunting. Bayinnaung (1516-1581)¹, his brother-in-law succeeded to the throne. After a series of annex wars, Bayinnaung built a kingdom including most of the Burma area (except the Arakan area). The rise of Toungoo Dynasty let the troubled time brought by the fall of Bagan Dynasty (849-1287) come to an end. The Burmese-Siamese war just happened during the rising of Burma.

There are two statements about why the Burmese-Siamese War began. Some people thought that Tabinshwehti wanted to revenge against Ayutthaya Dynasty because when he attacked Arakan Dynasty (1433-1824)², the army of Ayutthaya Dynasty raided him from behind. So Tabinshwehti's army started to attack Ayutthaya Dynasty in 1548 (Song & Zhang, 2020). Other people thought that Ayutthaya Dynasty's civil strife because of the succession let Tabinshwehti see the chance to annex Siam (Duan, 2014).

The war made these two countries be feuding. Tabinshwehti, Bayinnaung and Nandabayin (1535-1599, the son of Bayinnaung), three kings of Toungoo Dynasty all had wars with Siam. Bayinnaung's army occupied Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya (the capital of Ayutthaya Dynasty) in 1569, letting Siam become the vassal of Burma for fifteen years. Then, the war between Burma and the Empire Ming let a young general saw the opportunity to restore his country. Then he worked on it for his whole life. This general was King Naresuan (1555-1605)³, a famous politician and strategist in the history of Thailand. In 1767, Ayutthaya was occupied by the army of Burma again. Then, the army of Siam defeated the Burmese army under the leading of a Chinese immigrant named Zheng Xin (1734-1782)⁴ (Duan, 2014). After ejecting the army of Burma from Siam, Zheng built a new regime called Thonburi Kingdom (1769-1782).

The whole Thai-Burmese War could be divided into three parts. The first part was the attack of Burma (1548-1592). The second one was the counteroffensive of Siam (1593-1664). The last one was the final failure of Burma (1759-1810).

In the 16th century, Burma became powerful and started to contend for the hegemony of Indochina. However, Ayutthaya Dynasty and Lan Xang, the other two big regimes of Indochina, were pro-Ming regimes. So, the wars between Burma and other countries of that area were essentially Burma challenging the regional hegemony of the Empire Ming.

III The Military System of Toungoo Dynasty

The military system of Toungoo Dynasty was similar to the Wei-so system of the Empire Ming. The young men worked as farmers in peacetime. When wars started, they would join in the army.

In other countries which had such kind of military system, the young men just knew that they might join in the army one day. They didn't know what kind of soldier they would be after joining in the army. However, the

¹ The brother-in-law of Tabinshwehti, one of the three most greatest kings in the history of Burma. After Tabinshwehti's death, Toungoo Dynasty started to broke up. It was him that let the Burma unify again.

² Located in the southwest of Burma, owning a strong navy. Arakanese defeated the army of Tabinshwehti in the battle of Mrauk U(1546).

³ One of the five most greatest kings in the history of Thailand, ejecting the army of Burma from Siam. During his reign, he built good diplomatic relations with the Empire Ming. He planned to attack Japan during the war between the Empire Ming and Japan.

⁴ One of the five most greatest kings in the history of Thailand. His ancestral home was Chenghai, Guangdong Province, China.

system of Toungoo Dynasty had its characteristic feature. As we all know, the farmers live in different villages. In ancient Burma, the governors would ask the same kind of soldiers and their families to live in the same village. Then, many cavalry villages, infantry villages and mahout villages appeared. This military system was hereditary. Take the cavalry villages as an example. A young man who lived in a cavalry village worked as a farmer and had the training of cavalry in peacetime. He would serve as a cavalry when the war came. His later generations would have the same destiny as him.

Actually, this type of military system originated from a kind of serf system in Bagan Dynasty (He, 1991, p. 95). The government let the serfs who had the same job live together and formed blacksmiths' villages, carpenters' villages and potters' villages (He, 1991, p. 95). Then Ava Dynasty (1364-1555, governed the north area of Burma) developed the serf system into a kind of military system. Tabinshwehti adopted this military system after annexed the territory of Ava Dynasty.

IV The Equipment of Soldiers

The Weapons

Unlike ancient China or Europe, the cold weapons of Burma were not so famous. What's worse, because of some reasons such as wars, the relevant historical materials are too little which makes the research of Burmese cold weapons become more difficult.

The Burmese sword (local people call it Dha, as shown in Figure 1) is the most famous kind of Burmese cold weapon. Unfortunately, the Burmese swords of Toungoo Dynasty were lost in the mists of time. Most of the ancient Burman swords were forged in Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885). After Burma becoming the colony of the British Empire, most of the Burmese swords were destroyed by the Brits.

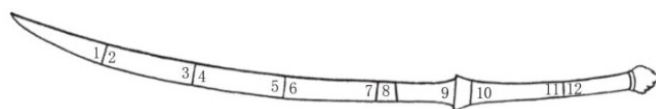


Figure 1. Dha (Source: adapted from Zhou, 2018).

The Burmese soldiers were good at close combat and many of them were skillful swordsmen. The swords (Dha) they used could be bent like a belt. The British soldiers thought this kind of swords was forged by the steel of low quality. But some Chinese warriors thought that this characteristic made Dha become portable.

The skill of Dha was similar to the swords of Siam. Usually, the soldiers would hold a Dha and a shield when on the battle field. Some skillful warriors gave up the shields and used two swords at the same time. When fighting, they would keep moving to find a suitable angle to attack their enemies. Besides, Dha could also be used as the secondary weapon of cavalry.

Except the swords, the soldiers of Toungoo Dynasty also liked to use spears (2-2.5m in length) (Zhou, 2018). Under the influence of Portugal and the Empire Ming, some soldiers of Toungoo Dynasty were equipped with firearms. The same thing also happened in Siam. Chinese people first introduced arquebus (in Chinese it was called Niaocho) to the army of Siam (Zhou, 2018). Then, some firearms from Europe were brought to Siam by Portuguese. According to some historical materials, after using arquebus for some time, Burmese people learned the method to produce it. The arquebus was called JinJal by Burmese people (Zhou, 2018).

By the way, compared with archery, spear-throwing was the skill that Burmese soldiers would prefer.

The Helmet and Armor

The helmet of Toungoo Dynasty's soldiers was called rain hat helmet (as shown in Figure 2). This kind of helmet originated in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) of China. Then, it became popular in Yuan and Ming Dynasties (as shown in Figure 3) and was introduced to Southeast Asia and Korea. From the statues of general Bandula (1782-1825)⁵ and King Zheng Xin (1734-1782), we could find that the Burmese and the Siamese kept using this type of helmet until the modern age. In the 16th century, the Southeast Asian army didn't have too many firearms which means their main long-range weapons were bows. In the battlefield, the soldiers' faces might be hurt by the arrows from the above. The brim of rain hat helmet could offer a protection to soldiers' faces.

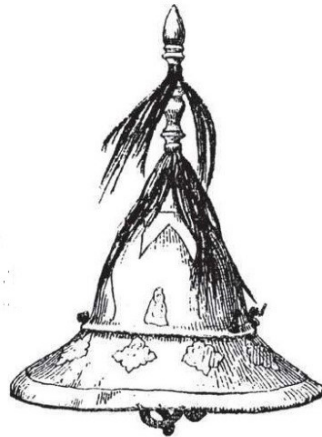


Figure 2. The rain hat helmet of Burma (Source: adapted from Zhou, 2018).



Figure 3. A warrior of the Ming Dynasty, wearing a rain hat helmet (Source: adapted from Chen, 2017).

⁵ A famous strategist in the history of Burma, died in the first Anglo-Burmese War.

When researching the military history of ancient Burma, the armor was a real headache. Simply because the antiques were too few. The best reference was a statue of Bayinnaung (as shown in Figure 4). The reason why Burmese soldiers seldom wearing armor was easy to guess. Simply because the weather of Indochina was too hot. If wearing heavy armor for a long time, the soldiers might dehydrate. So, in ancient Burma, only officers, cavalries and elite infantrymen would be equipped with armor.



Figure 4. The statue of Bayinnaung (Source: adapted from www.baik.baidu.com).

As shown in the figure above, in the 16th century, the typical armor of Burma was scale armor with special shoulder armor (looked like a canoe). This kind of scale armor always appeared in the paintings of that period. So, there was a consensus that this Burma style scale armor was the mainstream in the army of Toungoo Dynasty.

In the 16th century, Portuguese went to Indochina and started to do business with local people. Therefore, some kinds of western armor such as plate armor were introduced to Southeast Asia and were equipped by local army. However, because of the high price and the climate of Indochina, the quantity of soldiers who wore plate armor shouldn't be large.

Besides, shields were common seen in the army of Toungoo Dynasty. A significant number of infantrymen were equipped with swords and shields. The shields of that period could be divided into two parts: bucklers and thureos.

V The Kinds of Arms of Toungoo Dynasty's Army

Cavalry

Unlike China, Mongolia or Europe, the cavalry of Burma was not so famous. Its visibility was even not higher than the cavalry of ancient Japan (as shown in Figure 5). However, the cavalry of Burma actually existed. According to the history records of Burma, the young Tabinshwehti commanded 500 cavalries sneaked into enemies' territory and finished the necessary rituals before enthroning.

Most of the cavalries of Toungoo Dynasty were the surrendered soldiers of Ava Dynasty (1364-1555). In the 16th century, some chieftains from Yunnan area, China, came to the territory of Ava Dynasty to dodge the army of the Empire Ming. Many cavalries came to Burma following their leaders. With the help of the powerful

mounted troops, these chieftains from Yunnan quickly became the governors of Ava Dynasty. After the fall of Ava Dynasty (1555), the commanders of mounted troops turned to Bayinnaung. The Toungoo Dynasty originated in the central region of Burma, lacking of cavalries. The mounted troops joined in the Toungoo army let the armed force of Bayinnaung become more powerful.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, because of the rapid development of firearms, the destiny of cavalry especially heavy cavalry came to crossroads. Facing artillery, hand cannon and arquebus, the cavalry commanders of different countries made different choices. Some countries without too many firearms kept using traditional heavy cavalry (wearing heavy armor and using lance). The typical example was the cavalry of Japan (as shown in Figure 5).



Figure 5. Sanada Yukimura, the commander of Red Armor Cavalry (the most famous heavy cavalry in Japan)

(Source: adapted from Z. J, Studio, 2019)

Some other countries made some changes to let their heavy cavalries be suitable for the new battlefield. The lance became shorter or was given up. So, cavalries always used saber or sword as melee weapon. At the same time, they would also be equipped with ranged weapons such as bows, hand cannons, arquebuses and reed wheel guns. The typical examples were the Ritters of Germany (as shown in Figure 6) and the heavy cavalries of the Empire Ming (as shown in Figure 9). By the way, many types of light cavalry such as Hussars started to become popular during this era.



Figure 6. A Ritter (Source: adapted from Longyuzhe, 2017).



Figure 7. A heavy cavalry of the Empire Ming (Source: adapted from Longyuzhe, 2017).

Interestingly, the development of Burmese cavalry disobeyed this rule. Therefore, the cavalries of Toungoo Dynasty were worth researching. Since the topography of Burma (hills and jungles) was not suitable for heavy cavalry, the cavalries of Toungoo Dynasty were of low quantity and always acted as skirmishers in the battlefield, but they didn't use ranged weapons. Though they were good at close combat, they were not equipped with heavy armor. They also had no lance. Their combat style was a little similar to the hussars (as shown in Figure 8) in Europe since they usually broke through enemy lines depending on their motility. However, the hussars gave up their armor to get a higher speed (another statement was the armor was too expensive for them) but the cavalries of Burma didn't. In a word, the cavalry of Toungoo Dynasty was a unique example in the development of cavalry.



Figure 8. A hussar (Source: adapted from Longyuzhe, 2017).

According to the paintings and the sculptures of that era, some of the cavalries of Toungoo Dynasty wore scale armor and rain hat helmet, using Dha and short spear as their weapons (as shown in Figure 9). Many of them might just wear leather armor. Because of the trades between Burma and Portugal, some officers might get plate armor. Their horses were called Yunnan horses, a kind of pony from Yunnan area, China.



Figure 9. A Burmese cavalry (Source: adapted from www.baidu.com).

The Infantry

In the 16th century, as the most powerful country in Indochina, the Toungoo Dynasty kept a large quantity of infantrymen. Most of these infantrymen were from the infantry villages we mentioned before. A small percentage of them might come from serfs. In Toungoo Dynasty, there were many types of infantry such as pikemen, hypaspists and arquebusiers. After researching some typical battles of Toungoo Dynasty, we could easily found that infantry was the main force of Toungoo Dynasty's army. For example, in 1548, Tabinshwehti started to attack Siam. The army directly led by him consisted of 40,000 soldiers, including 80 war elephants and 800 horses (Wang, 1986, p. 6). From the quantity of war elephants and horses we could calculate the number of cavalry (no more than 800) and mahout (about 160 to 240). We could then draw a conclusion that most of the soldiers in this army were infantrymen.

Mahouts and Their War Elephants

In the history of Southeast Asia, elephants always showed up on the battlefields. They not only acted as powerful weapons but also had the task of transport. The soldiers who ride elephants are called mahouts. In the 16th century, the generals of Burma, Lan Xang and Siam usually rode elephants when they were on the battlefield. According to some Thai history books, in 1592, King Naresuan killed the crown prince of Burma (Duan, 2014). They had a fierce battle on the back of their elephants (Duan, 2014).

In Southeast Asia, there was a famous kind of group, consisting of an elephant, three mahouts and four infantrymen (as shown in Figure 10). It was a classic tactic.

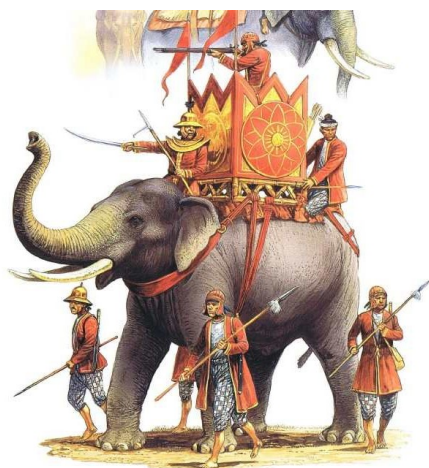


Figure 10. The famous group of Southeast Asia (Source: adapted from Konstantin & Dennis, 2008)

Mercenary

In the 16th century, some Chinese, Japanese and Portuguese worked as mercenary in Southeast Asia. The Portuguese mercenaries were the most famous ones. For the army of Burma, these Portuguese who were equipped with arquebuses and sakers were very important supporting units since the local army of Burma was short of firearms. In 1548, 400 Portuguese mercenaries joined in the army of Burma and fought in the battle of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya, under the command of Tabinshwehti (Wang, 1986, p. 6). At the same time, there were 120 Portuguese mercenaries fought for Maha Chakraphat⁶, the King of Siam (Duan, 2014).

VI The Tactics of Toungoo Dynasty

Man Sea Tactic

Both Tabinshwehti and Bayinnaung were good at using this tactic. But the quantity of Bayinnaung's army was more surprising. For example, in 1563, he commanded 600,000 soldiers invading the territory of Siam (Wang, 1986, p. 6). Five years later, 540,000 Burmese soldiers attacked Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya and occupied it (Wang, 1986, p. 6).

The Classic Campaign

Table 1

Shows the Situation of Both Sides in the Battle of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya.

Regime	Toungoo Dynasty	Ayutthaya Dynasty
Commanders	Tabinshwehti	Maha Chakraphat, Suriyothai(the wife of Chakraphat, the queen of Ayutthaya Dynasty)
The Quantity of soldiers	300,000[3] or 120,000	60,000
Result	Victory	Defeated

The battle of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya (1547-1549) was the beginning of Burmese-Siamese War. Most of the historians thought that Tabinshwehti mobilized a huge army consisting of 120,000 soldiers including infantrymen, cavalries, mahouts, mercenaries and navy. One third of the army was directly led by him.

⁶ The grandfather of King Naresuan.

This huge army met the 20,000 soldiers led by Chakraphat and Suriyothai (other 40,000 soldiers were left in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya). In this battle, both Tabinshwehti and Chakraphat chose the traditional Southeast Asian military array: the infantrymen and mercenaries were in the middle; elite infantrymen, mahouts and cavalries were the flanks; the king and his guards were behind the array of infantrymen and mercenaries. The war situation was completely one-side. The Burmese army rapidly got initiative and suppressed the Siamese army. Queen Suriyothai was killed by a Burmese general on the way to retreating in order to cover Chakraphat. Then, the army of Tabinshwehti surrounded Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya but could not break the defence since Portuguese sakers were not enough to break the wall of Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya. At the same time, some small warships which were equipped with firearms started to cooperate with the garrison in the city. The siege lasted for four months. Finally, because of the lack of supply, Tabinshwehti had to retreat.

VII The Performance of Toungoo Dynasty's Army

When facing the army of the Empire Ming, Toungoo Dynasty's army could not resist. During the whole war, the Ming army's soldiers were no more than 50,000. After two famous Chinese generals named Liu Ting (1558-1619) and Deng Zilong (1528-1598) coming to the front, the war situation began to be one-side. According to *The History of the Ming Dynasty* (1739), a junior officer named Gao Guochun commanded 500 soldiers, defeating a Burmese army consisting of tens of thousands of soldiers and destroying six strongholds (Zhang, 2013). After the battle, Gao received a large reward.

When facing the army of Siam and Lan Xang, the Toungoo Dynasty got more victories than losses. However, the disadvantages of Burmese army were really clear: the tactic was unitary and relied on man sea tactic; lacking of firearms, when facing the strong towns such as Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya and Mrauk U, the only way it could take was siege. Besides, compared with the countries in Eurasia, the cavalry of Burma was out of date.

VIII Conclusion

In the 16th century, the military force of Toungoo Dynasty was the most powerful one in Indochina. Because of the special geographical situation, the new weapons of China and the Western countries could be easily introduced to Burma. However, the governors of Toungoo Dynasty never found a correct strategy. Fighting on many fronts at the same time let Burma have no chance to have a long term occupation on its new territory. Therefore, though having the most powerful army in Indochina, in the 16th century, Toungoo Dynasty finally failed upon the path of expansion.

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