Conclusion

Ritual comprised an integral part of Song Chinese warfare. It is erroneous to portray middle-imperial Chinese warfare as conducted along the same strategic and tactical lines as Western warfare. The tendency to do so explains in part the dearth of scholarship on these ritual techniques, despite their prominence in the manuals. Magic and the occult stand outside of our own taxonomies and, therefore, our own conceptualization of reality and the realm of the possible. Both transgress our own categories and therefore make these techniques difficult to accept. Nevertheless, such ritual formed an essential component of Chinese warfare, necessary because the forms of battle and object of victory were not conceptualized in the Western ways. To ignore their place in the Song approach to military action denies the Song not only their conception of warfare, but also their vision of the universe and the nature of Chinese culture at that historical moment. Consideration of Song warfare devoid of ritual can only be incomplete at best.

For the Song, warfare was many things, the object of victory manifold. Battle was not merely human or territorial, but cultural, moral and divine. Therefore, warfare spoke to many realms—death, life, court, field, time, space, and various levels of “universe”—and engaged those realms accordingly. Ritual was an important element of battle, tapping into universal forces to produce physical power, instilling warfare with a moral dimension, and performing a superior culture to the Song’s non-Han enemies.

Occult rituals and “magic” probed, interrogated and defined boundaries of phenomenal and symbolic realms that were expressed in practice, defining the borders
of the Song universe. This is important because the set of relations involved in such practices, and the role transgression played in those relations, help us understand more clearly the production of power and culture, especially its approaches to warfare, during the Song dynasty. As we saw in the case of battle array schema and cosmography rituals, the re-creation of such rituals and the place of increasing importance that they held throughout the dynasty further distinguish the Song as a watershed in China’s imperial history. This is true in the areas of authority, especially as it figures into governance, including the increasing alienation (on paper at least) between wen and wu; and in Song thought, including new universal and cosmological constructions.

One of the most important of these new cosmological constructions that appear in the manuals and in Song military ritual practices is that of xiang; image, symbolization, representation, and simulacrum. Its emphasis on the visual lent itself well to the Song military project, and scribes a conceptual ground shared by Song thinkers and the Song military project. Xiang and its fellow in the four orders of reality, shu—number, regularity, emblem—were incorporated in all rituals investigated here: in exorcism rituals, deities incorporated into local and national pantheons, battle array schema, and cosmograph rituals.

The military manuals exhibit a persistent tension between textual prescriptions and oral transmission. The re-categorization of Song court ritual revolved around the role of yin as the domain of the production of power. Some military rituals that were practiced at court in previous dynasties were moved out of the capital and into the field. This transfer is textually represented in the Official History of the Song and the manuals, especially the Comprehensive Essentials, which represents the culmination of the Song court’s collection (and expunging) of transmitted rituals practiced outside the control of the center. At court, debates over the ritual code and the selection of the
“Five Rituals” show a tendency toward shaping the courtier, who came from increasingly diverse social backgrounds. Similarly, establishing the *Military Canon* was an effort to shape a new kind of military commander.

Rituals practiced at court emphasized order and stability. As recorded in the manuals and local records, rituals involving bloody sacrifice and other *yin*-invoking performance were relegated to the military realm outside of the capital. Unlike ritual meant to invoke stability and order, occult rituals produce power by connecting complementary forces—theirs of *yin* and *yang*, heaven-earth-human, and *wen* and *wu* (one reason why *wu* deities still tend to characterize the Chinese popular pantheon). These stand in contrast to non-occult polarizing rituals, typified by court ritual, which sought to insert clear-cut boundaries between those forces. Chinese death rituals, which insure that the *yin* world will remain separate from the *yang*, are the most familiar example of this principle.

*Yin* and *yang* forces, complementary rather than polarized opposites, are predisposed to overlap; hence, their role in Chinese cosmogony. Occult ritual, and ritual generally, recognize precisely that these forces are not separate. Occult ritual and “magic” function exactly to invert other sorts of ritual—they produce power by invoking the inherent connection between *yin* and *yang*. While acknowledging the danger in producing it, the Song devised many ways to control that power; ways to manipulate *xiang* and *shu*—both creating increasingly finer categories within ritual—prime among them.

*Xiang*, with its new emphasis on the visual, was ideal for the Song military system. The visual quality of *xiang* reinforced the oral, performative nature of military field rituals. In those rituals, *xiang* functioned as taxonomy or organizing principles, important because this is how humans organize knowledge. This was important to the military system because as images, the visual can communicate across social and
geographical limitations of the military collectivity. Most obviously, *xiang* and *shu* played a role in the number and organization of troops. More important, military rituals illustrate an expanded interpretive domain of *xiang*. This more fluid interpretation, combined with the detachment of *xiang* from the text of the *Book of Change*, meant the formation of a more extensive non-literate canon. In that text, *xiang* as images of hexagrams were generated from a “vision of an obstacle to being” simultaneously providing the means to transcend that obstacle. In the field, both battle array schema and cosmography rituals produced the power to overcome immediate military obstacles with purely visual and performative techniques.

Paralleling the bureaucratization of governance, comprehensive military manuals generated by the court represent the first official attempts to capture in writing an oral ritual tradition whose content was effective only when performed. In its founding myth, the Hidden Period is based on talismans and drawings, not writing. The success of the Hidden Period depended on first ‘getting language’. In the cosmograph rituals, writing as such is mentioned only as a combination of indeterminate and empty markers, the “eight characters” that signify only when invested with time and blood. Similarly, battle array schema founding myths revolved first around the Yellow Emperor, a constellation later personified as the founder of civilization. Later, that myth was supplanted by Zhuge Liang’s reification of divine power captured and re-produced through rock layouts that mimicked landscape and the diagrams of the *Book of Change*. Song field rituals, such as that instating the general and various exorcism rituals, involved text only to burn or bury. In the act of documenting rituals in the manuals, then, there is a tension between the (legitimate and orthodox) authority of writing and the (dangerous and unorthodox) power and efficacy of oral performance. In other words, these rituals in written form signaled the court’s attempts to appropriate a tradition that was previously oral and therefore
“secret”. Once written, of course, the court believed it could control and standardize these rituals.

Who should have access to military knowledge and limiting the transmission of texts were themes taken up during the Song. Compiling the Military Canon and the Comprehensive Essentials were part of a program to limit access to such knowledge through careful selection and training of military officials by establishing military academies at both the provincial and national levels. Yet, because of the visual nature of the rituals, and the relegation of dangerous and power-producing rituals to the field, the court had less control over how the canon of rituals were practiced and interpreted. Discourse that presented ideas visually contributed to effecting the formation of military collectivities that had the potential to exclude the imperial court and construct their own network of exchange and corresponding obligation. The court saw military ritual practitioners, appointed or not, as the focus of those collectivities. Their policies toward such practitioners were conflicted; the court sought them out, sometimes eagerly, simultaneously proscribing their practices and castigating them for trickery.

In their efforts to control such rituals, one might ask, did the court force “secret” methods into the larger social milieu? To what extent did occult rituals exist at other, rather less well-documented levels of Song society? The perpetuity of many of these rituals into the present day, and their endurance as a source of fascination in fiction, film and romance suggest that these proscribed and closely-held techniques did find their way into popular practice. Though the precise dynamic of how that came to be remains obscure, I am hopeful that this essay may contribute somehow to future efforts in this regard.