

Toward Contextualizing The Concept of a *Shashoujian* (Assassin's Mace)

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Recently the policy and punditry world in Washington has been introduced to the concept of the 'assassin's mace' or *shashoujian*. Reference to the concept appears in the recently released US-China Security Review Commission report. The Commission refers to these kinds of weapons as those "which can deliver decisive blows in carefully calculated surprise moves and change the balance of power".¹ The introduction of this concept into the policy discourse is mainly a result of Dr. Michael Pillsbury's important research on the impact of ancient military concepts on contemporary strategic thinking inside the Peoples Liberation Army. However, judging from some of the more popular commentary in policy and punditry circles there has been a tendency to 'orientalize' the concept, to de-contextualize it and to view it as some inscrutable, likely malevolent, strategic concept that holds the key to understanding how the PLA thinks about asymmetric strategies against US power. The intent of this note is to provide a bit more context to the concept.

The concept of *shashoujian* appears to be a relatively recent addition to the PLA's discourse on strategy. It is associated with writing on information warfare and on military organization mostly. Using a full text keyword search of the China Academic Journals database -- an online index for articles from over 6000 journals -- a search for the term shows that it doesn't show up much in Chinese military journals until after 1999 (see Figures 1 and 2). It actually shows up more frequently (in absolute terms) and earlier in articles on economics. This suggests the term is not some deeply embedded, long-time standard way in which the PLA has always spoken about warfare, or at least not yet. Interestingly, the term is not used in Mao Zedong's major military writings.

The US-China Commission Report and much of the Washington policy and punditry discourse implies that *shashoujian* weaponry is something mysterious and exotic. Rarely does this discussion ask whether the concept can be mapped onto concepts and idioms in the US strategic discourse.² Yet when the term is used in Chinese military writings it can refer to anything from something as 'mundane' as nuclear ballistic missiles to something as technically exotic as nano-technology. It is also a term that Chinese military writers use to describe certain American weapons (US ballistic missile defense, for instance) and certain Russian weapons. This implies that PLA writers believe Americans and Russians can conceptualize *shashoujian* just as Chinese can. Often the term is cited in "quotation marks" to underscore that it is being used metaphorically. That is, a *shashoujian* could be an action, a technology, a configuration of power -- anything that finally turns things one's own way. It doesn't necessarily literally mean a secret, high-tech piece of weaponry. It is a term that

¹ US-China Security Review Commission, *The National Security Implications of the Economic Relationship Between the United States and China*. (July 2002) p.8

² The US China Commission report does use the term "special silver bullet" to describe *shashoujian*. But the tone of the report drops this parallelism between US and Chinese idioms in favor of a more generalized 'othering' of Chinese strategic thinking.

refers to any technique that one side uses consciously to turn the tide decisively in its favor. In short, it refers to anything that gives China advantage at a critical time and place in wartime, and that gives China credible deterrence power in peacetime.

Interestingly enough, the term is used a great deal in popular culture -- sports, 'love advice' etc. It is by no means limited to military issues. In love advice columns and books it is used to refer to that one action or quality of an individual that finally attracts the person one hopes to attract (e.g. a subtle smile is the *shashoujian* to win over a prospective date). It is used in Chinese sports commentary to refer, for instance, to the really good soccer scorer who turns the tide in the game. Some Chinese analysts have termed the war on terrorism as the Republican Party's *shashoujian* against the Democrats in US domestic politics.

So its use in military affairs may reflect a blending of popular culture idiom with strategic analysis in the way, say, that US strategists will blend sports idioms and analogies with military analysis. It is a short-hand for talking about things, somewhat analogous to 'silver bullet' in English idiom (which the American Heritage Dictionary defines as "an infallible method of attack or defense"). The term *shashoujian* originally came from ancient Chinese folk stories, where the hero wielded this magic object to defeat a seemingly overwhelmingly powerful and evil adversary. The etymology of 'silver bullet' in more recent English idiom refers to the use of magical object (silver) to defeat an seemingly overwhelmingly powerful and evil adversary (a werewolf). We need to be careful about simplistically assuming that Chinese strategic concepts cannot be mapped onto concepts used in US strategic discourse or that they reflecting a fundamentally different way of understanding the use of force.³

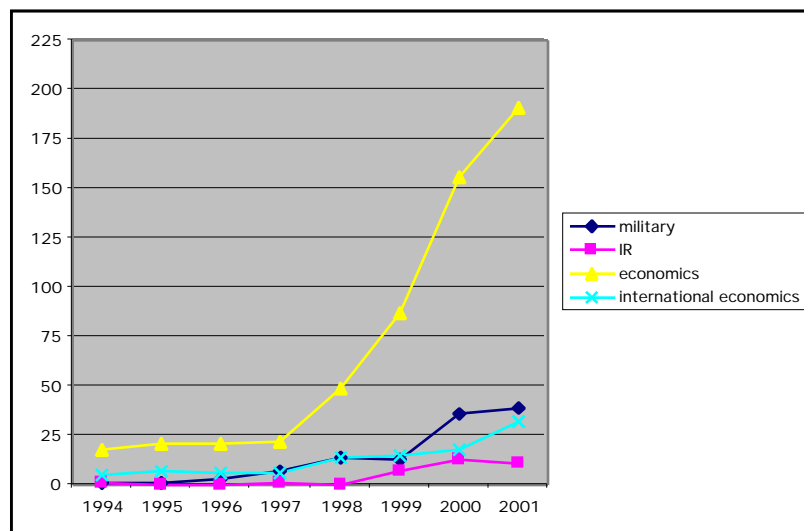


Fig. 1 Frequency of articles using the term *shashoujian* in text, 1994-2001 (by article type)
Source: China Academic Journals (Chinese language online database)

³ See for instance the following story about depleted uranium ammunition as a 'silver bullet' in Western military arsenals. One could replace 'silver bullet' in this story with 'shashoujian' and get precisely the same analysis. <http://www.tv.cbc.ca/national/pgminfo/du/>.

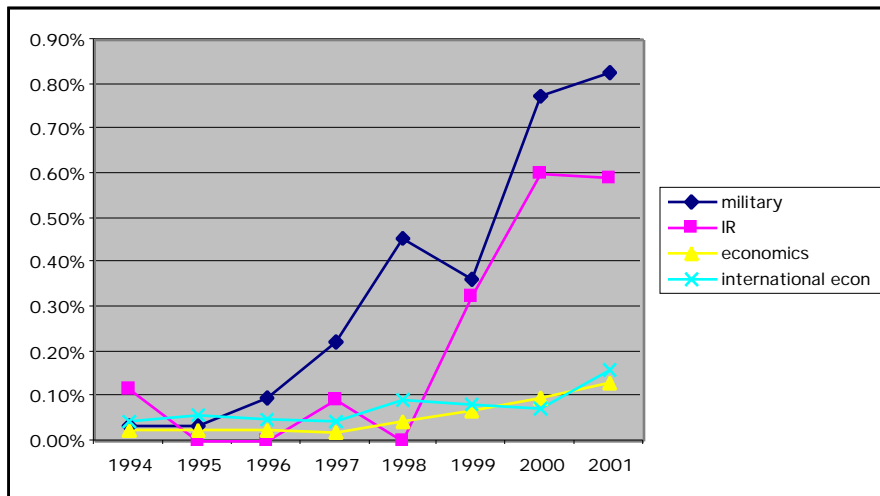


Fig 2. Articles using the term 'sha shou jian' as a % of all articles in each subfield (note scale is less than 1%). Source: China Academic Journals (Chinese language online database)

Note:

1. More military articles use the term 'sha shoujian' than IR or international economics, a larger number of economic articles use the term than military articles.
2. The relative use of the term seems similar in military and IR articles.
3. More international economics articles used the term than military articles until 1997. A lot of general economics articles used the term before it was used in military articles. This suggests that the term was 'floating out there' and did not have exclusive military meaning, nor was the military the first or most frequent user of the term.
4. Across the fields the term becomes more popular over time. This suggests a certain faddishness to the term and/or a political signal to use the term.
5. The military did not use the term at a constant rate -- it is a phenomenon of the late 1990s and 2000. If this term were deeply embedded in PLA discourses one would expect a relatively constant usage across time (though the search engine, unfortunately, does not go back beyond 1994)
6. The use of the term in military journals depends on the topic area. Across 1994-2001, it is used mostly in articles about military technology and military organization/administration. See Table. 1

Journal category	Technology/ engi neering	Strategy/ tactics	Military organi zation	Theory and history
N	44	13	46	11
% of articles	all 38.60%	11.40%	40.35%	9.65%

Table 1: Articles on military affairs that use the term 'shashoujian' in text, classified by category. Source: China Academic Journals, 1994-2001