David A. Graff

The Eurasian Way of War: Military Practice in Seventh-Century China and Byzantium. (Asian States and Empires). London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2016. pp. x, 208. \$160. ISBN 978-0415460347.

David Andrew Graff has made an important contribution to premodern world history with a book comparing the militaries of the Chinese Tang and Byzantine empires in the seventh century. Arguing that they shared a “Eurasian Way of War,” Graff challenges proponents of the “Western Way of War” thesis who hold that there was a divide in military culture between east and west. In particular, Victor Davis Hanson and John Keegan have argued that European armies favored direct confrontations, while Asian ones preferred tactics of delay and deception. Graff’s careful comparisons reveal that the methods of war in Byzantium and China had converged by the seventh century. He argues that the cause was the common challenge of nomadic enemies from the Inner Asia steppe.

The empirical foundation of Graff’s book is a systematic comparison of Chinese and Byzantine methods of war prescribed in two contemporary military manuals. One is the *Strategikon* of the Byzantine emperor Maurikios (Maurice, r. 582–602) or someone else in his circle. The other is the “Military Methods” of Li Jing (571–649), one of the Tang dynasty’s most famous generals. Since Graff’s subject is not just the theory of war, but also its practice, these two sources are supplemented by research in various other Byzantine and Chinese historical records and military manuals.

Graff details well-known differences between the two empires in Chapter 2, “Resources and Institutions.” Christianity was the state religion of the Byzantine Empire, while a mix of native religions and Buddhism found official sanction in China. The Tang Empire was larger and commanded more manpower and resources, particularly after the Arab conquests took Egypt and Syria from Byzantine control. Finally, China’s main strategic threat was pastoral nomads living on the steppe bordering the north, while Byzantium had a more varied frontier and strategic challenges, particularly the sedentary Sasanian Empire to its east, and an extensive coastline on the Mediterranean and Black seas that required a greater investment in naval power. Byzantium faced pastoral nomads primarily based in the Pannonian Basin of modern Hungary and the Pontic steppe north of the Black Sea in modern Ukraine. Given the importance of geo-strategy to this chapter and the book as a whole, a lack of maps is a drawback that makes the author’s arguments more difficult to follow. This problem is particularly acute because relatively few readers will be highly familiar with the geography of medieval Byzantium and China.

The next three chapters make systematic comparisons of the military methods of the two empires. Chapter 3, "Weapons and Tactics," finds strong similarities between the weapons of warfare in the east and west. Armies were composed of infantries armed with spears, swords, javelins and bows, and light cavalymen wielding lances and compact composite bows. Most critically, the Byzantines did not have a distinctive "Western Way of Tactics." In east and west, cavalry charges tended to be decisive in war. Deception was a crucial prelude to effective mounted assaults, so commanders attempted to set up surprise attacks and ambushes to turn the tide of battle. Since deception was to be expected, officers disciplined their troops to avoid falling into these traps. Chapter 4, "The Army on Campaign," finds that Tang and Byzantine armies generally took common approaches to establishing systems of supply, patrol, and camp organization and defense. In both cases, great attention was given to scouting to prevent ambushes and determine when circumstances favored an attack against a disadvantaged enemy. Siege technologies likewise tended to be similar. Even in the case of projectile technology where ancient Roman and Chinese armies differed, the Chinese traction-based trebuchet began to supplant the Byzantine torsion stone throwers by the seventh century. Chapter 5, "The Legacy of the Past," compares the strategic thought contained in the Greek and Chinese textual traditions stretching back to antiquity. War was viewed as a last resort that was to be planned well in advance, and not treated as an act of bravado. Trickery and deception in battle tactics was applauded as a means of achieving victory that minimized expenditure of resources. In sum, chapters 3 through 5 find that similarities outweigh differences in Eastern and Western warfare.

The next two chapters argue convincingly that Eurasian pastoral nomads were the vectors responsible for the transmission of technology and knowledge. Chapter 6, "Contacts and Influences," demonstrates that the pastoral nomadic Avars most likely were responsible in the sixth century for bringing new military technology crucial for cavalry warfare from East Asia to Byzantium. Avar origins are hazy and only the ruling group ultimately may have migrated from the east to dominate the Pannonian steppe. Graff makes a convincing case that the Byzantines adopted their stirrup, cavalry lances, lamellar armor, and quiver as a result of contacts and competition with the Avars. Chapter 7, "The Shadow of the Steppe," also makes a persuasive case that Romans and Chinese began to adopt steppe battle technologies and tactics even earlier. The states of northern China, which had a long border facing the Inner Mongolian steppe, began to encounter and learn from nomadic warriors from at least the first millennium BCE. The Roman Empire did not feel as strong a challenge until imperial expansion to the east and northeast brought them into

contact with the Sarmatians and Alans of the Pontic steppe and Caucasus in the second century CE. As a result of these early contacts, Romans and Chinese began to field cavalry contingents equipped with composite bows and practicing deceptive tactics such as feigned flight. The borrowing of technologies and techniques was facilitated because the sedentary states were willing to “recruit nomadic warriors from the steppe” (161). Though deception played a role in earlier Roman and Chinese infantry battles, feigned flight and ambushes gained heightened importance by the seventh century because these types of tactics were more effective when carried out with fast-moving cavalry.

Graff’s comparative history will be of interest to students and scholars of premodern military and world history. As a China specialist, it seems to me that the author has dealt a decisive blow to the Western Way of War thesis, but historians of Byzantium will have the final say. My only quibble with his argument relates to the China’s head start over Rome and Byzantium in the adoption of steppe military methods, which involved more than China’s earlier confrontation with nomadic armies and subsequent recruitment of steppe warriors to serve in the cavalry. In contrast to Byzantium, North China was conquered and ruled by various nomadic powers in the fourth century, and eventually fell under rule of Sārbi (Xianbei) dynasties with origins in the Inner Mongolian-Manchurian borderlands in the fifth and sixth centuries. This led to the wholesale importation of steppe military technology and thought into North China. While Graff mentions this in passing, he never highlights it as a major explanatory factor. Regardless, Graff has produced an outstanding comparative history that sheds new light on the role of steppe nomads as innovators and transmitters of military technology and methods across Eurasia.

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