

**LI JING'S ANTECEDENTS:  
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE PRAGMATICS OF MEDIEVAL  
CHINESE WARFARE**

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Li Jing 李靖, who lived from 571 to 649, was one of the most outstanding military leaders of the early Tang. He directed the campaign that brought most of the Yangzi valley under Tang control in 621 and later led expeditions beyond China's borders to crush two formidable steppe powers, the Eastern Türks (in 629–30) and the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾 (in 634–5). He was renowned for his mastery of the ancient military writings of the pre-Qin period and admired for his ability to realize both the martial ideal of *wu* 武 and the civil, literary ideal of *wen* 文.<sup>1</sup> Probably toward the end of his life, this literate warrior made his own contribution to the Chinese literature on the art of war in the form of a detailed, practical treatise whose contents bear less resemblance to the ancient military writings than to later military encyclopedias such as the *Taibai yinjing* 太白陰經 of the mid-Tang period and the *Wujing zongyao* 武經總要 of Northern Song. Among the topics covered by Li Jing are basic tactics, group drills, formations for battle and march, arrangements for scouting and patrolling, the layout of the camp, and the treatment of sick and wounded soldiers. His work does not survive in integral form, but extensive extracts—identified as Li Jing's "military methods" (*bingfa* 兵

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<sup>1</sup> See Li Jing's biographies: Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) [hereafter cited as *JTS*], 67.4275 ff. and Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975) [hereafter cited as *XTS*], 93.3811 ff. The *Xin Tang shu* biography is translated in its entirety in Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 313–20.

法)—are quoted in the military chapters of Du You's *Tong dian* 通典, an important administrative reference work compiled over several decades and presented to the throne in 801.<sup>2</sup> The Li Jing fragments, whose authenticity has not been seriously challenged, are an invaluable source of information about military practice in early seventh-century China.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the *Tong dian*, see Denis Twitchett, *The Writing of Official History Under the T'ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 104–7. Most of the Li Jing fragments are found in chapters 148–159, with the largest concentration in chapter 157. Quotations from Li Jing's "military methods" can also be found the Song encyclopedia *Taiping yulan* 太平禦覽, compiled between 978 and 984. However, Yang Yong'an 楊永安 points out that the *Taiping yulan* contains no Li Jing material that does not also appear in the *Tong dian*, and goes on to suggest that the compilers of the *Taiping yulan* were quoting the *Tong dian* rather than a surviving copy of the original book by Li Jing. See Yang Yong'an, "Guanyu Tang Taizong Li Weigong wendui yi shu zhi suyuan wenti" 關於唐太宗李衛公問對一書之溯源問題 in idem, *Sui Tang Wudai shi guankui zagao* 隋唐五代史管窺雜稿 (Hong Kong: Xianfeng chubanshe, 1987), 85–96. Some of the material attributed to Li Jing in the *Tong dian* also appears in Li Quan's 李權 *Taibai yinjing* 太白陰經. This is a much thornier problem since the material appears without attribution and the date of the *Taibai yinjing* is uncertain.

<sup>3</sup> The bibliographical chapters of the two Tang histories do not mention a *Bingfa* by Li Jing, but they do credit him with the authorship of a three-juan military text entitled *Liu jun jing* 六軍鏡 (*Mirror of the Six Armies*); see *JTS* 47.2040, and *XTS* 59.1551. Although impossible to prove, it seems reasonable to assume that Du You is quoting from this work (and using *bingfa* in the generic sense rather than as a book title). The Li Jing fragments in the *Tong dian* should not be confused with the *Tang Taizong Li Weigong wendui* 唐太宗李衛公問對 (*Dialogues of Tang Taizong and Li, Duke of Wei*) in the *Wujing qi shu* 武經七書 collection; this is a completely separate work whose authenticity is generally not accepted. See Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 488–90; Xu Baolin 許保林, *Zhongguo bingshu tonglan* 中國兵書通覽 (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1990), 131–2; Zhang Xincheng 張心澂, *Weishu tongkao* 偽書通考 (1939; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1998), 810–12; Peter A. Boodberg, "The Art of War in Ancient China: A Study Based upon the Dialogues of Li Duke of Wei" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, 1930); Li Shutong 李樹桐,

They are also of more than passing interest to the student of sixth-century warfare. Although there is no evidence that Li Jing held any military command before 619, when he was already close to fifty years old, he was still very much a product of the sixth century. The son of a regional inspector (*cishi* 刺史), he entered the Sui government service—as a junior member of the staff of the Chang'an 長安 magistrate—in 586 at the age of fifteen or sixteen. He went on to serve as deputy director of the Equipment Bureau in the Ministry of War around the beginning of the seventh century.<sup>4</sup> Long before that, however, Li Jing must have learned something of practical military affairs from conversations with an illustrious uncle, the Sui general Han Qinhu 韓擒虎, who is supposed to have been impressed by his nephew's profound understanding of the ancient military classics.<sup>5</sup> Han Qinhu was himself the son of a Northern Zhou general and had held a command position during the Zhou conquest of Northern Qi in 576–7, before he went on to gain greater fame in the service of Sui.<sup>6</sup>

The army that Li Jing commanded in early Tang was also in many ways a product of the sixth century. The original force that the Tang founder Li Yuan 李淵 led from Taiyuan 太原 to Daxingcheng 大興城 (Chang'an) in 617 had as its nucleus the Sui troops he had commanded as viceroy of what is now northern and

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“Du Li Weigong wendui shu hou” 讀李衛公問對書後 in idem, *Tang shi suo yin* 唐史索隱 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 1988), 92–103; and Yang Yongan, “Guanyu Tang Taizong Li Weigong wendui yi shu zhi suyuan wenti.” For a rare argument in favor of the authenticity of the *Wendui*, see Lei Jiaji 雷家驥, *Li Jing* 李靖 (Yonghe, Taiwan: Lianming wenhua youxian gongsi, 1980), 238–50.

<sup>4</sup> Lei, *Li Jing*, 218, 277.

<sup>5</sup> *XTS* 67.2475.

<sup>6</sup> See his biography in Wei Zheng 魏徵 et al., *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973) [hereafter cited as *SS*], 52.1339. It was Han Qinhu who captured the Chen capital of Jiankang 健康 in 589. Another general in the family was Qinhu's younger brother Sengshou 僧壽 (*SS* 52.1342). Li Jing's elder brother Li Duan 李端 followed Han Qinhu on campaign against the Türks in 601 (Lei, *Li Jing*, 207, 212).

central Shanxi, and the Sui military had its roots in the predecessor regimes of Western Wei and Northern Zhou. It is well known, for example, that the *fubing* 府兵 system of locally-based farmer-soldiers that formed the backbone of the early Tang military was the product of evolutionary development under Western Wei, Northern Zhou, and Sui.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, the expeditionary army (*xingjun* 行軍) structure through which *fubing* and other categories of soldiers were funneled into ad hoc campaign armies was also a creation of the sixth-century Northern Zhou regime.<sup>8</sup> This connection is especially significant, since Li Jing's treatise is concerned primarily with the organization, administration, and deployment of early Tang expeditionary armies.

In this paper I will argue that some of the specific methods and practices described by Li Jing can be traced back to the sixth century and provide further evidence of an impressive degree of continuity in military matters from Western Wei to early Tang. My method will be to compare passages from Li Jing's fragmentary *bingfa* with the narrative accounts of military operations found in the northern dynastic histories (primarily Linghu Defen's 令狐德棻 *Zhou shu* 周書 and Li Baiyao's 李百藥 *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書) and the chapters of the *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒 covering the years from 525 to the end of the reign of Sui Wendi 隋文帝 in 604. My approach will be selective. I am not going to discuss weapons and equipment, which receive very little mention in the historical narratives. Nor do I intend to dwell on the many platitudinous quotations from the *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法 that appear in both the Li Jing fragments and the histories.<sup>9</sup> Instead, I will concentrate on

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<sup>7</sup> The literature on the *fubing* system is immense. For one of the better and more detailed treatments of the Western Wei and Northern Zhou origins of the *fubing*, see chapter 2 of Gu Jiguang 谷霽光, *Fubing zhidu kaoshi* 府兵制度考釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1962).

<sup>8</sup> This point is strongly emphasized in Sun Jimin 孫繼民, *Tangdai xingjun zhidu yanjiu* 唐代行軍制度研究 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1995), especially pages 54, 57, 59, and 62.

<sup>9</sup> The runaway favorite is *chu qi bu yi* 出其不意, "Appear where they do

just a few examples of formations, deployments, and battlefield maneuvers that suggest continuities from the sixth century to early Tang.

It must be conceded at the outset that not all the material in the histories is of a piece with what remains of Li Jing's "military methods," but this is less a matter of outright contradiction than of different priorities and emphases. Whereas Li Jing expands at great length on the division of an expeditionary army into subordinate units and the size and composition of those units, the histories simply do not offer enough information on this subject to permit a meaningful comparison. Another, rather different example is the treatment of individual heroism. Reflecting the martial ethos of a society in which warriors were the politically dominant elite, the histories of the northern dynasties contain numerous instances of heroic action and feats of arms. The *Zhou shu*, for instance, reports that the Western Wei leader Yuwen Tai 宇文泰 was thrown by his startled horse after it was hit by an arrow during the battle of the Yellow River Bridge in 538. Two of his officers, Yuchi Gang 尉遲綱 and Li Mu 李穆, then launched themselves fiercely into the fray and scattered the enemy, giving Yuwen Tai the chance to mount another horse and avoid capture.<sup>10</sup> Li Jing, in contrast, has little to say about heroism and is much more interested in the use of harsh

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not expect [you]." The appearance of this phrase from the first chapter of the *Sunzi* soon becomes anything but unexpected. For examples, see Linghu Defen, *Zhou shu* 周書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1971) [hereafter cited as *ZS*], 1.9 and 19.316; Li Baiyao, *Bei Qi shu* 北齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1972) [hereafter cited as *BQS*], 18.239, 20.280, and 29.393; Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956) [hereafter cited as *ZZTJ*], 151.4725 and 163.5035. The expression also appears in Li Jing; see Du You 杜佑, *Tong dian* 通典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988) [hereafter cited as *TD*], 158.4061.

<sup>10</sup> *ZS* 20.339. A somewhat different version of the same episode is offered in *ZZTJ* 158.4894–5. For more examples of heroic action, see *ZS* 11.165–6, 175, 181; 14.219–20; 15.239, 240, 242; 16.269; 18.295; 19.320; 27.443–4, 450, 453; 29.494–5, 502; 30.518, 527; 36.647; and 43.775.

coercive measures to compel ordinary, fainthearted soldiers to move forward into combat. In one fairly typical passage, he writes that the deputy commander of a fifty-man company (*dui* 隊) is to stand behind his unit holding a long-hafted sword (*modao* 陌刀) in order to cut down anyone who might try to hang back.<sup>11</sup> This may reflect a change in elite attitudes over time, but it seems more likely that we are simply seeing the difference between the viewpoints of the literary eulogist and the pragmatic military planner.<sup>12</sup>

When we turn from heroism to security and intelligence, however, and consider the role of scouts, patrols, outposts, and pickets in the warfare of the period, we find that Li Jing and the histories seem to be speaking with a single voice. In the surviving portions of Li Jing's "military methods" considerable attention is devoted to detailing a variety of arrangements intended to provide for the security of the army when it is in camp or on the march. The expeditionary army is always to be on the watch for the unexpected. When it is settled in camp for the night, small outposts (*waipu* 外鋪) are set up three to five *li* 里 away from the main camp. Out beyond these positions at a distance of ten *li* are roving six-man cavalry patrols (*waitan* 外探).<sup>13</sup> Closer in, pickets called *tingzi* 聽子 ("listeners") are to be stationed one hundred paces

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<sup>11</sup> *TD* 157.4035. For more examples of this sort of coercion, see *TD* 148.3794, 149.3824, and 157.4036, 4037. Li Jing cites with approval the famous story in *Weiliaozi* 尉繚子 about Wu Qi's 吳起 ordering the execution of a warrior who left his assigned position to make a successful but unauthorized raid on the enemy battle line (*TD* 149.3819). On the other hand, he also writes that "One who seizes a flag or cuts down a leader, breaks a formation, or destroys the enemy spearhead is to receive the highest reward." (*TD* 149.3823)

<sup>12</sup> Although drawing on earlier materials, the *Zhou shu* and *Bei Qi shu* were both written in early Tang (and completed in 635 and 636, respectively).

<sup>13</sup> *TD* 157.4032. As presented by Li Jing, the main duty of the *waipu* would seem to be to use drums to disconcert an enemy force making a night attack on the main camp, but Sun Jimin argues that the *waipu* and *waitan* were the fixed and mobile components, respectively, of an integrated system intended to provide advance warning of enemy attacks.

outside the camp during the night. During the daytime, lookouts called *chihou* 斥候 are placed on high ground and at strategic points outside the perimeter of the camp.<sup>14</sup> When the army is encamped in the same place for more than a few days, Li Jing calls for the establishment of a system of temporary beacon stations radiating outward from the camp as far as two hundred *li* in order to announce the approach of hostile forces with smoke signals in daytime and torches at night. Associated with the beacons are roving cavalry patrols and men hidden in the grass beside the roads to listen for the approach of the enemy.<sup>15</sup> When the army is in motion, small groups of mounted lookouts occupy high ground on both flanks of the marching column, and more distant cavalry scouts are sent out as far as 30 *li* and provided with flags to signal the approach of hostile forces.<sup>16</sup> Scouts are to be sent out even greater distances, up to one hundred *li*, to investigate wooded spots and other rough terrain that might conceal enemy troops in ambush.<sup>17</sup> In addition to all of these arrangements, other long-range scouts, accompanied by local guides and possibly dressed in camouflage garb, are to be sent out to probe the location and condition of the enemy.<sup>18</sup> In the Li Jing fragments, arrangements for reconnaissance and force protection are multiple and redundant, and the attention given to them seems almost obsessive.

Although scouting, security, and reconnaissance arrangements are generally not spelled out in the same sort of detail as in Li Jing, the historical narratives make frequent mention of scouts and lookouts (*chihou*).<sup>19</sup> It is often specified that these are mounted

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<sup>14</sup> TD 157.4031.

<sup>15</sup> TD 157.4029–30.

<sup>16</sup> TD 157.4028, 4029.

<sup>17</sup> TD 157.4034.

<sup>18</sup> TD 157.4024.

<sup>19</sup> ZS 11.175, 25. 417, 29.504; and BQS 19.253, 24.364. The verb used to indicate scouting is *zhanhou* 覘候, and scouts are sometimes also referred to as *zhanhouzhe* 覘候者; see BQS 50.691 and ZZTJ 154.4773.

scouts (*houji* 候騎) or light cavalry (*qingji* 輕騎).<sup>20</sup> In 537, on the eve of the battle of Shayuan 沙苑, Yuwen Tai was informed by his cavalry scouts of the approach of Gao Huan's 高歡 army, and at the battle of Mangshan 邙山 in 543 it was Gao Huan's mounted lookouts who told him that Yuwen Tai was approaching.<sup>21</sup> There were many officers in the northern armies who were skilled at leading scouts and patrols. The nomad chief Hulü Jin 斛律金, who served as a troop commander of the Huaishuo 懷朔 garrison in the last years of Northern Wei, used what were called "Xiongnu 匈奴 methods": he could tell the size and composition of a force from the dust clouds it raised, and could determine whether an army was nearby or far away by sniffing the ground.<sup>22</sup> A Western Wei officer named Han Guo 韓果 was good at perceiving the weak (*xu* 虛) and strong (*shi* 實) points of the enemy's position; from a high place, he was able to identify the locations where enemy scouts and spies were hiding. For this reason, Yuwen Tai put him in command of the army's reconnaissance units.<sup>23</sup> In the eastern armies, one of the distinguished scoutmasters was Qilian Meng 綦連猛, who led small parties of light cavalry over great distances to probe the dispositions of first the Rouran 柔然 and later the Türks.<sup>24</sup> Once, when Gao Huan's son Gao Cheng 高澄 was on campaign, he feared that the enemy had troops placed in ambush, so he ordered one of his officers to lead half a dozen horsemen deep into a valley where they flushed out more than a hundred of the enemy.<sup>25</sup> Not all reconnaissance efforts were so successful, however. On one memorable occasion in 577, when the Zhou armies were closing in on the Northern Qi capital of Ye 鄴, a strong lookout force of Qi

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<sup>20</sup> ZS 2.14, 11.166, 12.183, 15.244, 18.292, 19.303, 43.780; and ZZTJ, 157.4884. For mention of patrolling cavalry (*youji* 遊騎) see ZS 14.215 and ZZTJ 166.5144.

<sup>21</sup> ZZTJ 157.4884, 158.4915.

<sup>22</sup> ZZTJ 150.4709.

<sup>23</sup> ZS 27.441–2.

<sup>24</sup> BQS 41.540–41.

<sup>25</sup> BQS 41.537.



cavalry was frightened into panic-stricken flight by a flock of birds taking to the air.<sup>26</sup>

These passages demonstrate in a general way that scouts, patrols, and lookouts were as important in sixth-century warfare as they were to Li Jing in the early seventh century. There are other passages in the histories, however, that come very close to some of Li Jing's specific prescriptions. Although the *Bei Qishu* does not use the term *waitan*, it does note that an officer could be assigned to lead patrols around the army's camp at night.<sup>27</sup> An even more striking parallel comes from just before the battle of Shayuan in 537, when Yuwen Tai sent Daxi Wu 達奚武 and three other horsemen to reconnoiter the Eastern Wei camp. At sunset, at a distance of a hundred paces from the camp, they dismounted and listened from hiding, thus learning the Eastern Wei passwords. They then mounted again and made the rounds of the enemy camp as if they were officers making a night inspection of the sentries, even beating men whose behavior was not in accordance with regulations.<sup>28</sup> The system Daxi and his comrades were able to exploit sounds remarkably like that laid out by Li Jing, where the night sentries of an army camp are divided into two-hour watches and the officers make regular circuits of inspection, exchanging password and countersign with the sentries and promptly punishing anyone who should fail to give the correct countersign.<sup>29</sup>

As suggested by the example of Gao Cheng mentioned above, the major reason for the scouting, patrolling, and general air of caution was fear of surprise attacks and ambushes. The prevalence of ambushes in the warfare of this period is strongly attested in the historical narratives. Repeatedly we see reckless detachments, if not whole armies, surprised by concealed foes. A very common

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<sup>26</sup> *BQS* 15.195; *ZZTJ* 173.5369.

<sup>27</sup> *BQS* 19.253.

<sup>28</sup> *ZS* 19.304. The same story, with only minor differences in detail, can be found in *ZZTJ* 157.4884.

<sup>29</sup> *TD* 157.4031–2.

scenario involved provocation or feigned flight, as in 530 when Heba Yue 賀拔岳, involved in pacifying Guanzhong 關中 for the Erzhu 爾朱, led a small body of cavalry to the Wei River to confront a force led by Yuchi Pusa 尉遲菩薩. Heba then turned and fled, luring his opponent to leave his infantry behind and set out with light cavalry alone. When the pursuers passed by a ridge that ran at a right angle to their road, they were suddenly struck on the flank by troops that Heba had earlier placed in an ambush position behind the ridgeline. At this point Heba's fleeing horsemen suddenly turned around and charged, and Yuchi's cavalry were cut to pieces with three thousand taken prisoner.<sup>30</sup>

Not surprisingly, Li Jing advises the use of ambushes and feigned flights,<sup>31</sup> but he devotes far more attention to avoiding traps set by one's opponent. He observes that fleeing enemy troops are likely to be an enticement intended to draw one's own soldiers into an ambush,<sup>32</sup> and lays out tactical rules which—if followed properly—will minimize the danger. In particular, he is concerned with limiting and controlling pursuits. In one passage, he states that the cavalry may not ride in pursuit “until it has been learned through careful examination that the enemy is panicked and in disorder.”<sup>33</sup> In another, he says that when the enemy retreats, only a portion of the army's foot soldiers are permitted to advance in pursuit, and even the designated pursuers may move forward no more than one hundred paces until it has been “determined through investigation that the enemy troops have scattered in defeat.”<sup>34</sup> It seems that the intention is not merely to prevent the cavalry from galloping headlong into ambush, but also to ensure that some

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<sup>30</sup> This battle is described in *ZZTJ* 154.4773 and *ZS* 14.223. For other examples of ambushes, often involving provocation or feigned flight, see *ZS* 15.244, 25. 418, 29.501, 49.892; also *BQS* 16.213 and *ZZTJ* 150.4693, 173.5403, and 174.5426.

<sup>31</sup> *TD* 158.4061, 159.4088.

<sup>32</sup> *TD* 150.3840.

<sup>33</sup> *TD* 157.4034. Also see 157.4036.

<sup>34</sup> *TD* 154.3948.

echelons of one's own force remain in close formation as a defensive reserve to guard against sudden reversals or surprises on the battlefield even while other echelons move out in pursuit of the enemy.<sup>35</sup>

The sort of unstable situation that Li Jing apparently had in mind can be glimpsed in the narrative accounts of sixth-century warfare. At the battle of the Yellow River Bridge in 538, the Western Wei army under Yuwen Tai suffered an initial setback, but quickly recovered and went on to defeat Gao Huan's Eastern Wei forces.<sup>36</sup> When the two great rivals met in battle again at nearby Mangshan in 543, the western army got the worst of it but Gao Huan's pursuit was checked by a surprise attack carried out by some of Yuwen Tai's troops who had remained in good order. In addition, the slow, deliberate retreat of elements of the Western Wei army led by Ruogan Hui 若干惠 convinced the pursuing cavalry to hold back for fear that he was trying to draw them into an ambush.<sup>37</sup> Later, when Gao Huan was seeking to follow up on his victory at Mangshan, the possibility of falling into an ambush continued to be one of his major concerns.<sup>38</sup> Something akin to Li Jing's division of the army into echelons for greater safety can be glimpsed in the thinking of the famous sixth-century general and turncoat Hou Jing 侯景, who once suggested that "It would be better to divide into two armies, following one after the other. If the front army is victorious, the rear army can join forces with it; if the front army is defeated, the rear army can assist it."<sup>39</sup>

There is also some evidence that specific formations described by Li Jing were employed on sixth-century battlefields. In the histories we find mention of both square formations (*fangzhen* 方

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<sup>35</sup> For a discussion of Li Jing's division of the army into a series of echelons with different functions in battle see Sun, *Tangdai xingjun zhidu yanjiu*, 304–6.

<sup>36</sup> *ZZTJ* 158.4894–5. For another example of a battle reversed in midcourse, see *BQS* 21.294.

<sup>37</sup> *ZZTJ* 158.4917; *ZS* 15.246, 17.281.

<sup>38</sup> *BQS* 24.343.

<sup>39</sup> *BQS* 24.370–71.

陣) and round formations (*yuanzhen* 圓陣), which seem to have differed little and served primarily a defensive purpose.<sup>40</sup> They appear to have been especially useful when an army was threatened by either a more numerous or more mobile foe, especially one composed largely of cavalry. In 525 a Northern Wei general confronting an opposing force of light cavalry placed his baggage train on the inside of his formation and infantry bearing large shields on the outside, and at the battle of Hanling 韓陵 in 532 Gao Huan drew up his badly outnumbered army in a circular formation.<sup>41</sup> On another occasion, the Western Wei general Wei Fabao 韋法保, marching with a small force to reinforce a threatened outpost, was attacked by a larger body of eastern troops; he ordered his men to adopt a circular formation and continued his advance, fighting as he went (*qie zhan qie qian* 且戰且前).<sup>42</sup> At end of the sixth century, the usual Sui deployment for confronting steppe nomads such as the Türks was to create a square formation with the infantry and the baggage carts and place the cavalry in the center of it, and in 612 the Sui general Yuwen Shu 宇文述 adopted a square formation as he tried to make a fighting withdrawal from the northern Korean state of Koguryō.<sup>43</sup> The histories provide few details of these deployments, but in both form and function they broadly resemble the square formation described by Li Jing, in which the baggage train is placed between two marching columns

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<sup>40</sup> For the similarity of square and round formations, see Gu Jiguang 谷霁光, “Gudai zhanshu zhong de zhuyao zhenxing—fangzhen; jian lun fangzhen de fazhan bianhua ji qi zai zhanshu zhong de zuoyong,” 古代战术中的主要阵形—方阵: 兼论方阵的发展变化及其在战术中的作用 in *Gu Jiguang shixue wenji* 谷霁光史学文集, vol. 1: *Bingzhi shilun* 兵制史论 (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe and Jiangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 504–6.

<sup>41</sup> *ZZTJ* 150.4699, 155.4819; *BQS* 1.8.

<sup>42</sup> *ZS* 43.775.

<sup>43</sup> *ZZTJ* 178.5564; also recounted in Yang Su's biography, *SS* 48.1285–6. Yang Su 楊素 adopted a more aggressive cavalry formation with some success in 599, but the 612 example (from *ZZTJ* 181.5665) suggests he did not have a lasting impact on Sui tactics.

of infantry which can be extended to cover the front and rear of the train.<sup>44</sup>

Another battlefield technique mentioned by Li Jing that also appears in the histories is the designation of certain combat units as the “spearhead” of the army (*zhanfeng* 戰鋒 Li Jing, usually *qianfeng* 前鋒 in the histories), entrusted with leading frontal assaults on the opposing army. In the Li Jing fragments, the spearhead companies (*zhanfeng dui* 戰鋒隊) are one of some half-dozen troop types making up the early Tang expeditionary army. When the army is on the march, they are placed at the front of each of its component elements, to batter their way, if need be, through blocked passes and defended terrain; when the army is deployed for battle they are assigned to the first echelon together with the archers and crossbowmen, and are the first to engage the enemy in close combat.<sup>45</sup> Spearhead elements are mentioned frequently in the histories. In 525, for example, the Northern Wei commander Cui Yanbo 崔延伯 overcame the spearhead of a rebel army, and in 527 the fighting quality of the Wei army’s own spearhead was a subject of debate.<sup>46</sup> In 573 the Northern Qi army selected men of great height and physical strength to form its lead unit, with the result that the army’s “spearhead was extremely sharp.”<sup>47</sup> A few years before this, in 564, the Northern Zhou army repeatedly deployed infantry as its spearhead, a tactic that seems to have been unusual at the time because of the attention it receives in the *Bei Qi*

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<sup>44</sup> *TD* 157.4028–9, 4035.

<sup>45</sup> The most important passages describing the spearhead troops are *TD* 157.4025–6 and 4033–4. They are also mentioned in *TD* 154.3948, and 157.4030. Curiously, they are not mentioned in the discussion of army organization in *TD* 148.3792–3. For a modern scholar’s interpretation of the role of the spearhead troops and the reason for this odd omission see Sun, *Tangdai xingjun zhidu yanjiu*, 249–50, 294.

<sup>46</sup> *ZZTJ* 150.4692, 151.4727.

<sup>47</sup> *ZZTJ* 171.5319.

*shu*.<sup>48</sup> By the time that Li Jing was writing his “military methods,” however, it had become the standard procedure. Li Jing’s spearhead is composed of infantry, and the cavalry are positioned to its rear.<sup>49</sup>

This necessarily limited and selective comparison of certain military methods and tactics described in the Li Jing fragments of the early seventh century and the historical narratives dealing with the sixth century points toward the conclusion that continuity rather than change was the dominant theme of Chinese warfare in these centuries. To be sure, the pragmatics of warfare—its tools, techniques, and tactics—were by no means unchanging over this period. The most obvious and celebrated example, of course, is the oft-noted shift in emphasis from heavy cavalry to light cavalry that seems to have taken place more or less simultaneously with the founding of the Tang dynasty. Where the Sui military and its predecessors in the Northern and Southern dynasties had relied on armored horsemen mounted on armored horses as the main strike force on the battlefield, the armies led by the early Tang commanders (most notably Li Shimin 李世民) seem to have made much greater use of light cavalry, meaning armored riders on unarmored horses.<sup>50</sup> What survives of Li Jing’s treatise unfortunately has nothing whatever to say about the presence or absence of horse armor, but it is worth noting that the testimony of the histories indicates that the shift was not nearly as complete or

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<sup>48</sup> *BQS* 16.211–2; also *ZZTJ* 169.5238, 5248.

<sup>49</sup> *TD* 157.4033.

<sup>50</sup> For more detailed treatments of this subject, see Yang Hong 杨泓, *Zhongguo gu bingqi luncong* 中国古兵器论丛, 2nd ed. (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1985), 48–52, 102; Albert E. Dien, “The Stirrup and Its Effect on Chinese Military History,” *Ars Orientalis* 16 (1986): 33–55; Wang Yuanchao 王援朝, “Tang chu jiaji juzhuang shuailuo yu qing qibing xingqi zhi yuanyin,” 唐初甲骑具装衰落与轻骑兵兴起之原因 *Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究 1996, No. 4: 50–58; and David A. Graff, “Strategy and Contingency in the Tang Defeat of the Eastern Turks, 629–630,” in Nicola Di Cosmo, ed., *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800)* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 59–64.

dramatic as it is sometimes presented. Both the *Zhou shu* and the *Bei Qi shu* make frequent references to light cavalry, which by my count is mentioned far more often than heavy cavalry in those pages.<sup>51</sup> This should not be surprising. Light cavalry was always more versatile than heavy cavalry; it was more useful in a wider variety of situations both on and off the battlefield, especially where speed and mobility—always key desiderata of the mounted arm—were of the essence. And above all, it was indispensable when confronting fast-moving nomadic opponents such as the Rouran and the Türks. As I have argued elsewhere, the emphasis that the early Tang leaders placed on light cavalry must surely derive at least in part from the origin of the Tang army as a frontier force in the last years of the Sui dynasty.<sup>52</sup>

The influence of the steppe is also discernible in three of the four tactical continuities identified in this paper. Feigned flight and ambush had been an important part of the steppe military repertoire from at least the early days of pastoral nomadism, and good scouting and a high level of vigilance were always essential to success and even survival in steppe warfare (recall the Northern Wei scout who used the Xiongnu method of sniffing the ground to determine the proximity of hostile forces). In these respects, the conduct of war as it is depicted in the northern histories and the Li

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<sup>51</sup> For mentions of light cavalry, see *ZS* 1.9, 10, 12; 2.13, 14, 30; 6.97; 11.166; 12.192, 193; 14.223, 224; 15.244; 16.269; 17.282–3; 19.315; 21.350; 27.439; 28.477; 30.519, 527; 32.556, 558, 563; 33.580; 49.891, 897; 50.913; and *BQS* 4.58, 60; 19.253; 20.271, 280; 41.540–41. Mentions of heavy cavalry: *ZS* 2.14 and 14.218. Cf. the mentions of light cavalry in *ZZTJ* 150.4699, 4709; 151.4714, 4716; 154.4772, 4773, 4792, 4793; 155.4802–3, 4812, 4819–20, 4821; 156.4838, 4839, 4841, 4842, 4844, 4849, 4855, 4856; 157.4874, 4884; 158.4894, 4898; 160.4969; 161.4982; 165.5131; 177.5508; 180.5609–10; as opposed to the mentions of heavy cavalry in *ZZTJ* 150.4699; 152.4739; 156.4852; 157.4868, 4885; 161.4970, 4981; 163.5053; 164.5080; 173.5385; 176.5499. This listing is probably incomplete since it is based on reading notes rather than a search of electronic databases.

<sup>52</sup> Graff, “Strategy and Contingency,” 60–64.

Jing fragments may reflect a certain amount of borrowing from the steppe, a sort of symmetrical adaptation to the nomads' way of war. In contrast, the employment of square formations for all-around defense when stationary or on the march may represent an asymmetrical response to the threat that fast-moving steppe horsemen posed to slower-moving sedentary armies composed mainly of infantry.

To be sure, some of the tactical maneuvers characteristic of steppe warfare were already being practiced in ancient China well before the advent of mounted combat in the fourth century BCE.<sup>53</sup> Sunzi admonished his readers not to “pursue feigned retreats,”<sup>54</sup> and the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 has a story about one Cao Gui 曹刿, a man of Lu 魯 who offered advice to his duke during a battle fought against the state of Qi 齊 in 683 BCE. Cao recommended that Lu troops set out in pursuit only after he had inspected the tracks of the Qi chariot wheels to determine that their flight was not a ploy intended to lure the Lu army into an ambush.<sup>55</sup> Given the many limitations on the maneuverability of chariots, however, including their inability to operate in most types of terrain, it seems unlikely that tricks, traps, and surprises based on rapid maneuver were nearly as prevalent in ancient China as they became in post-Han times. Due to the far superior tactical and operational mobility of warriors mounted on horseback, and of armies composed largely or wholly of cavalry, certain ploys that had not been unknown in earlier days became much easier to execute and, as a result, came to shape and define military practice in northern China during the early medieval period. The process must have begun with the

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<sup>53</sup> The author would like to thank Professor Jonathan Karam Skaff for raising this issue.

<sup>54</sup> This passage is found in the seventh chapter of the *Sunzi*; see Wu Jiulong 吴九龙 et al., eds., *Sunzi jiaoshi* 孙子校释 (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, 1990), 126. The translation is from Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 170.

<sup>55</sup> Duke Zhuang, 10<sup>th</sup> year. See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5: *The Ch'un Ts'ew with the Tso Chuen* (rpt. Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1985), 85–6.



widespread adoption of cavalry by China's warring states in the late fourth century BCE, continued through the steppe campaigns of Han Wudi 漢武帝, and reached its apogee after 300 CE with the domination of the central plains by North Asian peoples with nomadic roots. It was this milieu that produced the military leaders of the Northern Dynasties, Sui, and early Tang, including Yuwen Tai, Gao Huan, Li Shimin, and Li Jing. In his introduction to *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, John King Fairbank noted the need for "[a] meaningful periodization of the two millennia of [Chinese] military history after 221 B.C."<sup>56</sup> The evidence presented here suggests that in terms of tactics both the sixth century and the seventh belong to the same period of Chinese military history, an age of cavalry defined above all by steppe contacts, threats, and influences that had begun several centuries earlier.

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<sup>56</sup> John K. Fairbank and Frank A. Kierman, Jr., eds., *Chinese Ways in Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 5.