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Written over 2,400 hundred years ago, Sun Tzu's *Art of War* still captures the attention of scholars and general readers. In *Sun Tzu at Gettysburg*, the prolific military historian Bevin Alexander (Longwood Univ.) seeks to show that modern leaders who inadvertently applied Sun Tzu's maxims succeeded, while commanders who did not suffered defeat (xi).

In his introduction, Alexander equates Sun Tzu's prescription “to avoid what is strong, strike what is weak” with guerrilla warfare and B.H. Liddell Hart's strategy of indirect warfare (xii, also 235–36, n. 2). This sort of sweeping but lightly supported generalization is typical of the argumentation throughout the book. The introduction alone covers, besides Liddel Hart, the history of the translation of Sun Tzu into English and the influence of his maxims on Mao Zedong’s doctrine of “People’s War” in a mere six pages and three footnotes.

Alexander discusses ten battles, moving chronologically from Saratoga in the Revolutionary War to the Inchon landing in the Korean War. His narratives are clear and brisk, but do not make many connections to Sun Tzu. For example, chapter 7, on the German victory in France in 1940, begins as follows:

> Although [Field Marshal Erich von] Manstein knew nothing about Sun Tzu, he was a brilliant strategist and he arrived on his own at one of Sun Tzu's most fundamental concepts: “make uproar in the east but attack in the west.” Manstein saw that deception is the most dependable way of achieving victory. By staging an “uproar” at one place, a general can induce his enemy to commit his strongest forces there, and thereby ensure that the general’s actual target somewhere else will be poorly defended or not defended at all. Manstein’s idea was not original. It goes back to the beginning of warfare and is the intellectual foundation of Sun Tzu’s concept of the orthodox, or direct, zheng force working in conjunction with the unorthodox, or indirect, qi force (141).

While this is a good description of Sun Tzu’s principles of the orthodox and unorthodox, it constitutes almost the entire introduction for that chapter. Sun Tzu and his theories do not reappear till twenty pages later in the chapter’s (too) brief conclusion. Moreover, the meat of the chapter is, Alexander admits, adapted from one of his previous books (255, n. i). The other chapters feature equally small doses of Sun Tzu; the eight-page final chapter, “The Enduring Wisdom of Sun Tzu,” simply summarizes some of the often repeated maxims.

The book is founded on superficial research: the selected bibliography lists no sources for Sun Tzu besides two translations. A familiarity with several easily available sources would have greatly improved Alexander’s work. David Graff, for one, has discussed several instances of commanders applying Sun Tzu’s maxims. He argues that, at the battles of Jingxing and Yanshi, Chinese leaders deliberately deployed their

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forces with their backs to a river, in an attempt to employ what Sun Tzu described as “fatal terrain”: “Throw them into a place from which there is nowhere to go, and they will die rather than flee. When they are facing death, how could one not obtain the utmost strength from the officers and men? When soldiers have fallen in deep, they have no sense of fear.” With this in mind, it is disappointing to find Alexander criticizing Robert E. Lee for backing his army against the Potomac River at the Battle of Antietam (105-6). Not having read the pertinent secondary sources, he misses a chance to show that Lee was acting in accord with one of Sun Tzu’s dictums.

Alexander’s book also suffers from lack of nuance in selecting translations of Sun Tzu. The Chinese characters translated as “orthodox” and “unorthodox” could also be rendered as “spiking” and “tilting” in both tactical and strategic senses. But Alexander ignores the strategic meaning. Instead of noticing Lee’s use of “fatal terrain,” he criticizes him for leaving himself little room for his “tilt” or flanking maneuver. But if an enemy is expecting a flank attack, how “unorthodox” can that attack be? In short, “orthodox” and “unorthodox” are fluid terms, the meaning of which can change several times in the course of even a single battle. Sun Tzu’s language is far more subtle and flexible than Alexander’s terminology (“fix,” “flank,” and “repeat”) denotes.

Alexander’s stress on the common-sense quality of the maxims causes him to underestimate the complexity of the situations that both ancient and modern practitioners of war faced in making their decisions. For example, in arguing that those who applied Sun Tzu’s teaching succeeded, he fails to examine sufficiently just why commanders acted as they did. He cites a violation of Sun Tzu’s first maxim—“thoroughly ponder and analyze war”—as a reason for the British defeat in the American Revolutionary War (5). But contemporary debates among British policy makers clearly show that they did in fact ponder their war extensively. They simply arrived at a different conclusion from Alexander’s! This lack of detail in exploring the strategic decisions of belligerents vis-a-vis Sun Tzu’s maxims is disappointing.

Finally, there is the problem of using Sun Tzu himself. Part of his appeal lies in the wide applicability of his aphorisms. For instance, advocates of both direct and indirect strategic approaches to battle can find support in his text. The problem of this inherent ambiguity is worsened by Alexander’s persistent characterizations of the adages as commonsensical (223), his reliance on only two translations, and his lack of acquaintance with the relevant secondary scholarship. We are left with a set of principles so oversimplified as to lose all value as military prescriptions. The Sun Tzu coating that Alexander applies to modern campaigns serves only to obscure underlying complexities.

Despite these problems and because Sun Tzu at Gettysburg is written in an engrossing, brisk style, unencumbered by dense footnotes, it is suited to those seeking a primer on modern battles that exemplify Sun Tzu’s maxims. It may also serve as “the book that got me interested military history” for high school readers. But scholars of East Asia and the history of warfare, including serious undergraduates, will need to look elsewhere.

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7. See Wallacker (note 5 above) 299.