

SUN TZU

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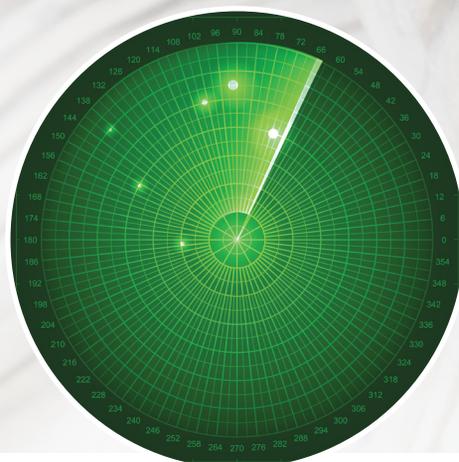
THE ART *of* WAR

Introduction

A writer, warrior, and philosopher, Sun Wu¹ is traditionally credited as the author of *The Art of War*, a piece written more than two thousand five hundred years ago and still as contemporary and fundamental as it was then. Within it are inscribed lessons on how to conquer battlefields, triumph over enemies and achieve victory in war as well as in life.

Sun Tzu presents a holistic cohesive approach to conducting and winning wars. His ancient teachings are reflected in successes and defeats along the history of warfare and, even today, when correctly followed and interpreted, Sun Tzu's lessons, while they cannot predict the results of the battles, can be very useful.

According to Professor Beatrice Heuser this is in fact one of the best two books ever written on strategy and warfare.² Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart asserted that, compared to von Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege* (On War), "Sun Tzu has clearer vision, more profound insight, and eternal freshness."³ And, even if *The Art of War* is made up of deceptively simple aphorisms, it is still vital to the understanding of the nature of



strategy and war itself. In war, those who decide on ignoring Sun Tzu's teachings will be left in darkness, governed not by their actions, but by something that Machiavelli called *fortuna*, or simply luck, which is the greatest enemy of security and safety of the state.

There is no real evidence that Sun Tzu really existed. Some scholars, namely Cheng-tsê, believed that the mythical "Master Wu" never existed and was in fact a fabrication by philosophers of the Warring States period (453-221 B.C.).⁴ Either way, ancient writings of *The Art of War* echoed through space and time, adapting to the new dimensions of warfare, and thereby demonstrating their universality. A timeless classic piece packed with very important strategic teachings intended for practitioners of war, this work could very well be the first example of a Mirror for Princes writing technique.⁵

It is no less interesting to note that Sun Tzu's masterpiece is not only a text on strategy and manoeuvres, but also one of the first reflections on human psychology in warfare. Not focusing solely on strategies and tactics to defeat the enemy, Sun Tzu went far beyond writing on how the enemy could react if attacked and how its reaction would influence the outcome of a battle. Master Wu understood the human nature and believed that control was the ideal of victory; thereby he dismissed vulgar aggression and sought absolute excellence by breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting or shedding blood.

In strategic theory like in any other theory, as authors suffer from the same illness—"interpretation" and "translation"—a side note needs to be made on this matter. When B. H. Liddell Hart claimed that Sunzi's writings were more clear, profound and fresh, one could certainly disagree. At first sight, when compared to *On War*, *The Art of War* seems more simple and direct to the point, but Sun Tzu's writings are in fact more holistic and profound than von Clausewitz's.⁶ Not only that, but the original (and incomplete) ancient Chinese texts written on pieces of bamboo wood, suffered greatly from being translated, which significantly hindered their true perception. Hence, leading scholars admitted that Sun Tzu and von Clausewitz are positioned on different ends of the strategic spectrum. Although that might be the common interpretation, Michael Handel shows us a different vision of this issue when claiming:



The author pictured at JWC. Photo by JWC PAO

... they [Sun Tzu and von Clausewitz] agree that the most rational way of waging war is usually to fight for the shortest possible duration and win decisively if possible. Any other types of prolonged and indecisive battles are to be avoided.⁷

Nevertheless, when it comes to the issue of victory without fighting, there are certainly differences between the two authors:

... von Clausewitz writes that destroying the enemy's army is most often the key to victory in war; Sun Tzu recommends that the best alternative is to attack the enemy's strategy.⁸

Sunzi, influenced by the chaotic period of the Warring States, shared the early Confucian assumptions that "... the superior man, extolled in the classics as the highest product of self-cultivation, should be able to attain his ends without violence."⁹ This is evident in the following passage of *The Art of War*:

"... those skilled in war subdue the enemy's army without battle. They capture his cities without assaulting them and overthrow his state without protracted operations."¹⁰
(One wonders, is he referring to winning their hearts and minds?)

But for the general, to wage successful war, his orders need to be followed and executed without question. Martin van Creveld asserted that the military virtue of an army is based on strict discipline, which at the same time is the general's method to enforce necessity on his troops.¹¹ In order to illustrate this issue, we

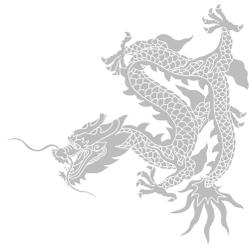
would like to refer to the famous tale of Sun Tzu's army of concubines.

DURING THE ERA of Warring States, King Ho-lü of Wu, when faced by imminent invasion of the State of Ch'u, summoned Sun Tzu, by then already a famous strategist. Mystified by Master Wu's military capabilities, King Ho-lü asked him if he could organize the palace concubines into a military force. The legendary general happily accepted the challenge and promptly explained to the women what they had to do when he gave the command. The first attempt flopped because every single one of them giggled. Sun Tzu then realized that to be victorious, one should have etched in one's mind the five factors of war, the first of them being *moral influence*, which "causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders, so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear of mortal peril."¹² The fourth element is *command*, which means that a General should be wise, sincere, human, courageous, and strict.¹³ However, since the commander needs to be seen as the "Respected One", sometimes harsh decisions must be taken. And so, Sun Tzu made an example out of the two concubines most favoured by the king by demanding that their heads be cut off. After witnessing that terrifying scene, every woman fell into line, and Sun Tzu told King Ho-lü that they were ready to follow his command "through fire and water."¹⁴

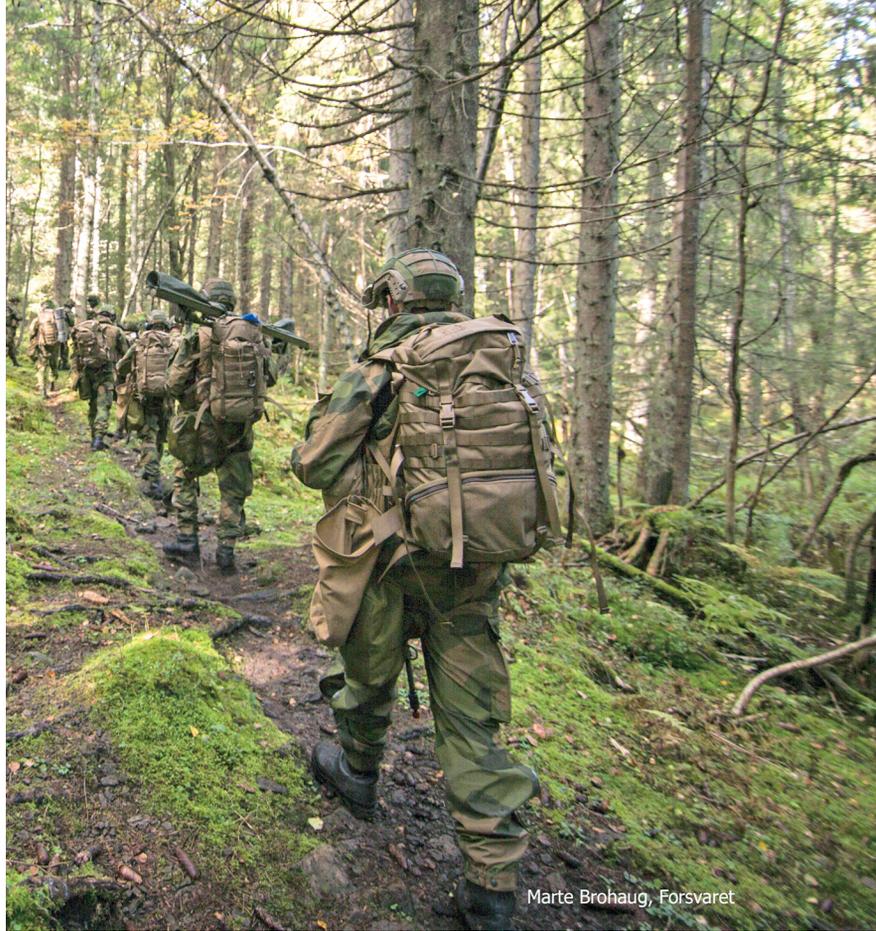
Sunzi explained that for a general to win his battles, it is certainly necessary to master the five fundamental principles of war: moral influence and command, which have already been mentioned, then *weather*, *terrain* and *doctrine*. Although these principles were envisioned from a holistic Taoist point of view, they may be perceived as operational factors as well. "Weather" not only stands for the "interaction of natural forces"¹⁵ which should be taken into consideration when designing strategy plans for war or peace, but is also relevant in deciding which season could be most favourable for campaigning, according to Creveld.¹⁶

Another factor, "terrain", hints at the physical characteristics of the theatre of operations, which may certainly be decisive for victory or defeat in battle. And by "doctrine" Sun Tzu meant everything related to the organization of the army, from the hierarchy system





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Marte Brohaug, Forsvaret

to the management of the supply lines or, put differently, the politics and logistics of warfare. Although mastering these principles is important, they are not sufficient by themselves, but need to be explored in depth. Sun Tzu asserted that a general need to “create situations which will contribute to their accomplishment.”¹⁷

The Art of War presents many important ideas although Sun Tzu stated that a commander could predict victory under five important circumstances: (1) one who understands when he can fight, and when he cannot fight, will be victorious;¹⁸ (2) one who knows how to use different-sized forces will have success;¹⁹ (3) “one whose ranks are united in purpose will be victorious;²⁰ (4) one who is prudent and cunning will defeat the unprepared enemy;²¹ (5) “one whose general is able and not interfered with by the ruler will be victorious.”²² All of these circumstances come together under a bigger notion, materialized by Sun Tzu's words when declaring that “All warfare is based on deception.”²³

The art of achieving victory

Like the latter idea, now four structural concepts identify the strategic theory of *The Art of War*. One of the most popular quotes by Sun Tzu begins by stating “Know the enemy and

know yourself, in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.”²⁴ While this message may appear simple and clear, an in-depth analysis will reveal other dimensions and let them multiply. Master Wu clarifies that if one knows oneself, but is ignorant of the enemy, then one's chances of losing will be equal to those of the enemy. Once again, if one is ignorant of oneself and of the enemy, then one most certainly will lose every battle. This means that Sun Tzu was concerned with achieving rational victory rather than pure defeat of the enemy. When Sun Tzu's visions are compared to modern warfare, a change in the war paradigm immediately springs to mind. During the World Wars, the objective was not logical victory over war; rather, an ulterior objective was envisioned, which was to destroy and annihilate entire nations. Contrary to what Sun Tzu recommended, the true objective was no longer the mind of the enemy's ruler, but the body of the troops²⁵ and the enemy's people.

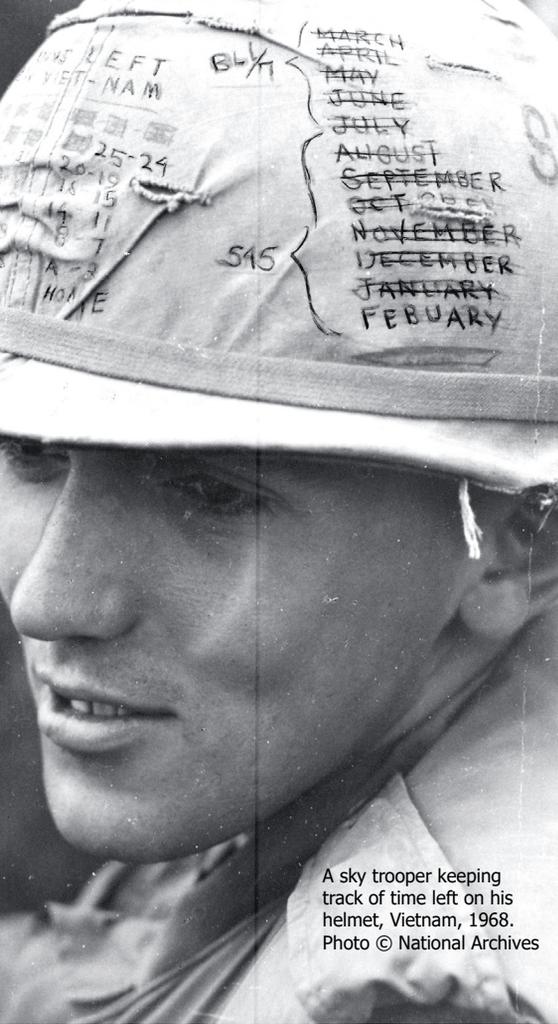
Sun Tzu said, “For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”²⁶ The point behind this idea, Robert Leonhard explains, is the recognition that even when a force wins a battle, it will unquestionably lose resources like men, time, equipment, or even willpower.²⁷ So, the

wise general in need of an attack would carefully consider when to launch it, and how to accomplish it, bearing in mind that “[t]hus the strongest, most successful action is at the same time the most economic one.”²⁸

In regard to victory, the general needs to assess the costs of battle. To do so, the tools of utmost importance in war are spies and intelligence. It is clear that for Sun Tzu “information represents a key to success in war,”²⁹ where secret agents have not only an important role, but they are the sovereign's treasure.

Master Wu distinguished five types of spies: “...native, inside, double, expendable and living.”³⁰ Native or local agents are the enemy's people, *i.e.* people familiar with sensitive information of interest to the general. Inside spies are agents who hold relevant positions inside the enemy's army. Double agents are, as the name points out, the enemy's spies, but employed by one's own side. Living agents are one's own spies, who are expected to collect intelligence on the enemy. Expendable spies make up the zenith of Sun Tzu's art of deception and are sent into enemy lands in order to spread fabricated information to deceive the enemy and make him work against himself. Chia Lin emphasized, “An army without secret agents is exactly like a man without eyes or ears.”³¹ Sun Tzu asserted:





A sky trooper keeping track of time left on his helmet, Vietnam, 1968. Photo © National Archives

"Thus, those skilled in war subdue the enemy's army without battle. They capture his cities without assaulting them and overthrow his state without protracted operations."³²

(David H. Petraeus: "Winning their hearts and minds"; von Clausewitz: "Winning the centre of gravity: their hub of power; their moral will.")

Once again, obviously, for Master Wu the most eminent way to resolve a conflict is to use diplomacy and negotiation. It is only if such efforts fail and there is no alternative but to fight that one should use force as a last resort, disrupting the enemy's alliances, attacking his army and laying siege to his walls. Again, sounding like von Clausewitz: Limited warfare uses only the power and violence you need! Indeed, one may say that war is the result of failed politics.

Sun Tzu's excellence shines through via *The Art of War's* original words: "Thus, what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy."³³ Sir Winston Churchill seemed to have grasped these ancient teachings and made them his own when after World War I he claimed, "... battles are won by slaughter and manoeuvre. The greater the general,

the more he contributes in manoeuvre, the less he demands in slaughter."³⁴

Finally, concerning one's flexibility, Master Wu declared that "Now an army may be likened to water, for just as flowing water avoids the heights and hastens to the lowlands, so an army avoids strength and strikes weakness."³⁵

When Sunzi commanded the Wu army, he opted for an indirect attack on Ch'u's enemy forces because he lacked the manpower required to risk a decisive battle. In *The Art of War*, direct attacks are not seen as very important; instead—and due to the fact that Sunzi's forces were smaller—the author emphasized the use of indirect strategies. To counter the forces of Ch'u, Sun Tzu made use of indirect manoeuvres, ensuring he stayed mobile and extremely flexible at all times and using decoys, cunning and surprise tactics. One could affirm, however, that Sunzi's forces were only that flexible due to their small number. Master Wu kindly asserted otherwise: "... management of many is the same as management of few. It is a matter of organization."³⁶

Martin van Creveld explained that one should "[u]se speed and secrecy to make out that you are concentrating at one place, then attack at another."³⁷ And like the water metaphor, a force should be adaptable to variations in the enemy's strategy. It should be able to adjust itself to the battle new needs, and like water not have a constant form, or routine.

On this last point, there is also the example of the Vietnam War, in which the United States, at the time fueled by their deceptive world power status, stormed through the jungle ignoring Sun Tzu's teachings, only to suffer tremendous losses. Long before that conflict, Master Wu had already understood that numerical superiority confers no advantage at all in winning the war. Indeed, forces may be beaten using cunning tactics, indirect attacks and superior intelligence collection, which is exactly what the Việt Cộng did in Vietnam. When fighting the American leviathan, the North Vietnamese remained hidden, always moving and anticipating U.S. movements; they prepared surprise ambushes and concentrated attacks. They knew their enemy very well, and followed the teachings of Sun Tzu. Instead of attacking American troops, they chose to hit their strategy and the democratic decision-makers back home.

Thirty-five years after the end of this

war, the United States faced a similar enemy in Afghanistan. The creation of the PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) was important to generate synergies with the Afghan population and seems to have inherited Sun Tzu's wisdom: "Treat the captives well... Hence, what is essential in war is victory, not prolonged operations."³⁸ Based on this quote one may argue that the Afghan war has been prolonged for a long time, which means that although some efforts have been made (when comparing to Vietnam), Allied Forces and the U.S. still do not completely master Sun Tzu's warfare techniques. But, once again, one may ask whether this is a problem related to the mastery level of Sunzi's teachings or a problem lying in their ineptitude to adapt to the new dimensions of warfare.

Some critics claim that *The Art of War* does not apply to other dimensions of warfare (besides land power) like airpower, naval power, or some other new elements such as cyber or Space power. Proving them wrong is only a question of time. Master Wu could not envision twenty-five centuries of technological advances, albeit he did predict the immutable nature of war and the human thirst for victory. And these are inseparable conditions of war itself.

Conclusion

Did Master Wu ever exist? What explains him? An unquestionably and profoundly holistic, everlasting work on strategy and ways of conducting war. Even today, *The Art of War* constitutes a millennial centre of gravity for strategic affairs. More than ever, Sun Tzu's teachings are identified as vital knowledge for fighting the wars of the future. With the escalation of the destruction power of the 21st century's new weaponry, direct wars lose purpose due to the fact that mutually assured destructions can result from a classic or conventional confrontation between two major forces of our time. Here enter Sunzi's aphorisms to guide the way to waging war and achieving victory.

If one considers indirect wars, the wars of the future, then *The Art of War* would convey its absolute meaning for the simple reason that it holds the key to unlock the path for victory. Cultivating a deep understanding of the enemy is essential to victory, but alone it will not be decisive, it will not win battles. Sun Tzu won the battle against Ch'u by adding to this conduct organized planning of his troops, indirect



German Rheinmetall KZO unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) being launched during Exercise IRON WOLF II in Lithuania, which involved 2,300 troops from 12 NATO Allies. Photo by NATO



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attacks and cunning tactics. Until present day, Sun Tzu and *The Art of War* faced no technological or human innovation able to revolutionize the ancient Chinese way of waging war and achieving victory. For all these reasons, Sun Tzu and *The Art of War* together stand the test of time. Their wisdom is as true today as it was in their time, and is best summed up by one of their most important maxims:

"War is a matter of vital importance to the state; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied."³⁹



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END NOTES:

1 Sun Wu was the real name of the Chinese famous general, who later won the honorific title of "Master", which in Chinese can be read as "tzu" or in Pinyin "zi". Pinyin is part of the Romanization system, which represents the pronouce of Chinese characters. Pinyin was developed by the Popular Republic of

China, where Sun Tzu can be read as Sunzi and Peking as Beijing. Briefly Sun Wu can be named "Sun Tzu", "Sunzi" or simply "Master Wu".

2 Clausewitz, Carl von: *On War* trs. by Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xxxi

3 Sun Tzu: *The Art of War* trs. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. v

4 *The Art of War*, p. 1; The Era of Warring States was a war fought by every major power, that culminated in the unification of China under the heavy rule of the Qin Dynasty in 221 B.C.

5 Just like Christine de Pizan's *The Book of Arms and Chivalry*, giving guidance and presenting a role module, for nobility. In the case of Master Wu, this is not so evident, although *The Art of War* certainly shares some characteristics.

6 Due to the fact that Sun Tzu was deeply influenced by the Taoism, making the interpretation very difficult, and with different levels of spiritual interpretation.

7 Handel, Michael I.: *Masters of War: Classic Strategic Thought* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001), p.135-6

8 Mahnken, Thomas G. & Maiolo, Joseph A. (Eds.): *Strategic Studies: A Reader* (New York: Routledge 2008), p.51

9 *Masters of War: Classic Strategic Thought* p. 136

10 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 10, p. 79

11 Crevelde, Martin van: *The Art of War: War and Military Thought* (London: Cassell, 2000), p.31

12 *The Art of War*, ch.I, 4, p. 64.

13 *The Art of War*, ch.I, 7, p. 65.

14 *The Art of War: War and Military Thought*, p. 31

15 *The Art of War*, ch.I, 5, p. 64.

16 *The Art of War: War and Military Thought*, p. 37

17 *The Art of War*, ch.I, 16, p. 66.

18 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 25, p. 82.

19 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 26, p. 82.

20 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 27, p. 83.

21 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 28, p. 83.

22 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 29, p. 83.

23 *The Art of War*, ch.I, 17, p. 66

24 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 31, p. 84.

25 Liddell Hart: *Strategy* (New York: Meridian, 1991), p. 204

26 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 3, p. 77.

27 Leonhart, Robert: *The Art of Maneuver: Maneuvre Warfare Theory and AirLand Battle* (New York: Presidio Press Book, 1991), p.28.

28 *The Art of War: War and Military Thought*, p. 38

29 Baylis, John; Wirtz, James; Gray, Colin S.; Cohen, Eliot (eds.): *Strategy: In the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p.77

30 *The Art of War*, ch.XIII, 5, p. 145.

31 *The Art of War*, ch.XIII, 23, p.149.

32 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 10, p. 79.

33 *The Art of War*, ch.III, 3, p. 77

34 Churchill, Winston S.: *The World Crisis* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), vol.2, p.5.

35 *The Art of War*, ch.VI, 27, p. 101.

36 *The Art of War*, ch.V, 1, p. 90

37 *The Art of War: War and Military Thought*, p. 38

38 *The Art of War*, ch.II, 19-21, p. 76

39 *The Art of War*, ch.I, 1, p. 63