

THE ART OF WAR THE ANCIENT CLASSIC

THE ART OF WAR
THE ANCIENT CLASSIC
THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

SUN TZU
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

THE ART OF WAR
SUN TZU



ORION
CLASSICS

THE ART OF WAR

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Including the translated
THE SAYINGS OF WU TZU

SUN TZU

With an Introduction by
TOM BUTLER-BOWDON



CAPSTONE

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CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
An Introduction by Tom Butler-Bowdon	xi
Part I	1
THE ART OF WAR	3
Part II	101
THE SAYINGS OF WU TZU	103

FOREWORD

Sun Tzu's book, *The Art of War*, has appeal throughout the ages because business feels like warfare. We wish romantically that it were not so, but the daily lives of workers and executives alike are full of emotional traumas not unlike those that soldiers face at war.

A successful executive and a friend of mine used to work at a *Fortune 500* company. Shortly after he had retired, he confided in me: "I *put up* with them (his former employer) for 37 years." A client of mine worked at his non-profit for several decades and, when he retired, he moved as far away from his former employer as he could.

It is no wonder that I bought and read this ancient Chinese classic shortly after I resigned from my *Fortune 500* company job as a manager in international sales and marketing in the spring of 1983. My corporate job had given me so much angst and dissatisfaction I had cinematographic visions of large-scale warfare that felt like the apocalypse in my dreams. I wanted to set up my own business. I wanted to have control over my own fate. I knew I must read Sun Tzu in order to survive in this do-or-die, cut-and-thrust world of business.

One of the early stories in Sun Tzu that fascinated me was the way he handled the unruly concubines of his client, the Duke of Wu. He beheaded those who didn't take his training seriously, and succeeded in turning court ladies into fearsome warriors. War is serious and unsentimental, just like the forces at work in the marketplace. To fail to obey good judgment is fatal. I took this lesson to heart.

After 15 years of practicing my craft in helping companies promote and sell American-made products and services in the China market, I ran up against the most feared moment of my consultancy. My most important client did not get any business from China for one full year, and my annual retainer was about to be renewed. It was late December and I was about to meet my client. I had served my client for 14 years by that time. We trusted each other and we did not feel we had to play "games" with each other. I was telling myself that perhaps I should tell my client to drop me because I couldn't foresee when the China market would pick up. I was tempted to commit professional suicide.

I was fortunate that the same evening when I was thinking such thoughts, my lawyer friend Mariann invited me to her house for dinner. I told Mariann my dilemma and she said: "James, it is not up to you how your client wants to use you and your service. See

your client tomorrow and stay quiet. Listen to what they say to you first.”

As I sat in front of my client the next morning, I obeyed Mariann’s advice because it was so Sun-Tzu-esque. I controlled my feelings of insecurity. I did not become defensive or belligerent. Most importantly, I did not initiate a “fight” with my client on whether or not I am worthy of their retainer.

Miraculously, as I sat in silence while keeping my poise, my client told me in a matter-of-fact manner that they wanted to renew my contract. Not only that, they wanted to give me a three-year (not the usual one-year) contract. In addition, my client raised my consulting fee for me. I was speechless. I said: “Thank you.” The “negotiation” session took no more than five minutes.

This story is related to Sun Tzu because I put into practice the most important principle – and the ultimate goal – of the spirit of *The Art of War*, namely, the greatest victory is one that does not require fighting a war.

My client’s strategy proved to be correct. They understood the business cycle in their industry. They wanted to retain me in anticipation of doing battle with our competitors. In less than two years, the China market picked up and they succeeded beyond their expectations. It is hard enough to battle with one’s

competitors; it is fatal to fight an unnecessary war with one's benefactor.

Sun Tzu tells us not to do battle unless it is really necessary. This is just one of the many pieces of timeless advice in the book that you are about to read.

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AN INTRODUCTION

BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

That a person of today, a civilian, would want to read a manual for waging war that is over two thousand years old must say something about that work's enduring power.

But what, exactly, can the modern reader get from *The Art of War*?

First, in the capitalist knowledge society we live in, in which individual qualities are quickly exposed, the book's emphasis on the importance of personal character and knowledge as the keys to success has never been more relevant. Its author, Sun Tzu, insisted that wise generals or leaders could not simply rely on their knowledge of the terrain or the capabilities of the opposition, but had to know themselves. To become invincible, they first had to develop deep understanding, and full control, of their own reactions, to be the same in the face of praise or blame. Victory, Sun Tzu says, comes to those who have developed an ethic of constant refinement and improvement. It is never possible to control other people, but by developing our own strength of character, knowledge and insight we can build

invincibility. In Chinese philosophy, leadership is character. People with great character, developed over time, naturally become leaders.¹

Secondly, *The Art of War* is intriguing because of its spiritual underpinnings. While other military treatises from its era, and indeed modern war manuals such as Von Clausewitz's *On War* and the US Marines' *Warfighting*², are simply technical manuals on the mechanics of waging war, *The Art of War* provides a whole philosophy for action that applies to life as much as battle.

“In war there is no fixity,” Sun Tzu says. The wise general does not simply come up with a plan and rigidly follow it, but is attuned to the “Tao” of a situation, or the particular way events are moving at any one moment. Such a leader can act objectively and with perfect timing.

SUN TZU AND HIS IMPACT

Constant fighting between feudal states and dynasties, plus the need to defend borders from invaders (the Great Wall had been built long before Rome began its spread into northern Europe), gave China ancient experience in war strategy and methods. Amid a rich heritage of military annals, histories and manuals stands *Sunzi Bingfa* (*The Art of War*).

Both it and *Wuzi*, or *Sayings of Wutzu* (see Part II of this volume), are included in *Seven Military Classics*, the canon of war manuals first collated in 11th-century China.

The Art of War came into being when Sun Tzu was asked by the king of Wu, Ho Lu, to compose a work encapsulating his warrior wisdom. Sun Tzu, or Sun Wu as he is also known, was a real person. Born around 544 BCE, a native of the Qi state (now Shandong province), he was a contemporary of Confucius during the “Spring and Autumn” period when northern China was essentially a collection of warring states. His father had been a general and his grandfather a provincial governor. By his early 30s he had become known as a brilliant military strategist, leading the armies of Wu (the smallest of 13 states at the time) to great victories. Such “masters of war,” translator EF Calthrop notes, “were in no sense patriots but professional strategists, continually changing their employer.” Yet this very independence and objectivity were the source of their wisdom and prowess.

The impact of *The Art of War* on warfare in China could be compared to that of Machiavelli’s *The Prince* on politics in Europe and the West. The Chinese king Qin Shi Huang, for instance, adopted the

book's principles to unite China, and centuries later Chairman Mao would use it for a similar purpose.

Its influence transcends its original time and place. The *Sonshi* (or Sun Tzu), as it is known in Japan, was brought there as early as the 8th century, and later played an important role in Japan's unification. It was reputedly core reading for Napoleon in his European conquests, and in more recent times, American generals Douglas MacArthur and Norman Schwarzkopf, along with the Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap, noted their debt to the book. It remains on the syllabus in military colleges around the world.

This is the case even though, until little more than a century ago, in the West *The Art of War* was little known.

THE TEXT

First communicated orally, over time Sun Tzu's original tenets were made into a book, complemented by commentary and annotations from other military philosophers including Li Quan, Du Mu, Mei Sheng-yu, and the great warlord Cao Cao. For a period, doubt was cast on whether Sun Tzu was actually the author of *The Art of War*, with some scholars arguing that it was simply an aggregation of the

philosophies of various military leaders, or the work of Sun Tzu's descendant Sun Bin. However in 1972, in Shandong, bamboo-strip versions of *The Art of War* and *Sun Bin's The Art of War* were found in a Han dynasty (206 BCE–220CE) tomb, confirming each as separate works and Sun Tzu as the author of the text long attributed to him.

The first European translation was completed in 1782 by a French Jesuit priest living in China, Joseph Amiot, but it was another 120 years before the first English translation appeared. Captain Everard Ferguson ("EF") Calthrop was a British officer who had served in the Boer War before being stationed with the Foreign Service in Japan. As part of its then alliance with Japan, Britain deemed it useful for 50 or 60 of its officers to learn Japanese and study their host country's military system. Calthrop was exposed to the *Sonshi* and learned of its impact on the history of Japanese military strategy.

Calthrop's first translation of the *Sonshi* was published in 1905 in Tokyo, before it was fully revised for British publication in 1908 under the title *The Book of War: The Military Classics of the Far East*. This version carries well the basic force of Sun Tzu's maxims and, along with his translation of the *Sayings of Wutzu*, Calthrop's translation^{3,4} forms the basis of this Capstone edition.

In Calthrop's wake, Lionel Giles, a sinologist and keeper of Far East antiquities at the British Museum, published his own translation⁵. In it, perhaps resenting the incursion of a mere army officer onto his academic turf, he trenchantly criticized Calthrop for various perceived omissions and mistakes, and for lack of scholarship. However, as historian and military scholar Hamish Ion⁶ has noted, Calthrop was unfairly maligned since his translation was based on a Japanese version of Sun Tzu, which would always have differed from a Chinese text. Moreover, it was never Calthrop's purpose to provide exhaustive scholarly commentary, but rather to mine the wisdom of Sun Tzu for his higher-ups in the British Army, showing how that institution could be reformed and illuminating how Japan could have defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese war⁷.

After the Calthrop-Giles era many other translations of *The Art of War* followed, including Samuel Griffith's notable work of 1963, and they keep coming. Recent versions⁸ tend to emphasize the book as a guide to managing any kind of conflict, positing Sun Tzu as an enlightened Taoist master.

Below is a brief exploration of some of the main concepts in the work as we can apply them to work and life today.

Some versions begin with an account provided by the Chinese historian, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, of Sun Tzu's notorious actions at the court of King Ho Lu. Though not included in the main text, this apocryphal event is also discussed below.

In its basic form, *The Art of War* consists of Sun Tzu's 13 chapters, beginning with "Preliminary Reckoning," or the preparation for war, and ending with "The Employment of Spies." Yet modern readers should not expect a neat sequence of lessons. This is, after all, an ancient and sometimes enigmatic text that works best when we let it seep into our consciousness over several readings.

THE WAY OF THE WISE LEADER

The five factors

Sun Tzu identified "five indispensable matters" that had to inform a leader's decisions: The Way, Heaven, Earth, Leader, and Law. What do these actually mean, and how can we apply them in our own context?

In Sun Tzu's army, **The Way** refers to the extent to which there is singularity of purpose, with leader and soldiers tightly bound to the same goals. There

is very little such a body of people cannot accomplish, since they move with the power and purpose of one. The obvious lesson for organizations of any place or time: Do not waste energy on internal divisions, and move ahead united.

Related to the individual, The Way involves the five virtues of humanity, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faith, suggesting a mature person who, having developed themselves over many years, is “all of a piece” and galvanized by clear goals.

Heaven and **Earth**, as Sun Tzu uses the terms, are the conditions within which a general wages war. In a modern context, this can be interpreted as heightened, present-moment awareness of the social, political and economic environment in which one lives and works. Such awareness allows one to make the most of opportunities, avoid dangers, and develop intuition about what is to come.

Leader means a person or an organization that exhibits timeless values. The combination of “hard” and “soft” attributes – Sun Tzu specifically refers to sincerity, wisdom, benevolence, courage, and strictness as qualities of the great general – marks out an individual as deeply humane, and yet someone who means business. An organization, similarly, must be seen to be

tightly focused on its mission, and yet always be acting ethically.

Law in Sun Tzu's terms refers to "the ordering and partition of troops." For ourselves, we can take it to mean having one's house in order and establishing priorities. In an organization, Law may mean the appointment of the right people, who know exactly what they are accountable for and who have the resources to execute their mission.

Of these five factors of action, Sun Tzu says, "to know them is to conquer; to know them not is to be defeated."

Taking whole

Sun Tzu notes the great costs and evils of war, particularly prolonged wars, and so reserves his greatest praise for the general who is able to avert battle in the first place, who can "subdue the enemy without fighting."

However, if preventing conflict is not possible, the next greatest skill is to "take whole," or achieve victory with the minimum loss to life and property. Such a leader "causes the enemy's forces to yield, but without fighting; he captures his fortress, but without besieging it; and without lengthy fighting

takes the enemy's kingdom." The key is to build up momentum, then strike hard and either conquer or get away quickly. The wise general works continually to channel his soldiers' combined energies into a single powerful force that can achieve this. "Like the well-judged flight of the falcon, in a flash crushing its quarry, so should the stroke be timed," says Sun Tzu.

A clean victory will also involve giving the enemy an honorable exit strategy. When your forces begin to surround the enemy, Sun Tzu counsels, "allow him an outlet" through which escape is possible. If you push him into a corner with no chance of retreat it will cost you, as he will fight with the desperation of one who has nothing to lose.

Planning and preparedness

"Taking whole," as opposed to the shattering of a foreign kingdom through brute force, can be achieved. But it requires brilliant strategy and timing, great forethought, planning, and knowledge.

The wise leader never leaps into battle as an emotional response, but plans exhaustively to ensure that his positions will be impregnable, while identifying the weaknesses in the enemy.

Of Sun Tzu's "five occasions when victory can be foretold," number four is:

When the state is prepared, and chooses the enemy's unguarded moment for attack.

It is always a mistake to rely on assumptions about the enemy's positions and plans. Real confidence comes from knowing that your own positions are unassailable, and only then deciding to go into battle.

Sun Tzu says never to engage a force that is your equal. You must be certain of your superiority before the first arrow is shot. You must not only have greater numbers and better equipment, but be tactically superior, more nimble, have better information, and possess greater unity of purpose. "Skilful soldiers," Sun Tzu notes, "make defeat impossible."

In hindsight, the victor is always seen to be the one who made the most calculations prior to conflict. By practicing the way things may go, we are much less put off course by a change of events in the heat of battle.

"If the condition of both sides with regard to these matters be known," Sun Tzu says in relation to preparation and readiness, "I can foretell the victor."