

## Sun Tzu's The Art of War: Craftsmanship & Current Relevance

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### Abstract

Sun Tzu's 'The Art of War' is by far one of the finest political and war discourses ever written in prose form. Dating back to the Sixth Century B.C., it contains tremendous far-sighted elements of strategy and tactics embedded in it. He is often referred to as the modern-day economist a war strategist of his times. Having belonged to one of the oldest Chinese civilizations, he has spelt out clear principles of strategy and stressed the importance of tactics in war scenario. The discourse contains in it a detailed account of first-hand human experiences. The paper focuses on the strategy discourse, which is filled with courage, dedication and commitment. Tzu is seen as a realist in his approach and the discourse contains analogies on 'Nature'. The paper also offers deep analysis of 'craftsmanship' of the discourse from the standpoint of discourse literature.

**Keywords:** Sun Tzu, War, Strategy, Tactics, Craftsmanship.

### Introduction

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, the ancient Chinese treatise written about 2500 years ago is arguably the most important work on the subject of strategy. Lionel Giles first translated it in English in 1910. Since then it has been taught in many war and strategy colleges through the world.

Sun Tzu (544 - 496 B.C.) is perhaps by and large considered ruthless in his teaching and writings. His primary focus always centered toward achieving many objectives and in this very case on military strategy and tactics.

The writer has a significant pull over convictions than preferences in his objective writings. This helps the reader realize that preferences are negotiable and convictions are not. And under sheer pressure, preferences tend to become weak and convictions gathers significant strength. Most often, they talk on exact opposites. The rewards could be followed with punishments, morality to be encapsulated with immorality and honesty accompanied by dishonesty. And human actions are justified with rational a chance that is presented to them and not in the form of choices.

Mark McNeilly who authored *Sun Tzu and The Art of Modern Warfare (2003)* discusses extensively on Sun Tzu's expertise in devising strategies. He had also recorded some of key global events in his books and compared has them with the discourse. He describes that "The Art of War by Sun Tzu is a cohesive and holistic text. If you listen to Sun Tzu's principles you are likely to win. If you don't, you are at your own peril and will lose".

The work significantly portrays values and habits. In the world of strategy, Sun Tzu gives impetus to human actions such as patience, subversion and chaos. Although, most aspects are ruthless in their nature, Sun Tzu is very clear in military principles that his treatise is for strategic and tactical gains and hence important values such as morality and honesty do not gain prominence.

### Methodology

In the paper, I seek to pick few quotes and human attributes like actions and strategies from his work and analyze them. The words significantly portraying on strategy and tactics are hand picked, compared with modern military operations and analyzed. For instance, Sun Tzu, gives impetus to metaphors utilizing nature such as 'wood', 'mountain' and 'water'.

#### Craftsmanship

##### i.) Lexical Derivatives

Words like 'Water' and 'Thunderbolt' used extensively in the discourse indicate Sun Tzu's strong affinity towards nature. And words like 'intuitive sagacity' and 'knowledge' strongly reiterates his importance for the dire need of human intellect.

##### ii.) Personification

Tzu attributes the importance of spies to one of the elements of earth, 'water'. And on them depends an army's ability to move. The personification of 'Water' assumes central importance here to which Tzu devotes his complete attention.

To avoid wars, one needs to rely on the works of the spies. Strategies that are created between strength and weakness are given a major impetus. Tzu heavily depends on deceiving the mind of the enemy in order to win a battle without even to having fighting in one. His emphasis on mental strength over physical is to be clearly established in the most befitting fashion of modern-day espionage. Subversion and Chaos have become the epitome his successful devised strategies among many.

Through his discourse, we find Sun Tzu to be a naturalist. A military General to King Ho Lu of the Wu Clan, is perhaps one of the finest military strategists. His ultimate emphasis is upon foreknowledge to any given situation in order to succeed in a war scenario. Sun Tzu says,

“Supreme Art of War is to subdue the enemy without fighting” (3:6)

The real strategy devised is a psychological war. In modern parlance, we refer to “proxy wars”. The idea is to subdue the enemy that a war is in progress; but in stark reality the enemy is deceived into the trap. The mind-set of the enemy is thus tricked.

iii.) Metaphor of ‘Darkness’

“Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt” (7:13).

He attaches importance to the use of secrecy in battle movement through natural analogies. He refers to secrecy and often it is a metaphor assigned to ‘darkness’. And the battle movement is compared to swiftness like a thunderbolt. In modern parlance, The Shaolin School of Martial Arts, China clearly spells out eleven principles to master the art of self-defense. And among the principles laid out, one of them attaches importance to the metaphor of thunderbolt.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 2011, The US Navy SEAL’s secretly conducted a special operation in Abbottabad, Pakistan and hunted down one of the most wanted terrorist in the world. The operation was conducted in the night with absolute precision with the use of minimum personal but armed with brute force of weaponry.

iv.) Use of Mixed Metaphors depicting ‘Nature’: ‘Wind’ & ‘Wood’. ‘Fire’ & ‘Mountain’.

*“Move swift as the wind and closely-formed as the wood. Attack like the fire and be still as the mountain”*

In the battle scenario, without concrete strategies disaster is sure to follow. To address the given issue at large, Sun Tzu compares speed with wind and the formation with wood. Fire by all given imagination is bound for disaster and its capacity to destroy excessively is stressed. In the modern contexts, one of the Shaolin principles being taught in the Shaolin monastery, China is that in order to sustain an attack it is imperative to hold oneself like a mountain.

Importance of ‘human intellect’

*“Knowledge of enemy’s disposition can be obtained from other men” (13:6)*

Here he stresses the importance of foreknowledge for a warrior to succeed in a war. Ultimately, human intelligence is very carefully constructed through extensive planning. Sun Tzu argues that foreknowledge cannot be elicited from spirits, cannot be obtained inductively from experience, or by any deductive calculation. Sun Tzu says,

*“To neglect the use of spies is nothing less than a crime against humanity” (13:2)*

Sun Tzu clarifies that chaos is good. In common reality, chaos could be seen as a gaping pit. But, he pitches in that chaos is like a ladder. One needs to climb on it to outwit the given confused state of situation. This, in his approach is the single most important aspect to subdue the enemy. Intelligence by far, can be collated only through human endeavors. And to minimize the casualties and thereby forbid a war altogether, spying become the focal point of the nerve center of war strategy.

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was constantly in touch with the ‘Saudi Group’ for a decade between 2001 and 2011 to culminate the required information in order to locate and capture Osama Bin Laden, the most wanted terrorist in the world at the time.

Sun Tzu attributes a special mention on the use of ‘Double Agents’ in war scenarios. Chapter XIII exclusively deals with the use of secret agents during war.

*“Spies cannot be usefully employed without a certain intuitive sagacity” (13:15)*

Tzu argues that it is highly important for spies to develop mental strength than physical strength. This in turn, would make them wise and enable them to make shrewd and concrete choices. Spies have limited time and scope throughout their ordeals almost every day. And their choices do not necessarily clout with any given rationale but go by purely circumstantial chances.

*“The end aim of spying in all its five varieties is knowledge of the enemy; and this knowledge can only be derived, in the first instance, from the converted spy” (13:25)*

The ultimate aim of the converted spy is to satisfy the needs of both his native state and the enemy state. This involves tremendous pressure and duress on the part of the converted spy and his every move his double-watched in double time.

In modern parlance we could attribute it to ‘Operation Double Cross’, which was successfully employed by the British during the Second World War (1939 – 1945). Wherein, Spy agents from Russia and Germany were utilized by the British and in-turn were overturned to spy on their own respective native states.

The Game of Chess VS The Game of Go (Encircling Game)

Unlike the game of chess, which is traditionally a fight wherein, the king is cornered by either checkmate or stalemate; the game of go is about occupying more space. War strategists and experts have long debated the extent of employing strategies in a war scenario to capture a territory or regain a lost one.

In the modern day scenario, we could take the example of the instances during the Vietnam War. The General of the US Army chose the chess strategy and the Vietnam General who chose the GO game strategy. Eventually, the American people were also protesting against the war in their home state. These instances not only led the US to evade their war but also ultimately led to their withdrawal. This was necessarily a psychological pressure for the US administration to which they could not bolster.

In the game “Go”, the pawns move across the board in order to occupy more space and therefore, not only the king, but his subjects, courtiers, citizens are all cornered psychologically. The encirclement reflects the mental challenges posed to the given circumstance.

Sun Tzu is an expert tactician in the art of subversion. He employs small strategies to confuse the enemy. He proposes to attack the small pickets of army posts of the enemy and when the real army arrives to rescue the victimized army post, the small army sent is gone by then to attack the next post. In this daring strategy of subversion, the enemy is led to believe one but deceived to cater to the other. Thus, Sun Tzu scatters the small army of soldiers to out win the mind of the enemy combatants and thereby leaving them with a deep sense of frustration.

### Conclusion

Tzu has laid out clear principles for the purposes for human survival in the harshest conditions possible. But when clarified in closer perspectives, he has created some of them. One priority they he has surmised are to denote the extensive roles of surviving and converted spies. They can be appointed for special occasions. Weddings, Throne Ascensions and major festivals according to them could be utilized as occasions for the purposes of insertion or defection of spies.

This, in modern day parlance could perhaps be referred to as clandestine operations; assassinations could be referred to as the black operations. These characteristics and strategies involve deep human intellect and require consistent patience to have them established. The discourse depicts accurate endeavor of human conditions and reiterates the importance of survival.

The strategies and tactics are extensively dealt not only in literal terms but in principle is figurative about managing conflicts and winning battles. Sun Tzu has in many ways realized the importance of strategy in a war scenario. It completely minimizes the human casualties and on economic fronts it clearly remarks sustainable management of resources.

The focal point of contention is heavily rested upon many facets of human action and behavior. And it thus becomes imminent to decode those actions involving human emotions and therefore deeper introspection of many of its facets among many has become mandatory. Finally, Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* is merely not just a discourse for learning military strategies alone but is also necessarily a great source for literary appreciation among many others in the long palate of distinct colors and flavors it succinctly offers.

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