

CHINESE CLASSICS

The Wisdom of Sun Tzu

RETOLD BY GUO WENPING & ZHONG SHAOYI

TRANSLATED BY TIFFANY GRAY (U.S.)



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS

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图书在版编目(CIP)数据

孙子的智慧: 英文 / 郭闻平 钟少异著; (美) 格雷 (Gray, T.) 译.
—北京: 五洲传播出版社, 2010.1

ISBN 978-7-5085-1754-4

I. ①孙... II. ①郭... ②钟... ③格... III. ①兵法—中国—春秋时代—
通俗读物—英文 IV. ①E892.25-49

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2009) 第 215469 号

THE WISDOM OF SUN TZU

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Retold by Guo Wenping & Zhong Shaoyi

Translated by Tiffany Gray (U.S.)

Designed by Yang Jingfei

Proofreading: Zhao Weibing

Planning: Hu Changming

Revisor: Qian Lihua

Executive Editor: Zheng Lei

Published and Distributed by China Intercontinental Press, 25th Floor, Huatian Plaza,
6 Beixiaomachang, Haidian District, Beijing 100038, China, (86) 10-58891281,
<http://www.cicc.org.cn>

First Printing: February 2010

Printed by Beijing Picture in Picture Printing Co, Ltd

ISBN 978-7-5085-1754-4

07800

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FOREWORD

After the advent of the 6th century B.C., a new era of spiritual creativity was welcomed, bringing with it an explosion of new thoughts. In Greece, there were Thales and Pythagoras, who initiated the development of philosophy and science. Sakyamuni arose in India and created Buddhism. In China, Lao Tzu, Confucius and Sun Tzu revealed the prologue to an era of free thought and innovation beginning in the late Spring and Autumn Period.

Sun Tzu's Art of War is one of the achievements that sprung forth from this explosion of thoughts.

Compared to the theoretical creations of other great thinkers of that age (in the East as well as the West) in philosophy, politics, science, religion and other fields, Sun Tzu's theoretical creations in the military arena were unique but equally great. Together, their philosophical achievements had a huge and profound influence on the spiritual world and realistic world shaped by human beings themselves.

Since the birth of *Sun Tzu's Art of War* in the late 6th



century B.C., it became widely influential in China. At the beginning of the 1st century B.C., the great Chinese historian Sima Qian was quoted as saying: "In civilian discussions of military affairs, they inevitably refer to the thirteen chapters of *Sun Tzu's Art of*

War." Clearly, this book was already very popular and respected at that time in China. By the 11th century A.D., a military school called Wuxue had been established by the Song Dynasty. The imperial government selected seven books from the military works of past dynasties to make up the curriculum. Under unified management, they were checked against authoritative texts, printed and published in 1080, and called the *wu jing qi shu* (seven books of the military canon). Among them, *Sun Tzu's Art of War* held the primary position, solidifying its high standing in Chinese military science.

For thousands of years, the great volumes of ideas, categorizations, theses and judgments coming out of *Sun Tzu's Art of War* have been the object of debate in traditional Chinese military science. Each successive dynasty and each successive generation's military experts and military writings have continued to supplement and develop *Sun Tzu's Art of War*





theoretically, but fundamentally none has surpassed it. It could be said that *Sun Tzu's Art of War* charted the development course for ancient China's theory of war, establishing the foundational spirit of China's traditional military philosophy.

In China's recent history, *Sun Tzu's Art of War* has continued to play an active role as an important source of ideas in the process of building a new model of military theory. For example, in many of Mao Zedong's military writings, he used Sun Tzu's words to illustrate his points; Mao also referred to many famous historical battles in China to back up his own opinion. The influence of China's military heritage represented by *Sun Tzu's Art of War* had provided Mao Zedong's military thinking with a profound historical context. It was also an important factor in the uniquely Chinese character of Mao Zedong's military thinking.

In the 7th century, during China's Tang Dynasty, *Sun Tzu's Art of War* gained widespread influence in East Asia, spreading to Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and other countries. In 1772, France's Jean Joseph Marie Amiot was the first to translate *Sun Tzu's Art of War* into French; after that, translations appeared in Europe in Russian, German, and English. From the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century, this ancient Chinese work of military strategy gradually attracted the attention and

interest of Western society.

Since the latter half of the 20th century, *Sun Tzu's Art of War* has continued to spread throughout the world. According to partial data, today *Sun Tzu's Art of War* has been distributed widely throughout the world and translated into Japanese, French, Russian, German, English, Italian, Czech, Romanian, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, Dutch, Spanish, Vietnamese, Danish, Burmese, Thai, Korean, Malay, and other world languages. More and more military schools across the globe are recommending or requiring students to read and analyze *Sun Tzu's Art of War* as an important military classic. As we have entered the 21st century, the influence of *Sun Tzu's Art of War* has not declined; rather, it has taken another step towards surpassing the constraints of regional and language barriers, gaining the respect of more and more people of every color.

In the 1960s, the English military strategist Liddell Hart made the following evaluation of *Sun Tzu's Art of War*: "Sun Tzu's essays on 'The Art of War' form the earliest of known treatises on the subject, but have never been surpassed in com-





prehensiveness and depth of understanding. They might be termed the concentrated essence of wisdom on the conduct of war. Among all the military thinkers of the past, only Clausewitz is comparable, and even he is more 'dated' than Sun Tzu, and in part antiquated, although he was writing more than two thousand years later. Sun Tzu has clearer vision, more profound insight, and eternal freshness."

What kind of a person was Sun Tzu? And what kind of a book is *Sun Tzu's Art of War*? What important military theories did he put forward? What were his views on issues of war? Let's take a look together at the world of Sun Tzu.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF SUN TZU

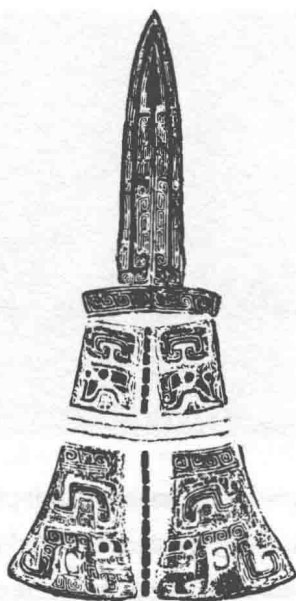
The name of the man we now call "Sun Tzu" (Sun Zi) is much like Confucius (Kong Zi) and Lao Tzu (Lao Zi); it is a respectful title bestowed on him by later generations. In Chinese history, only academics, great thinkers and educators could be called "Zi". Sun Tzu's real name was Sun Wu and he

was a contemporary of Confucius (551 – 479 B.C.) during the latter period of Zhou Dynasty in ancient China, which was a tumultuous age of continual wars between many feudal states.

Sun Wu was born into a large family of many famous generals, and came of age as the dynasty crumbled and many wars raged. He was steeped in a strong military tradition from when he was a small boy, which developed in him a strong interest in military affairs.

Both the accumulated military experience of his family and the frequent and fierce wars of the age created the ideal conditions that cultivated his ability to carry out deeper rational analysis of military issues.

In 532 B.C., Sun Wu left the Qi state for the southern state of Wu. Wu was another feudal state of the Zhou Dynasty, established in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River surrounding Taihu (including the southern portion of today's Jiangsu Province and the northern portion of today's Zhejiang Province). The capital was established in Gusu (present day Suzhou). After Sun Wu arrived in Wu, he isolated himself somewhere near Gusu, immersing himself in military strategy research while carefully observing political trends in the Wu state.



After taking the throne in 514 B.C., the ambitious king of Wu, He Lu, began widespread recruitment of talented men in an effort to defeat the states of Chu and Yue and build up a hegemony. So, Sun Wu presented his thirteen chapters of *The Art of War* to the king of Wu and was granted an audience. At this moment, history takes on a very legendary tone in this act as *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, this great military work, is revealed to the world.

Ancient China's greatest historian Sima Qian provided a moving account of this event in his great work, *Historical Records*:

With his *Art of War*, Sun Wu requested an audience with the Wu king He Lu.

He Lu said to him: "I have carefully perused your thirteen chapters. May I submit your theory of managing soldiers to a slight test?"

Sun Wu replied: "You may."

He Lu asked, "May women be used for the test?"

Sun Wu said, "Yes."

He Lu made arrangements to bring 180 ladies out of the palace for his demonstration.

Sun Wu divided them into two companies, and placed one of the king's favorite concubines at the head of each. He then bade them all take spears in their hands, and addressed them thus:

"I presume you know the difference between front and back, right hand and left hand?"

The girls replied: "Yes."

Sun Wu went on: "When I say 'Eyes front,' you must look straight ahead. When I say 'Left turn,' you must face towards your left hand. When I say 'Right turn,' you must face towards your right hand. When I say "About turn," you must face right round towards your back."

Again the girls assented.

Next Sun Wu let the guards set up the halberds and battle-axes for punishment, and reiterated the importance of military rules and regulations. Then, to the sound of drums, he gave the order "Right turn." But the girls only burst out laughing.

Sun Wu said: "If words of command are not clear and distinct, if orders are not thoroughly understood, then the general is to blame." So he explained the essentials of the drills,



military rules and regulations several times, and beat the drum and gave the order "Left turn" again, whereupon the girls once more burst into fits of laughter.

Sun Wu: "If words of command are not clear and distinct, if orders are not thoroughly understood, the general is to blame. But if his orders ARE clear, and the soldiers nevertheless disobey, then it is the fault of their officers." So saying, he ordered the leaders of the two companies to be beheaded.

Now the king of Wu was watching the scene from the top of a raised pavilion; and when he saw that his favorite concubines were about to be executed, he was greatly alarmed and hurriedly sent down the following message: "I'm now quite satisfied as to our general's ability to handle troops. If I'm bereft of these two concubines, my meat and drink will lose their savor, and I cannot sleep in peace. It is our wish that they shall not be beheaded. Please revoke your command."

Sun Wu replied: "Having once received His Majesty's commission to be the general of his forces, there are certain commands of His Majesty which, acting in that capacity, I am unable to accept."

Accordingly, he had the two leaders beheaded, and straightway installed the pair next in order as leaders in their place. When this had been done, the drum was sounded for the drill once more; and the girls went through all the evolutions, turning to the right or to the left, marching ahead or wheeling back, kneeling or standing, with perfect accuracy and precision, not venturing to utter a sound.

Then Sun Wu sent a messenger to the King saying: "Your

soldiers, Sire, are now properly drilled and disciplined, and ready for your majesty's inspection. They can be put to any use that their sovereign may desire; bid them go through fire and water, and they will not disobey."

But the king replied: "Let our general cease drilling and return to camp. As for me, I have no wish to come down and inspect the troops."

After that, He Lu saw that Sun Wu was one who knew how to handle an army, and finally appointed him general.

With his courageous and resolute action, Sun Wu let the king of Wu as well as the world know that his book and military theory did not lose touch with reality, nor discuss war only on the paper.

After that, until 482 B.C., the state of Wu grew in might, defeating the great state of Chu to the west and sacking its capital of Yingcheng (located in present day Jiangling of Hubei Province), then moving northward in a great show of strength to overcome great powers like the states of Qi and Jin. Throughout the long succession of wars and battles, Sun Wu made great contributions. However, historical records have recorded very little of his specific actions in battle, and records of his later years can hardly be found in literature. The essence of his achievements is represented by his *Art of War*. As Sun Tzu has primarily been admired throughout the world for the principles recorded in his great work, Mao Zedong called Sun Tzu a "great military expert". This is similar to Clausewitz's achievements and contributions embodied in his *On War*.

THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF *SUN TZU'S ART OF WAR*

Sun Wu is commonly called Sun Tzu as form of respect, so his great work on military strategy is called *Sun Tzu's Art of War*, or just *Sun Tzu*. This book is comprised of approximately 6,000 Chinese characters (one Chinese character is comparable to one English word), which is similar in length to Confucius' *Analects* and Lao Tzu's *The Way of Tao* (*Tao Te Ching*), each containing about 5,000 characters. Their common characteristic is that their language is extremely simple but succinct, choosing the most suitable phrases and maxims. Nearly every sentence is highly condensed, making it brief and to the point; the ideas expressed therein are profound and penetrating.

Sun Tzu's Art of War has a total of thirteen chapters. It is the essence of military strategizing and guidelines for waging war; each level is unfolded to create a unique system of military theory. In these thirteen chapters, Sun Tzu's analysis



ranges from outlooks on war, military strategy and tactics, operations support, army building, to military intelligence and other broad topics, covering every major aspect of military theory. This was the first time many of these issues had been collected and specifically analyzed.

The structure of *Sun Tzu's Art of War* is as follows: the first chapter is the key part of the entire book; it mentions every core topic that will be discussed and resolved, along with a synoptic description. The first topic is issues of overall planning and strategizing for war; the second is issues of warfare, including thinking on warfare and methods of warfare. The second through the fourth chapters are mainly analyses of overall planning and strategizing issues, where he describes a system of ideas on grand strategy. The fifth through twelfth chapters mainly discuss issues of waging war. The sixth chapter "Weak Points and Strong" laid out Sun Tzu's core thinking on warfare, and the other chapters broadly describe a system of principles and methods on waging war. Together, they form Sun Tzu's theory on war. The thirteenth chapter specifically addresses military intelligence issues, which is an important basis for planning and waging war. Within this structure, Sun Tzu also completely describes his basic attitude and many ideas on relevant issues regarding generals, as well as touching on every broad issue in the military arena. He thus established a great system of military theory that is uniquely clear.