

The art of war

Sun-tzu (Sun-zi) :

translated with an introduction and commentary by John Minford.

The Art of War

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(Sun-zi)

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TRANSLATED

INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

BY

John Minford

VIKING

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In memory of my father,

Leslie Minford

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Introduction

The Way of War is a Way of Deception.
—Master Sun, Chapter 1

Master Sun's short treatise *The Art of War* is both inspirational and worrying. It is beautiful and chilling. It encapsulates a part of the irreducible essence of Chinese culture and has been familiar to literate Chinese down the ages. For that reason alone, it is an extraordinarily important book and one that should be read by anyone dealing with either China or Japan. During the Second World War, E. Machell-Cox produced a version for the Royal Air Force. "Master Sun," he wrote, "is fundamental and, read with insight, lays bare the mental mechanism of our enemy. Study him, and study him again. Do not be misled by his simplicity."¹ Today, with China playing a more and more integral role in the world, Master Sun has become prescribed reading for global entrepreneurs. "Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting" (Chapter 3). Or, in the words of Gordon Gekko, the corporate raider in Oliver Stone's brilliant exposé of late-twentieth-century American capitalism, *Wall Street*, "I bet on sure things. Sun Tzu: 'Every battle is won before it is fought.' Think about it."

But *The Art of War* offers more than an insight into Chinese ways of doing things (including business). Like its venerable predecessor *The Book of Changes*, it lends itself to infinite applications. It has been used as a springboard for an American self-help book about interpersonal relationships.² It could no doubt also serve as the basis for a book on tennis, cooking, or defensive driving. The strategic advice it offers concerns much more than the conduct of war. It is an ancient book of proverbial wisdom, a book of life.

Cunning Plans, Popular Culture

The Empty City

The novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, written sometime in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, has been described as a vernacular expansion of Master Sun's ideas, a novelistic "folk manual of waging war, a description of the classical strategic and tactical solutions which were a part of the ancient theory of war, a popular lecture on classical theory [of warfare]."³ In a scene from Chapter 38, the most famous of all China's strategic wizards, Zhuge Liang (181–234), the "Sleeping Dragon," finally meets Liu Bei (161–223), pretender to the throne of the crumbling Han dynasty. This is Liu's third visit to the recluse's hermitage, his two previous visits having proved fruitless. The Dragon is at home, and Liu meets him face-to-face, a striking figure in his silken headscarf and Taoist-style robe lined with cranesdown, emanating the "buoyant air of a spiritual transcendent."⁴ Liu eventually succeeds in recruiting the hermit's services, and the Dragon, "though having never left his thatched cottage," proceeds to "demonstrate his foreknowledge of the balance of power." He goes on to mastermind Liu's military campaign with extraordinary cunning. One of the most famous of the Dragon's many strategic victories occurs some twenty years later, in the year A.D. 228, five years after the death of Liu Bei himself. Chapter 95 of the novel finds Zhuge cornered in the city of Xicheng (West City), with a paltry force of five thousand, against one hundred and fifty thousand troops of the northern state of Wei, led by the redoubtable marshal Sima Yi:

The Sleeping Dragon dispatched half of his troops to transfer the grain and fodder from the city to where the main body of his forces was encamped, which left him with a mere 2,500 soldiers in the city. [The astute seventeenth-century commentator Mao Zong'gang observes at this point: *Twenty-five hundred against one hundred and fifty thousand? Let's see how Master Sleeping Dragon manages to get out of this one!*] His officers were aghast at the state of affairs. Sleeping Dragon mounted the battlements to view the situation for himself, and sure enough he could make out the two columns of the huge Wei army, raising an enormous twin cloud of dust into the sky as they converged on the city. He now gave orders to conceal all military flags and pennants [Mao: *Strange! Weird!*], and announced that all the sol-

diers were to stay within their billets. Any discovered wandering around or making a din were to be instantly decapitated. [*Decidedly weird!*] He ordered the four gates of the city to be thrown open, and at each gate posted twenty soldiers in civilian attire, with instructions to go about casually sprinkling the ground and sweeping the streets. [*Weirder and weirder! Where twenty-five hundred could not withstand one hundred and fifty thousand, twenty can! Highly ingenious!*] "When the enemy arrives," ordered Zhuge Liang, "no one is to make a move. Leave everything to me. I have a plan." [*I wonder what Sleeping Dragon has up his sleeve?*]

The Master then donned his Taoist robe lined with finest cranesdown, and his silken headscarf, and made his way up to the watchtower above the main gate, accompanied by two page-boys and carrying his lute. There he lit incense and sat calmly playing an air on his lute. [*Weird! Ingenious! Just like the olden days in his hermitage! Doubtless the air he was playing on the silken strings of his lute was going to annihilate the enem. . . .*]

The scouts of Marshal Sima Yi, the enemy commander-in-chief, had meanwhile arrived before the city, and seeing this strange state of affairs, did not venture within the walls but hurried back to report to their general. Sima laughed, and found it hard to believe what they were telling him. [*So do I, to this very day!*] He ordered his troops to halt their advance, and galloped ahead to a vantage point from which he could observe matters for himself. Sure enough, he espied Sleeping Dragon seated up above the gateway, a smile on his face as he played his lute, surrounded by clouds of incense. To his left stood one page-boy, holding a ceremonial sword; to his right another page-boy, with a fly-whisk, emblem of the Taoist priest-magician. Within and without the gate, twenty-odd townsfolk could be seen casually cleaning the street. There was not another soul in sight.

Marshal Sima was filled with misgivings. [*So am I, to this very day! It must have been a most extraordinary sight!*] He returned to his army, and ordered his men to turn around and head north into the hills. His son protested: "Surely Sleeping Dragon is doing this precisely because he has no troops. Why are you retreating, Father?" [*Smarter than his father. . . .*] "I know Sleeping Dragon," replied the Marshal. "He has always been a man of great caution. He never takes risks. I am sure that this throwing open of the gates is simply a ruse. He has definitely set an ambush for us. If we go in, we walk straight into his trap. You are too young to understand. No, we must retreat with all speed."

So both columns of the Wei army turned around and retreated. Zhuge, seeing them go, laughed and clapped his hands. His officers were astonished, and begged their commander for an explication. [No doubt *Sleeping Dragon* had chanted some sort of "Spell for a Retreat" as he played his lute. . . .] "The Marshal has always known me for a cautious man," Zhuge began. "He knows I never take risks. He was bound to suspect an ambush. That is why he decided to retreat. [He knew that his enemy was familiar with his character; and therefore he acted out of character. . . . Brilliant! Genius!] I wasn't gambling. I simply had no other option. . . ."

His officers were dumbfounded at their commander's inscrutable genius.⁵

Two of the early commentators on Master Sun's *Art of War* tell a briefer version of this same story (which is probably apocryphal—historically speaking, Marshal Sima Yi seems to have been somewhere else at the time). Their comments come immediately after the Master's statement in Chapter 6: "If I do not wish to engage, I can hold my ground with nothing more than a line drawn around it. The enemy cannot engage me in combat; I distract him in a different direction." Certainly Zhuge Liang the wizard had little more than a line between himself and the massive Wei army. The "Ruse of the Empty City," as it came to be known, was graphically retold by many a medieval storyteller and went on to become a subject for opera and for popular woodblock prints (*nianhua*—in some of these the Dragon completes the picture of relaxation by having a cup of wine before him).⁶ It forms the thirty-second of *The Thirty-six Stratagems* (a popular condensation of traditional Chinese strategic wisdom, of obscure origin), where it is presented as a clever psychological strategy for use in desperate circumstances. It is also used to illustrate the forty-third of *The Hundred Unusual Strategies* (another popular compilation, probably from the Song dynasty).⁷ Here the "unusual strategy" being advocated is the subtle use of illusion, of deception or bluff, against a numerically superior enemy, what Joseph Needham calls "obtaining the desired effect through a discreet use of appearances, thereby avoiding an actual battle."⁸ Both of these late popular works were based largely on Master Sun's much older treatise. Zhuge Liang, the Sleeping Dragon, is himself (improbably) credited with a short work on the Art of War,⁹ while Cao Cao, Zhuge's adversary in his early campaigns (he is already dead by the time of the Empty City), is the prime commentator on Master Sun's *Art of War*.¹⁰ Both Cao Cao and the Sleeping Dragon are household names in China, emblems of military skill and strategic cunning, while Master Sun's *Art of War* and *The Three*

Kingdoms have continued to fascinate the Chinese popular imagination into the twenty-first century.¹¹ Both the treatise and the novel exercised a considerable influence on Chairman Mao, and in its recent lavish television serialization, *The Three Kingdoms* captured a huge audience in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Cartoon-strip versions of *The Art of War* enjoy large sales throughout the Chinese-speaking world, while the number of Web sites (in Chinese, Japanese, and English) devoted to Master Sun continues to grow.¹²

From Proverbial to Popular Culture

The most Skillful Warrior is never warlike; the most Skillful Warrior is never angered; the most skilled at defeating the enemy never strives (*The Way and Its Power*, Chapter 68).

The Skillful Strategist defeats the enemy without doing battle (*The Art of War*, Chapter 3).

In war it is best to attack minds, not cities; psychological warfare is better than fighting with weapons [Mao Zong'gang: *These words are not to be found in The Art of War. They are the summit of the Art, superior even to the teachings of Master Sun and Master Wu.*] (*The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Chapter 87).

"Know the enemy, know yourself, and victory is never in doubt, not in a hundred battles." We must not underestimate the wisdom of this saying of Master Sun, the great military thinker of ancient China (Mao Zedong, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, p. 187).

In ancient times there was a man called Han Xin [d. 196 B.C.], one of Liu Bang's [247–195 B.C.] senior generals [stories of Han Xin's military exploits recur throughout the commentaries on *The Art of War*]. Why was he so successful as a general? Even as a young man, Han Xin was an exceptional person. As a youth, he liked to practice martial arts, and one day he was walking down the street, carrying his sword, when a local ruffian blocked his way with his hands on his hips. "What are you carrying that sword for? Have you got the guts to kill someone? If you have, cut off my head." He stuck out his head. Han Xin thought to himself, "Why should I cut off this man's head?" The ruffian saw that Han Xin was not going to kill him, and said, "If you haven't got the guts, then crawl between my legs." So

Han Xin crawled between his two legs. [This story is ultimately based on the biography of Han Xin in the *Records of the Grand Historian*.] The way he accepted this humiliation showed that Han Xin had a heart of great forbearance. And yet he was just an ordinary person. As practitioners [of Falun Gong], we should be much better than he. Our goal is to rise above and beyond the level of ordinary people and to strive toward high levels (Li Hongzhi, founder of the proscribed Falun Gong movement, from Lecture Nine on his Web site).¹³

Ways of thinking such as these, psychological strategies in warfare and conflict such as the Ruse of the Empty City, belong to a field of human activity that concerns us all immediately. They are far from the ivory tower of pure philosophy. It is hardly surprising that they should have spread so far and so wide within Chinese popular culture. That quintessentially Chinese domain known as the martial arts, for example, is based on ideas of this kind. The sixth of Master Yang Chengfu's (1862–1935) Ten Precepts in *Taiji Shadow Boxing*, as recorded by his disciple Chen Weiming, reads, "Use thought, not force. Your body should be utterly relaxed; no physical exertion is necessary."¹⁴ Chen Weiming himself, when describing the *taiji* practice of *tuishou* ("push hands"), wrote, "When you attack, it is like a bullet penetrating neatly (*gancui*), without recourse to force. . . . This is real *taiji*. If you use force, you may move your adversary, but it will not be *gancui*. If he tries to use force to control or push you, it will be like a man catching the wind or chasing shadows."¹⁵ In Shaolin kungfu, we encounter the same ideas: "The tactics and strategies used by a Shaolin disciple during combat are an intelligent application of principles generalized by some of the best warriors in the past. Some of these principles include:

- Signal to the east, strike to the west;
- Avoid an opponent's strong points, strike the weak ones;
- Trick an opponent into advancing without success,
- Then strike decisively with just one blow;
- If an opponent is strong, enter from the side;
- If he is weak, enter from the front;
- Use minimum force
- To neutralize maximum strength.¹⁶

And if we search further back into the past, we find similar ideas and stories throughout the Taoist classics and in *The Book of Changes*. When we approach *The Art of War*, when we deal with its ideas and their reception, we

are dealing with a concatenation of ancient text and medieval event; of treatise, history, and novel; of commentary and legend; of theory and practice. We are dealing with a book whose ramifications extend through the vernacular entertainment culture of China's Middle Ages to the contemporary popular medium of Chinese State Television.

Master Sun's *Art of War* is one of China's key proverbial texts. Its seminal ideas have permeated Chinese culture, as Arthurian legends and ideals have permeated European culture. And yet, if we turn to this short text itself, we are confronted with an author about whom virtually nothing is known and a book that (in the words of one contemporary Chinese scholar) "presents the reader with greater difficulties than almost any other work of comparable antiquity."¹⁷

Let us begin with the "Sage" himself, Master Sun.

Master Sun and His Times

The Harem Sergeant-Major

Most of the little we "know" about Master Sun is contained in his biography from the *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian (ca. 145–ca. 85 B.C.), historian and master storyteller:

Master Sun Wu was from the state of Qi. On account of his treatise on the Art of War he obtained an audience with He Lü, the king of Wu [reigned 514–496 B.C.].

"I have carefully studied the Thirteen Chapters of your treatise," said the king. "Would it be possible for you to give me a small demonstration of the drilling of troops?"¹⁸

"Certainly I can," replied Master Sun.

"Can this demonstration be performed with women?"

"It can."¹⁹

The king authorized him to proceed. One hundred and eighty of His Majesty's most beautiful concubines were summoned from the inner apartments of the palace, and Master Sun divided them into two companies, putting one of the king's favorites in command of each company. All of the women warriors were given a halberd to hold. Master Sun now addressed them.

"Can you tell your front from your back, your left hand from your right hand?"²⁰

"We can," replied the women.

"When I give the order 'Eyes front!' you are to look forward," said Master Sun. "When I command 'Eyes left!' you are to look to the left. 'Eyes right!' look to the right; 'Eyes rear!' look to the back. Is that understood?"

"Yes!" replied the women.

With these rules established, Master Sun had the executioner's ax set up [to show that he meant business], went through the commands again, and explained them several times.²¹ Then he beat on the drum and gave the order to face to the right. The women all burst out laughing.

"If my orders were unclear," said Master Sun, "and not properly understood, then I, as your general, am to blame."

So he went through the commands once more, explaining them in detail. This time he beat out the order to face left. Once again, the ladies of the harem burst out laughing.²²

"While my orders were unclear, and not properly understood, I, as your general, was to blame. But now, since my orders were clear, and since you understood them properly, the fault lies with your commanding officers."

And he gave the order for the concubines placed in command of each company to be decapitated.

The king was watching all of this from his terrace. He was appalled by this order to behead the two concubines he loved most in all his harem and dispatched one of his aides with the following command:

"His Majesty has already witnessed sufficient evidence of your ability as a general. Without these two concubines, His Majesty would lose his appetite. He therefore desires that the order for execution be rescinded."

"Please inform His Majesty," replied Master Sun, "that as his personally appointed general, I have total authority in this matter. I am unable to obey certain of His Majesty's commands."

And so he proceeded to have the two concubine-commanders beheaded, as an example to the rest.²³ The two concubines next in rank were now installed as the new company commanders. Once again Master Sun beat the drum. This time the ladies faced left, faced right, marched forward, marched backward, knelt, rose to their feet, all in the strictest conformity to Master Sun's commands, and all in total silence. Afterward he submitted the following report to the king:

"Your Majesty's troops have now been correctly drilled, and Your

Majesty may inspect them. They will perform Your Majesty's every bidding. They will go through fire and flood for Your Majesty's sake."

"You may take a rest," said the king, "and return to your quarters. I have no desire to inspect my troops."

"I see Your Majesty is only interested in words," was Master Sun's reply. "You have no desire to put them into practice."

With this, King He Lü knew Master Sun to be a capable commander, and took him into his service as a general.²⁴ To the west, he conquered the state of Chu, entering the city of Ying. To the north, he struck fear into the states of Qi and Jin and became renowned among the feudal lords. And Master Sun shared in the king's might.²⁵

The moral of this story sits a little uneasily with the main drift of *The Art of War* of Master Sun as we have it today. The Jesuit Father Amiot (Master Sun's first Western translator) struggles to point a parallel between the two: "From this incident, as they tell it, and as I have told it in their fashion, be it true or imaginary, one can conclude that severity is the basis of the general's authority."²⁶ But the Master as we know him from the book has many other more interesting things to say about being a general and is certainly a great deal more subtle on the subject of discipline: "Discipline troops before they are loyal, and they will be refractory and hard to put to good use. Let loyal troops go undisciplined, and they will be altogether useless. Command them with civility, rally them with martial discipline, and you will win their confidence. Consistent and effective orders inspire obedience; inconsistent and ineffective orders provoke disobedience. When orders are consistent and effective, general and troops enjoy mutual trust" (Chapter 9).

The whole incident with Master Sun and the ladies of the harem is almost certainly apocryphal.²⁷ The eminent Song-dynasty scholar Ye Shi (1151–1223) considered it "utterly preposterous and incredible."²⁸ But the astonishing fact is that, apart from this one incident and a couple of brief references elsewhere in the *Records*, we know very little else about Sun Wu (the name Wu means "warrior"). If he was indeed an adviser to King He Lü (who is definitely a historical person), then he would have been a contemporary of Confucius (551–479 B.C.). And yet he is not mentioned once in *The Zuo Commentary*, the principal source for the history of the period. Despite this fact, by the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), everyone knew of Master Sun the strategist, and his name had become inseparable from his treatise on the Art of War.

We know a little more about another strategist of the Sun family, a certain Sun Bin, whose biography follows Sun Wu's in the *Records*. In it we are

told that Sun Bin lived some one hundred years after the death of Sun Wu.²⁹ Modern scholarship puts his dates at around 380–316 B.C., making him a rough contemporary of the second major Confucian philosopher Mencius (371–289 B.C.). The name Bin means “amputated at the knee,” and “Cripple” Sun had been mutilated in this way (and branded) by his erstwhile fellow student of military strategy, Pang Juan, when the two of them were advising the king of the northern state of Wei. The biography tells in some detail the story of the famous battle of Maling (341 B.C.), at which Sun Bin (by now working for the rival state of Qi) had his revenge on Pang Juan.³⁰

The Warring States and the Hundred Schools

The period in which both of these members of the Sun family are believed to have lived—the late Spring and Autumn, Warring States period, from the sixth century to the late third century B.C.—was one of enormous turmoil in the Chinese world.³¹ The central authority of the feudal Zhou regime had long disintegrated, and a varying number of states were engaged in perpetual struggle for predominance. It was, as the contemporary historian William Jenner puts it, “a world of absolute insecurity, in which any state might be attacked by a combination of any of the others. Faced with absolute threats, states had to be able to mobilize all their human and material resources for total war.”³² Among these material resources were the newly introduced crossbow (fifth to fourth century B.C.) and the deployment of professional cavalry (somewhat later). This struggle for hegemony came to an end only in 221 B.C., when the despotic northwestern state of Qin succeeded in reuniting the Chinese under a single (though short-lived) dynasty once more, establishing “a new kind of state power with a degree of direct control over the whole population that is hard to parallel in any major state elsewhere in the world before the eighteenth century.”³³ In the meantime, these centuries were a period of extreme violence and incessant warfare, with hundreds of thousands of foot soldiers sent to their deaths on a regular basis. As a modern commentator has remarked, “It is extremely unlikely that many generals died in bed.”³⁴

Rival states contended for the best available advice, both strategic and ideological. The king of the eastern coastal state of Wu, He Lü (reigned 514–496 B.C.), who so ill-advisedly allowed Master Sun to play at soldiers with his harem (if we believe the Grand Historian), was himself engaged in a life-and-death struggle with his neighbors and needed all the advice he could get. (His son Fu Chai would see their state of Wu conquered and annexed by the southerners of Yue in 473 B.C.)

Confucius, born in the state of Lu, to the north of Wu, traveled from state to state, preaching an ethical doctrine of benevolence, righteousness, and ritual, of civilized conventions of decency, of the power of moral example, in the hope of saving Chinese society from chaos, without having to resort to the wiles of the military strategists such as Master Sun, or the heavy-handed imposition of draconian laws later practiced by the state of Qin. Confucius “was witnessing the collapse of civilisation—he saw his world sinking into violence and barbarity.”³⁵ Unlike Master Sun, Confucius never “shared in the king’s might.” He was just one of the many wandering scholars of his time, whose propositions made this and the subsequent two centuries one of the golden ages of Chinese thought, a period of intense debate and exploration of fundamental philosophical issues. The “hundred schools” of philosophy bloomed, each with its own recipe for success, its rules for the conduct of personal and public life. Many of the great “sages” of Chinese culture emerged during this period: Confucius (Master Kong), Laozi (or Lao-tzu; Master Lao), Master Sun, Master Mo, Mencius (Master Meng), Master Zhuang, the Master known as Lord Shang, and Master Hanfei. It was the thinking of these last two that prevailed when the state of Qin briefly succeeded in imposing its ruthless brand of totalitarianism on the whole of China in 221 B.C. During the subsequent Han dynasty the milder creed of Confucianism was adopted as the official state ideology (and remained so until it was supplanted by Marxism in the twentieth century), but there was always a strong undercurrent of authoritarianism in Chinese public life, just as there was always a strong undercurrent of Taoist thinking in personal life.

Master Sun’s thinking, as reflected in *The Art of War*, represents a point of view at fundamental variance with the stance of the Confucians (Confucius himself, Master Meng [Mencius], and Master Xun [ca. 298–238 B.C.]). For the Confucian gentleman, war was evil, but if it had to happen, the main issue was an ethical one, whether or not the cause was a worthy one, and whether or not the ruler had the moral support of his people. In the fifteenth chapter of *The Book of Master Xun*, the Master listens to a general of the state of Chu expounding some of the accepted tenets of Master Sun’s strategic thinking: “What is important in War is [the dynamic of] the situation, and [the seizing of] advantage, cunning and swiftness of maneuver. The Skillful Warrior moves suddenly and secretly. No one knows where he will appear. [Master] Sun and [Master] Wu followed this method and had no enemies. Why is it necessary to have the moral support of the people?” Master Xun replies, “You are wrong. I am talking of the troops of the Benevolent Man, of the purpose of the True King. You prize [such things

as] plotting, scheming, the use of situation and advantage, sudden attacks and maneuvers, deception. These are the methods of the lesser rulers. The troops of the Benevolent Man cannot be fought with deception. . . ."³⁶

By contrast, the Taoists (Master Lao, Master Zhuang) were primarily interested in attuning the human microcosm and its energies with the larger harmonies of the universe. For them, all war and violence were "contrary to the Tao. And whatever is contrary to the Tao will soon perish" (*The Way and Its Power*, Chapter 30). Master Sun shared (some would claim, abused) many of the Taoists' basic notions, as did the so-called Legalists (Lord Shang, Master Hanfei), better described as Chinese Fascists, who derived from certain Taoist points of departure a chilling justification for their Orwellian state. The tenth chapter of *The Book of Lord Shang*, "Methods of War," is built on a series of quotations from Master Sun. It is a lineage that should not be forgotten as we read this book.

But we have already started to do what every reader tends to do: treat Master Sun and his book as one and the same thing. Perhaps it would be best to forget the harem sergeant-major altogether for the moment.

The Art of War: A Book of Life

Bamboo Strips

Until quite recently, there was considerable scholarly skepticism about the little military treatise known as Master Sun's *Art of War*. There were some who doubted its authenticity altogether, and suggestions were made that it had been heavily rewritten or even altogether concocted many centuries after the supposed existence of Master Sun himself.³⁷ Then, in the 1970s, copies of the text on bamboo and wooden strips were unearthed in two widely separated archaeological sites (Shandong and Qinghai), both dating to the Former Han dynasty, one to a period as early as the second century B.C.³⁸ Interestingly, perhaps surprisingly, the texts deciphered from these strips turned out to be very close to the accepted traditional text in thirteen chapters.³⁹ With this discovery the book began to command a renewed scholarly respect. As a popular work, of course, it had never ceased to exert influence and fascination. It was one of the books that helped both Communist leader Mao Zedong and the Nationalist Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (and the Japanese commanders in World War II) formulate their strategic thinking. But finally it became legitimate to look at it (along with two other puzzlingly short texts, the Confucian *Analects* and the Taoist *The*

Way and Its Power) as a genuine product of that early phase of Chinese conceptual thought, when the Chinese were "beginning to learn and develop the techniques of writing continuous prose in which philosophical and political propositions are advanced and defended through the use of an increasingly sophisticated literary style and logical structure."⁴⁰ It may have had little or nothing to do with a historical person called Master Sun, if such a person existed. Instead, it probably evolved over time, from the recorded teachings of some "unknown Warring States strategist,"⁴¹ only settling into an accepted text after many years.⁴² The final text is probably best described as the collective "product of a long process of sedimentation of strategic reflexions, which eventually crystallized into the form of a manual."⁴³

Handbooks for the Yellow Emperor

What sort of book is it? Well, it is not really a book at all, in our modern sense of the word. "Ancient Chinese thinkers did not write books," the distinguished sinologist, poet, and philosopher Angus Graham once wrote. "They jotted down sayings, verses, stories, thoughts and by the third century B.C. composed essays, on bamboo strips which were tied together in sheets and rolled up in scrolls."⁴⁴ *The Art of War* is such a roll (or series of rolls) of bamboo strips, a collection of more-or-less organized military and miscellaneous sayings and maxims, written in an epigrammatic prose style, using elements of free rhyme. It may even have incorporated early soldiers' rhymes, similar to our own:

Oh, the Grand Old Duke of York,
He had ten thousand men;
He marched them up to the top of the hill,
And he marched them down again.⁴⁵

Just as *The Book of Changes* must have had among its many layers old sayings similar to our "Red sky at night, shepherd's delight," *The Art of War* almost certainly incorporated a number of proverbial sayings. Take, for example, this passage from Chapter 4: "To lift autumn fur is no strength; to see sun and moon is no perception; to hear thunder is no quickness of hearing." Or this, from Chapter 5: "With an understanding of weakness and strength, an army can strike like a millstone cast at an egg." Or this, from the same chapter: "By their nature, on level ground logs and boulders stay still; on steep ground they move; square, they halt; round, they roll." Or

this, from Chapter 6: "Water shuns the high and hastens to the low. War shuns the strong and attacks the weak." Take the saying in the commentary on Chapter 12: "Unless you enter the tiger's lair, you cannot seize the tiger's cubs," which means much the same as our "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Master Sun seems to have been very partial to a simple form of repetitive parallelism. This, together with his use of near rhyme, highlights his sense, brings out the emphases and connections of the text.⁴⁶ It also gives the book a style and a force of its own. The literary style of *The Art of War* has had many admirers. The early critic Liu Xie (ca. 465–ca. 520) made a point of saying that Master Sun, although he was a military man, had a fine command of language (literally, "his writing was as beautiful as pearls and jade").⁴⁷ Again and again critics and commentators have praised the terseness and elegance of the writing, its combination of brevity and profundity.⁴⁸

In terms of both form and content, the book belongs to a genre peculiar to Chinese culture: the written version of a set of guidelines for success and well-being, a handbook for some aspect of life. Such handbooks have existed since earliest times in a variety of domains: medicine, sexuality, self-cultivation, martial arts, *fengshui* (the geomantic art of locating dwellings), alchemy, art, calligraphy, cooking, Go strategy, politics, war. The most ancient claimed authority from some legend of revelation, usually involving an encounter between the mythical ancestor of the Chinese people, the Yellow Emperor, and a female medium. The *Classic of Geomancy*, for example, was ascribed to the Yellow Emperor.⁴⁹ The sex handbook *Wonderful Disquisition of the Plain Girl* was cast (as were nearly all such books) in the form of a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and a woman knowledgeable in the ways of the bedchamber.⁵⁰ According to legend, this same Yellow Emperor, after being defeated in battle nine times and having spent three uncomfortable nights in the fog on the slopes of Mount Tai, encountered a woman with a human head and the body of a bird, who introduced herself as the Dark Girl (or the Plain or White Girl, depending on the version). When she asked him what he was seeking, he replied, "The Art of Victory." So she gave him a treatise on the Art of War.⁵¹ In actual fact, handbooks (in all the various domains) were often compiled by such-and-such a Disciple (or Disciples) of such-and-such a Master, some charismatic figure around whom they had once gathered. This may well have been how books such as the *Analects of Confucius*, the powerful Taoist classic *The Way and Its Power* (several short passages from which I quote in my commentary), and Master Sun's *Art of War* came into being.

Shi: Shared Energy

The common ground shared by *The Art of War* and other handbooks on a wide range of different topics can be seen in their common use of one key term: *shi*, "position" or "situational energy." This is the word used for the title of Master Sun's Chapter 5, "Potential Energy," where I have explained it as "the inherent power or dynamic of a situation or moment in time," a latent potential to be subtly exploited to its full by the Skillful Warrior. It is also a key term in Chinese geomancy, *fengshui*, referring to the energy or power of the earth (*dishi*) at a particular location.⁵² In the arts of painting and calligraphy, *shi* is the structural energy or life-giving movement sought for in a brushstroke or in a landscape composition. "If there is *shi* in a painting of a forest, then despite all manner of irregularities and twists and turns, the forest will be perfectly poised and alive. . . ."⁵³ In the art of letters, *shi* comes to mean a writer's literary style, spirit, tendency, bent, manner.⁵⁴ In the delicate art of playing the *qin* or Chinese lute (musical instrument par excellence of the cultivated Chinese gentleman), each carefully poised hand position is a *shi* (e.g., "the right hand position known as Flying Dragon Grasping the Clouds").⁵⁵ In the Art of Love (the sex handbooks) *shi* is the term used for a sexual "position" or "posture." Chapter 2 of the *Wonderful Disquisition of the Plain Girl*, for example, is entitled "The Nine Positions [or *Shi*]" and includes "Flying Dragon," "Striding Tiger," etc. In the martial arts, *shi* is used as the opening or closure in a sequence that could include moves such as "Crouching Tiger" and "Hidden Dragon" (whence the title of Ang Lee's film).

The shared use of this one term in such diverse domains points to a way of thinking that permeates them all. It comes from the observation and contemplation of the forces at work in the environment, from the attunement of the microcosmic self to the energies of the macrocosm, that is very much part of the Chinese perennial philosophy. It is at the heart of the Taoist attitude to nature and life, which teaches that rather than struggle blindly against obstacles, we should understand the true dynamic of the situation in which we find ourselves and act accordingly, in harmony with it. We find this thinking already in the great classic, *The Book of Changes*, which towers behind the Confucian *Analects*, the Taoist *The Way and Its Power*, and Master Sun's *Art of War*. "The *Changes* provides us with the means to know when and how a situation has come about and to follow it up to where we are now. This process is defined as 'going with the flow' (*shun*, literally compliance)."⁵⁶ The entire premise of the *Changes* (as of *The Art of War*) is that it

is possible to see into potential changes before they occur, to grasp the subtle configurations of Yin and Yang and thus attune oneself to the energy at work in the world around us. "The Master [Confucius] said, 'To know the pivots [the springs-of opportunity] is divine indeed. . . . The pivots are the first, imperceptible beginning of movement, the first trace of good or bad fortune that shows itself. The superior man perceives the pivot and immediately acts. He does not wait even for a day."⁵⁷ The similarity with Master Sun is striking.

A recent formulation of *shi* comes from the art historian John Hay: "The world [as conceived in traditional Chinese aesthetics] is inscribed in energy rather than explained by geometry. Man is implicated from the beginning in this inter-activity. . . . To be fixed is to be temporary, to move in and out is to endure. . . . The commonest term for these changeful and changing configurations of energy is *shi*."⁵⁸ The multifaceted essayist Lin Yutang put it in a more old-fashioned way in 1938, having first given his own multiple definition of *shi*: "gesture, posture, social position, battle formation, that which gives advantage of position in any struggle. This notion," he continued, "is extremely important and is connected with every form of dynamic beauty, as against mere beauty of static balance. Thus a rock may have a 'rock posture,' an outstretching branch has its own branch posture (which may be good or bad, elegant or ordinary); and there are 'stroke posture,' 'character [ideogram] posture,' and 'brush posture' in writing and painting, 'posture of a hill,' 'posture of a cloud,' etc. . . . A situation is conceived as static, while a *shi* denotes that which the situation is going to become, or 'the way it looks': one speaks of the *shi* of wind, rain, flood, or battle, as the way the wind, rain, flood, or battle looks for the future, whether increasing or decreasing in force, stopping soon or continuing indefinitely, gaining or losing, in what direction, with what force, etc."⁵⁹

Other key terms in Master Sun's worldview connect with this idea of "potential energy" of the situation: the permutations of Yin and Yang; the cycle of the Five Elements and the Four Seasons; the process of *bian* or "change" (the constantly changing environment within which the strategist has to function); variations in strategy between *qi* and *zheng* (the indirect and the direct), flexible improvisation and reaction to the particular *shi* of the moment; *xing* or the "outward and visible dispositions" of a given military situation, including such things as the disposition of troops and the laying in of provisions; the understanding of *xu* and *shi*, empty and full, weakness and strength, and the exploitation of our enemy's weakness; the concept of *yin* or "conformity with," of "going along with" the enemy's situation (e.g., adopting the line of least resistance, using the enemy's food and fodder

rather than sending home for more supplies). Much of this can be summed up in the general statement that "supreme military skill lies in deriving victory from the changing circumstances of the enemy" (Chapter 6). It is a philosophy of maximum effect through minimum expenditure of energy. It is the effortless gliding movement of the *taiji* practitioner, the soft but irresistible force of a brushstroke from a master calligrapher. These are reflected in the effortless victory of Master Sun's Skillful Warrior, his Wise General or Strategist, his Warrior Adept. "Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting" (Chapter 3).

The Way of Cunning and Deceit, the Tao of Power and Expediency

It is the business of the general to be still and inscrutable, to be upright and impartial. He must be able to keep his own troops in ignorance, to deceive their eyes and their ears (Master Sun, Chapter 11).

At his best, Master Sun's Warrior Adept can be inspirational: his enlightened general cultivates a "holistic response to the human predicament," and *The Art of War* communicates "a transforming personal encounter with ultimate reality, which can and does inform every aspect of life, from the practices of the monk to the martial arts."⁶⁰ It is the same perennial Chinese wisdom that the Japanese geisha in Arthur Golden's novel puts in such simple words: "We human beings are only a part of something very much larger. . . . We must use whatever methods we can to understand the movement of the universe around us and time our actions so that we are not fighting the currents, but moving with them."⁶¹ The Ultimate Warrior fights his battles off the battlefield. Herein lies the particular genius of Master Sun, who succeeded in expounding "the importance of mischief, cleverness and common sense in human conflict—as opposed to brute force."⁶² It is a message that contrasts strikingly with the nature of war as widely perceived in the world. Master Sun would surely have smiled "at the American exaltation of firepower, which too easily makes a means into an end in itself. . . . As he makes plain, violence is only one part of warfare and not even the preferred part. The aim of war is to subdue an opponent, in fine, to change his attitude and induce his compliance. The most economical means is the best: to get him—through deception, surprise, and his own ill-conceived pursuit of

infeasible goals—to realize his own inferiority, so that he surrenders or at least retreats without your having to fight him. . . .”⁶³ Arthur Golden’s sumo wrestler puts it more simply: “I never seek to defeat the man I am fighting, I seek to defeat his confidence. A man troubled by doubt cannot focus on the course to victory.”⁶⁴

But we should beware of the stereotype of the Chinese sage, which we have observed even in the twentieth century, the smiling, inscrutable image of some aging (and yet strangely ageless), avuncular (but not necessarily benevolent) Chinese statesman: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping. . . .⁶⁵ Very early in Chinese history, the Taoist sage’s message of effortless harmony with nature and of the “power” emanating from this harmony was hijacked by the Legalists (Chinese Fascists), who exploited the “absolute understanding” of the Taoists as an ideological basis for “absolute power,” for the “omnipotent ruler of the ideal Legalist state.” Burton Watson has put this very well: “The Taoist sage withdraws from the world to a mysterious and transcendental realm. The Legalist ruler likewise withdraws, deliberately shunning contacts with his subordinates that might breed familiarity, dwelling deep within his palace, concealing his true motives and desires, and surrounding himself with an aura of mystery and inscrutability. Like the head of a great modern corporation he sits, far removed from his countless employees, at his desk in the innermost office and quietly initials things.”⁶⁶

Taoist teachings on the Art of Love (which at their best offer many startlingly modern insights) were also distorted and used in a relentless quest for sexual power, a form of “sexual black magic.” Under cover of elaborate sexual-chemical techniques, the practitioners of these arts promoted a form of sexual vampirism, which reduced women to objects for the enhancement of male potency and “long life” (*caibu*, taking the other’s essence to boost one’s own).⁶⁷ Even that great admirer of Taoism and Chinese notions on sexuality, the Dutch scholar-diplomat Robert van Gulik, denounced this practice: “The Taoist teachings relating to this subject . . . bear a vicious character. They have nothing to do with love, not even with the satisfying of carnal desire or with sexual pleasure. These teachings . . . [are] aimed at acquiring supernatural power at the expense of the sexual partner.” For readers of Master Sun, the interesting thing here is that the sex handbooks written for this purpose (dialogues for the most part between the ubiquitous Yellow Emperor and the Plain or Dark Girl) were all couched in the language of the military treatise and used the old (i.e., Master Sun’s) strategic ideas about victory, to the extent that Chinese readers might have had difficulty knowing whether they were, in fact, reading a sex manual or a treatise on the Art of War. Van Gulik summarizes the shared ideas as fol-

lows: “First, one must spare one’s own force while utilizing that of the opponent; and second, one must begin by yielding to the enemy in order to catch him unawares thereafter” (“All’s fair in love and war” takes on a new meaning here). The late-Ming treatise *The True Classic of the Complete Union* begins, “A superior general will while engaging the enemy first concentrate on drawing out his opponent, as if sucking and inhaling his strength. He will adopt a completely detached attitude, resembling a man who closes his eyes in utter indifference.” The commentator remarks, “Superior general refers to the Taoist Adept. To engage means to engage in the sexual act. The enemy is the woman.”⁶⁸ Or as van Gulik explains, “The man should defeat the enemy in the sexual battle by keeping himself under complete control so as not to emit semen while exciting the woman till she reaches orgasm and sheds her Yin essence which is then absorbed by the man.” This is the Art of Victory on the sexual battlefield.

Victory on Master Sun’s or the Plain Girl’s battlefield requires considerable cunning, in addition to large doses of self-restraint and meditation. And as we read *The Art of War*, we find that its subtle message of nonviolence in the resolution of conflict goes hand in hand with a calculated and cynical exploitation of one’s fellow human beings. It is, after all, in the very first chapter that we encounter the shocking statement: “The Way of War is a Way of Deception.” In the film *Wall Street*, it is this passage that Gordon Gekko’s young acolyte, Bud Fox, quotes back at the tycoon, once he has done his reading of Master Sun and absorbed the principles of Gekko’s Art of Corporate War. The Warrior Adept is often advised to be callous and vicious (as was the Taoist Adept on that other battlefield of the inner apartments). Master Sun’s advocacy of deception as the cornerstone of strategy, his abandonment of values in favor of expediency, the disturbing implications of his cult of the cunning, the wily, and the inscrutable must be seen for what they are. In the eighteenth century Father Amiot did not hesitate to challenge them: “It is not necessary to say here that I disapprove of all the author has to say on this occasion about the use of artifice and ruse. . . . Most of the maxims in this section are reprehensible, as contrary to honesty and other virtues held in esteem by the Chinese themselves.”⁶⁹ James Murdoch, the historian of Japan (where Master Sun’s teachings have been widely studied since at least the eighth century), complained that “Sonshi” (the Japanese reading of Master Sun’s name) expounded “the dirtiest form of statecraft with unspeakable depths of duplicity. . . .” Murdoch deplored, for instance, “the naked and full-bodied depravity of the old Chinese lore on espionage.”⁷⁰ In a more recent and deeply provocative study of the nature of violence in early Chinese society, Mark Edward Lewis argues that

"the stratagems and deceits by which the military philosophers promised to reduce violence wreaked even greater damage on the fabric of human society than any physical brutality [by stimulating hatred and dishonesty]."71 For this "damage to the fabric of society" in our own time, we have only to look at the corrosive effect of the Cultural Revolution, its "distortions and deceptions, its confusion of good and bad, true and false, the frame-ups and endless injustices."⁷²

For the most part the Chinese themselves have regarded and still regard Master Sun as a "treasure of their national heritage." The early Confucians (as we have seen with Master Xun) had little time for his way of thinking. And the Song-dynasty Neo-Confucian philosopher, Zhu Xi, while admiring the pithy style of his writing, complained that his treatise encouraged "a ruler's bent towards unrelenting warfare and reckless militarism."⁷³ But otherwise there has been astonishingly little in the way of an indigenous critique of Master Sun's philosophy of expediency and survival, his advocacy of a subtle (even if successful) manipulation of one's fellow men.

This can best be understood as part of what the modern essayist Bo Yang calls the "soy paste vat" of Chinese culture, the Confucian stifling of creativity and the failure to "develop such habits as self-criticism, introspection and self-improvement."⁷⁴ Bo Yang sees it as part of the "national character."⁷⁵ Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the modern Chinese have been engaged in an agonized quest to unravel the problematic nature of their own culture. With recurring fury and frustration, they have come face-to-face with the darkness of their "Great Wall; that wall of ancient bricks which is constantly being reinforced. . . . The Great Wall of China: a wonder and a curse!"⁷⁶ Master Sun was surely one of that wall's original architects. As He Xin, a prominent neoconservative intellectual of the 1990s, gloomily laments the bankruptcy of contemporary Chinese society and culture, we can almost hear him trying to exorcise the specter of Master Sun, even if He Xin himself is too much a part of the "deep structure" to be able to identify the Master as one of the culprits: "The religion of the Chinese today is cheating, deceit, blackmail and theft, eating, drinking, whoring, gambling and smoking. We make laws in order to break them; our rules and regulations are a sham. Our tactics consist in carrying out policy; our strategy is to get people to fall into the traps they have set for others. We think any honest, humble gentleman a fool and regard any good person who works hard and demands little in return as an idiot. Crooks are our sages; thieves and swindlers are our supermen. . . . There are no greater cynics than the Chinese people. We refuse to take on any responsibility that won't profit ourselves and show no respect for any values that transcend the utili-

tarian."⁷⁷ The man who presided over half a century of this social degradation was Master Sun's most notorious twentieth-century disciple, Mao Zedong. As Liu Xiaobo, one of the brightest of the young intellectuals in the Tiananmen movement, puts it: "Seen solely within the context of Chinese history, Mao Zedong was undoubtedly the most successful individual of all. Nobody understood the Chinese better; no one was more skillful at factional politics within the autocratic structure; no one was more cruel and merciless; none more chameleonlike."⁷⁸

But by far the best twentieth-century representative of Master Sun's way of thinking is a little-known writer called Li Zongwu, whose cynical booklet *Science of the Thick and Black* has been an underground bible of survival ever since it first appeared in the 1920s, the early years of the republic. Li openly claims an affinity with Master Sun ("Master Sun and I are one and the same person"), and many of his ideas are elaborated in terms of the characters in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.⁷⁹ The "Third Level of Attainment" of Li's *Science*, for example, could have come straight from Master Sun: "Level 3. To have skin that is thick yet *formless* and a heart that is black yet *colourless*; this is the ultimate level of attainment. Then no one will have any idea of how thick and black you are. This is not easily achieved, and one finds the best examples among the sages of the past."⁸⁰

The Art of Reading *The Art of War*

The Art of War should be read, as the Ming-dynasty scholar Liu Yin wrote, not reverentially but "in a lively manner, like pearls rattling around in a dish, with no prescribed order." It should be read not glibly or flippantly but "practically, in an applied manner, from the very beginning. What is the point in simply reciting the text?" The balance for each reader (soldier, trader, corporate manager, marriage partner, tennis player, cook, driver) lies somewhere between the extraordinary wisdom embedded in its pages and its less attractive or acceptable implications. Each reader must negotiate this fascinating but treacherous terrain ("Entangling terrain, like a net, in which one can easily become entangled"—Chapter 10, text with commentary). Each reader must be flexible in response to the book's sometimes startling statements ("infinitely flexible and mobile, infinitely resourceful"—commentary on Chapter 5). Each reader must relate creatively and reflectively to the enormous potential energy of this book, so as to know not just the enemy but also self, so as to decode the book's message of survival and victory and emerge the stronger for it, without succumbing to its insidious

cult of deceit and expediency. As another Ming-dynasty thinker urged, "Emerge from the mud untainted; understand cunning, but do not use it."⁸¹ Or as Liu Yin advised, "In reading about the Art of War, you must understand Change; if you only know what is regular, what is unchanging, and do not know Change, you will be like the man who dropped his sword in the water and tried to find it again by making a mark on the side of his boat—wasting your time."⁸²

NOTES

1. Quoted by Richard Deacon, *The Chinese Secret Service* (London: Grafton Books, 1989), p. 15.
2. Dr. Connell Cowan and Gail Parent, *The Art of War for Lovers* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998).
3. Joseph Needham and Robin D. S. Yates, with Krzysztof Gawlikowski, Edward McEwen, and Wang Ling, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, part VI: *Military Technology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 80–81.
4. Moss Roberts, trans., *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 291.
5. My own translation. See Luo Guanzhong (with commentary by Mao Zong'gang), *Sanguo yanyi* (Shanghai: Guji, 1989), pp. 1241–42.
6. See several fine *nianhua* on this theme, from Suzhou, Fujian, and Shandong, in the two-volume collection *Xichu nianhua* (Taipei: Yingwen Hansheng, 1990).
7. See *Sanshiliuji xinbian* (Peking: Zhanshi, 1981), pp. 96–100, and Ralph Sawyer, trans., *Unorthodox Strategies for the Everyday Warrior* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), pp. 126–27.
8. Needham (1994), p. 71.
9. See Thomas Cleary's *Mastering the Art of War* (Boston: Shambhala, 1989), which includes a version of the work *The Way of the General*. Lionel Giles dismisses the attribution out of hand in his *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* (London: Luzac, 1910), p. lii.
10. He was held by some scholars to have extensively rewritten the text himself—until archaeological discoveries completely destroyed this hypothesis.
11. See, for example, the various conversations on the subject of Master Sun between the Manchu emperor Kangxi and the young rogue Trinket in the Third Book of Louis Cha's picaresque martial arts novel of the early 1970s, *The Deer and Cauldron* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2002).
12. See the Strategy and Leadership series published in Singapore, translated from the work of the Mainland cartoonist Wang Xuanming. See also *Sunzi Speaks: The Art of War* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), by the Taiwanese cartoonist Tsai Chih Chung, translated by Brian Bruya. Of greatly inferior quality are the six volumes translated from the series originally published by Zhejiang People's Art Press, but even these are an interesting example of Master Sun as popular culture. Among the many Web sites worth visiting are "Sonshi.com," "artofwar.com," and "zhongwen.com/bingfa.htm."
13. Available online at "falundafa.org." My translation is slightly adapted.
14. Yang Chengfu, *Yangshi Taijiquan* (Hong Kong: Taiping, 1968), p. 5.
15. Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, *Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1969), p. 38.
16. Wong Kiew Kit, *The Art of Shaolin Kungfu* (Rockport, Mass.: Element Books, 1996), p. 151.
17. D. C. Lau, "Some Notes on the Sun-tzu," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (1965:28:2), p. 321.
18. Father Jean-Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–93), in his French paraphrase of this biography (preface to his translation of Master Sun, *Les Treize Articles sur l'Art Militaire, ouvrage composé en Chi-nois par Sun-tse* [Paris: Chez Nyon, 1782], p. 49), adds a nice eighteenth-century flourish at this point: "The king, who was beginning to find his normal range of court amusements rather lackluster, took advantage of this opportunity to discover a novel form of amusement." One cannot help imagining Versailles. But given that Amiot was himself working with the aid of an eighteenth-century Manchu version of the original Chinese, we should also superimpose on King He Lü's palace features of the Emperor Qianlong's superb hunting lodge at Jehol.
19. Amiot: "Master Sun, aware that the king was endeavoring to make him appear ridiculous, maintained a show of dignity and gave the impression that he was greatly honored to have been vouchsafed not only a view of the inmates of His Majesty's harem but also the chance to direct them in person."
20. Amiot: "Listen to me attentively, and obey every one of my orders. This is the first and the most important of all the rules of warfare. Be sure never to break it."
21. In Amiot's paraphrase, one beat signifies front, two beats rear, three beats left, four beats right.
22. Amiot: "After a few moments of intense effort to stifle their urge to laugh, they burst into uncontrollable fits of laughter."
23. Amiot: "They have disobeyed me," said Master Sun. "They must die." And so saying he drew his sword and with the same sangfroid he had demonstrated throughout, proceeded to cut off their heads."
24. Amiot: "The king was stricken with the most intense grief. 'I have lost,' he cried, heaving a heartfelt sigh, 'that which I loved the most in this world. . . . Let this stranger return to his own land. I wish nothing more of him, or of his services. . . . Oh, barbarian, what have you done? How can I live from this day forth?' But, inconsolable as the king was, the passage of time caused him to forget his grief . . . and he sent once more for Master Sun, to advise him in his campaign against the state of Chu."
25. My translation. See *Records of the Grand Historian*, Chapter 65. I have followed Takigawa Kametaro, *Shiki kaichu koshu* (Tokyo: Kenkyujo, 1934; Taiwan reprint, Zhongxin shuju, 1976), p. 843.
26. Amiot concludes, "This maxim, which may not be valid for the Nations of Europe, is an excellent one for the Asiatics, among whom honor is by no means always the first motive."
27. Among the bamboo strips excavated at Yinqueshan (Silver Sparrow Mountain) in 1972 were fragments of a similar version of this story. The fact that this bamboo-strip version also refers to the thirteen chapters of Master Sun's treatise suggests that it, too, was of considerably later origin than the "core text." See Roger Ames, *Sun-tzu: The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), pp. 190–96.
28. See Lionel Giles, pp. xxi–xxii, quoting from the *Wenxian tongkao* of Ma Duanlin (1254–1325).
29. Takigawa, p. 844.
30. This story is referred to many times by Master Sun's commentators. See, for example, Chapter 5, where Zhang Yu and Du Mu paraphrase the *Records*.
31. For the dates of these and the other main periods and dynasties in Chinese history, and for a brief chronology of some events in early history that have a bearing on this book, see the *Chronologies*.
32. W. J. F. Jenner, *The Tyranny of History* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 20.
33. *Ibid.*
34. Samuel B. Griffith, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 21. Roger Ames refers several times, in his translations of Master Sun and Sun Bin, to the "killing fields" of this period. It is hardly an exaggeration.
35. Simon Leys, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Norton, 1997), Introduction, p. xxiii.
36. My translation. See *Xunzi xinzhu* (Peking: Zhonghua, 1979), pp. 230–31.
37. For example, the Tang-dynasty commentator Du Mu (803–52) suspected the earlier commentator Cao Cao (155–220) of having substantially rewritten the text, thereby reducing it to the thirteen chapters as we know them.