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S957 SUN-TZU PING-FA

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THE  
ESSENTIAL  
ART  
OF  
WAR

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*Translated, with Historical Introduction  
and Commentaries, by Ralph D. Sawyer  
with the collaboration of Mei-chün Lee Sawyer*

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THE ESSENTIAL ART OF WAR

## Preface

The intent of *The Essential Art of War* is to provide a comprehensive yet succinct introduction to Sun-tzu's remarkable and often enigmatic *Art of War*. Thus, apart from entailing a somewhat different orientation and encompassing significant new materials, it differs from our well-known, single-volume *Art of War* and the translation embodied in our *Seven Military Classics* by excising material of interest primarily to scholars; drastically condensing the historical background; deleting the lengthy tactical analysis of the era's pivotal battles; and selectively discussing the core concepts.

The core text has been based upon the heavily annotated, traditional Sung dynasty edition not only because it reflects the understanding of the past fifteen hundred years, the beliefs upon which government and military officials based their actions, but also because it continues to be widely circulated throughout Asia.

Although the translation has been adopted from our *Art of War*, individual sentences and certain important passages have been succinctly expanded with crucial tomb text materials that resolve otherwise opaque passages, supplement obvious deficiencies, or add new insights; some passages have also been slightly reshaped and occasionally rephrased to make them more accessible upon first reading, though without ever simplifying the terminology or “dumbing down” the text.

Explanatory material will be found not only in the newly written introduction but also in an afterword and the few paragraphs appended to each chapter. Apart from setting the basic historical constraints and reprising Sun-tzu’s infamous biography, the introduction examines the nature of the text and the implications for the reader. The chapter commentaries then identify the core concepts and place some of the less obvious elements in context by elucidating key aspects and demystifying their organic relationships. Finally, the afterword discusses crucial issues that merit more extended treatment by broadening the interpretation within Sun-tzu’s essential vision and suggesting some contemporary resonances. Although the book’s internal logic and occasional opacity significantly delimit the range and choice of topics, questions raised in numerous corporate, military, and intelligence seminars over the past three decades, as well as queries to our

Web site ([www.ralphsawyer.com](http://www.ralphsawyer.com)), have considerably shaped their treatment.

With the aid of these introductory materials readers should have no difficulty in envisioning and selectively adopting Sun-tzu's principles and concepts to life or business situations. Because the *Art of War's* passages were the product of military activities realized by men and forces in the turmoil of command and tumult of battle, their initial or primary understanding should be martial. Only thereafter can they be successfully extrapolated and mapped onto other domains of endeavor. To this end, the afterword offers a few suggestions for a broader applicability and an overview of the darker implications; but as with the chapter comments, they are provided as a matter of explication. *Determining the utility, legality, and appropriateness, if any, to individual situations and activities of all the materials included in the Essential Art of War remains the reader's responsibility.*

Although our concise book is thus intended to be read as a fully independent work, it can also be used in conjunction with our single-volume *Art of War*, which contains a lengthy examination of Sun-tzu's life and the book's authorship, an extensive historical introduction featuring the key battles of his era, a systematic analysis of the main concepts, additional tomb writings and other materials, and numerous textual and historical notes. Further understanding may also

be gleaned from some of the other writings discussed in the brief section for suggested reading and from the comments to our other Sun-tzu volume, *The Complete Art of War*.

*Ralph Sawyer*  
*Summer, 2005*



## *A Note on Pronunciation*

Unfortunately, neither of the two commonly employed orthographies makes the pronunciation of Romanized Chinese characters easy. Each system has its stumbling blocks and we remain unconvinced that *qi* in *pinyin* is inherently more comprehensible to unpracticed readers than the older, increasingly discarded Wade-Giles *ch'i*, although it is certainly no less comprehensible than *j* for *r* in Wade-Giles. However, because many of the important terms may already be familiar, a number of previous *Art of War* translations as well as all our martial writings employ Wade-Giles; and as a minor protest against the political practices of the PRC's draconian regime, we continue to employ it here. Nevertheless, for the convenience of younger readers, key romanizations in *pinyin* have also been provided in parentheses, although well-known cities, names, and books are retained in their customary forms.

As a crude guide to pronunciation, we offer the following notes on the significant exceptions to normally expected sounds:

*t*, as in *Tao*: without apostrophe, pronounced as a *d* (pinyin “*d*”)

*p*, as in *ping*: without apostrophe, pronounced as a *b* (pinyin “*b*”)

*ch*, as in *chuang*: without apostrophe, pronounced as a *j* (pinyin “*j*” and “*zh*”)

*hs*, as in *hsi*: pronounced *she* (pinyin “*x*”)

*j*, as in *jen*: pronounced as an *r* (pinyin “*r*”)

Thus, the name of the famous Chou (or Zhou in pinyin) dynasty is pronounced as if written “jou” and sounds just like the English name “Joe.”

## Dynastic Chronology

Legendary Sage Emperors	2852–2255 B.C.E.
Hsia (Xia)	2205–1766
Shang	1766–1045
Chou (Zhou)	
Western Chou (Zhou)	1045–770
Eastern Chou (Zhou)	770–256
<i>Spring and Autumn</i>	722–481
<i>Warring States</i>	403–221
Ch'in (Qin)	221–207
Former Han (Western Han)	206–008 C.E.
Later Han (Eastern Han)	023–220
Six Dynasties	222–589
<i>Three Kingdoms</i>	168–280
Sui	589–618
T'ang (Tang)	618–907
Five Dynasties	907–959
Sung	960–1126

Southern Sung	1127–1279
Yüan (Mongol)	1279–1368
Ming	1368–1644
Ch'ing (Manchu) (Qing)	1644–1911

## *Introduction*

Spawned during a period of increasingly horrific and incessant military strife, Sun-tzu's *Ping-fa*, or *Art of War*, quickly became the progenitor for a continuous, literate tradition of military science. Doubtlessly the most important book in China's long and vaunted history apart from the Confucian *Analects*, it disproportionately influenced the conceptions, actions, and lives of untold millions over the centuries of interminable strife and frequent fragmentation that marred the state's tenuous geopolitical unity. Studied and adopted by strategists and commanders, its tactical principles repeatedly determined the fate of armies, life and death of the state, and very existence or extinction of vast segments of the populace.

Even more remarkable, rather than having vanished and become forgotten, the *Art of War's* impact not only continues undiminished, but continues to expand and

penetrate every conceivable realm of human endeavor. Its renewed vitality is visible not just in the martial sphere, where the worldwide revolution in military affairs has prompted the People's Republic of China (PRC) to reexamine its concepts and principles as an integral part of their ongoing search for a new military doctrine with unique Chinese characteristics, but also in the domains of business, personal relations, social interaction, the stock market, and the minutiae of everyday life. However, it's not the enigmatic, often opaque classical text that is read and pondered, but an astounding variety of contemporary modern-language versions.

These vernacular versions range from highly simplified, plain language translations through every imaginable variation and peregrination, including lavish illustrated editions and classical texts complete with traditional but expansive commentaries that explore not just the immediate meaning but also extended implications and connotations, some wildly divergent, others simply the product of the writer's imagination. Numerous colorful comic-book versions have also appeared, some cheap, pithy productions printed on execrable paper that yet sell hundreds of thousands, others finely detailed multivolume episodic tales intended primarily for Sun-tzu aficionados.

A variety of dedicated texts interpret the *Art of War* from a predetermined, systematized perspective such as Taoism or Buddhism; expand the "true implications"

through personal, sometimes bizarre insights; or adopt the principles and concepts to one or another specialized realm, particularly general business practices such as marketing and organizational management. Especially interesting are programs intended for singles seeking to vanquish the opposite sex and works discussing how husbands and wives may control their marriage partners or even nurture exciting new loves outside of wedlock. Although some of these works are characterized by levity, most are deadly serious in intent and execution.

Passages from the *Art of War* also permeate popular culture and the contemporary media, frequently being cited or employed in movie subplots, serialized television dramas, and short stories and novels, whether or not they involve a martial theme. The principles and concepts are used almost daily in newspaper analyses of world events such as the Iraq conflict, generalized Middle Eastern and Islamic tensions, major business and economic developments, and all aspects of the competitive Asian environment where China's burgeoning power is viewed with increasing trepidation. Attesting to their ubiquitousness, many underpin academic analyses and detailed strategic assessments of the greater international geopolitical struggle.

Sun-tzu's thinking similarly pervades Japanese and, to a lesser extent, Korean and Singaporean popular culture; and for centuries the *Art of War* has heavily impacted traditional military practices and science in

Vietnam, Japan, and Korea. This phenomenon has not been confined to Asia but is similarly witnessed in the West, where translations of the *Art of War* have not only been available for two centuries but also continue to multiply in virtually every known format. Numerous variations and focal volumes explore the principles and their applicability in such realms as business and sports, and even U.S. military components have studied and consciously adopted many of the concepts and operational principles in increasingly shifting to maneuver warfare doctrine over the past three decades. Nor has exposure in the mass media lagged; movies such as *Wall Street*, *the Art of War*, and *Rising Sun* have all exploited the text for context and subplots. *The Sopranos* and even *The Simpsons* have occasionally quoted the *Art of War*, television's broad impact immediately creating a temporary surge in its popularity.

Apart from underpinning the Chinese mindset and strategic culture, numerous phrases from the *Art of War* have thus become well known and, much as American football coaches might claim that "the best defense is a good offense," have entered the language itself as popular sayings. Perhaps a reflection of China's abiding confidence in the ability of strategy and planning, deceit and manipulation, to allow inferior forces to overcome significantly stronger foes, these *ch'eng-yü* (*chengyu*) embody tactical fundamentals. Among the dozens commonly heard, the following are particularly prominent:



Warfare is the greatest affair of state.

Warfare is the Tao of deception.

Although capable, display incapability.

Display profits to entice them.

Attack where they are unprepared.

If they are angry, perturb them.

No country has ever profited from protracted warfare.

The highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans.

The lowest realization of warfare is to attack fortified cities—generally rephrased today as “Don't become entangled in urban combat.”

Attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the pinnacle of excellence.

One who knows the enemy and himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements.

First make yourself unconquerable.

Conquer those who are easy to conquer.

The victorious army is like a ton compared with an ounce!

The unorthodox and orthodox mutually produce each other.

Race forth where the enemy does not expect it.

The *ch'i (qi)* of the Three Armies can be snatched away.