

THE WAY OF WAR

CHINESE
STRATEGY
MANUAL

Edited by C. Ioutsen



C. Ioutsen

**The Way of War.
Chinese Strategy Manual**

«Издательские решения»

Ioutsen C.

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For the first time in the English language a comprehensive collection of the classical Chinese military maxims, sourced from the wide selection of relevant texts, both well-known and obscure, on a basis of practical modern-day usage, is presented in a straightforward and logically consistent form. The jewels of tactical and strategic thought, tested by some three thousand years of experience and still inexhaustible, are now available to be consulted in private life, business or indeed anywhere.

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C. Ioutsen

Cover designer C. Ioutsen

Cover designer A. Lenina

Editor C. Ioutsen

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Introduction

Warfare has been an integral part of human history since its earliest records but probably much longer. From sheer survival and fighting for one's life to unstoppable quest for power, from single combat to global confrontation, from battleground carnage to cyber attacks on stock markets, warfare takes many forms, appears in many guises. Yet, be it a cunning plan or a brutal force, a club or a nuclear bomb, the very essence of conflict is inextricably tied to the human nature itself, and that, subtle and variable as it may be, seems to hardly have changed at all.

Profound yet strikingly simple understanding of human psyche is at the core of the Chinese art of war. Far from being purely theoretical speculations, so numerous in the Western history of thought regardless of subject, it is the product of cool-headed observation and cold-hearted calculation, despite traditional Chinese mysticism.

Although warfare proper is scarcely ever seen as something desirable today, which is not unlike the view taken by the Chinese themselves throughout their turbulent history, one way or another it is evidently still present, indeed essential, in many areas of human activity.

The similarity of modern-day life and business, in its multiple facets, to war is uncanny. After all, contentions and problems arise everywhere and need managing and solving. Some would go so far as to argue, not unconvincingly, that life itself is a war, or – at least – a struggle, and not just human life but life as such.

Warfare was much on the minds of the Chinese, too. In particular, the era from the fifth to the late third centuries B.C., aptly named by later historians the Warring States period, was a perpetual series of feudal clashes for predominance, a succession of minor and major conflicts, intermingled and never-ending, by and large a time of total war of industrial proportions, when hundreds of thousands of soldiers were sent to die on a regular basis, not even mentioning the much higher casualties suffered by civil population.

In circumstances such as these a competent strategic advice was the most valuable currency of the day. Pondering their experiences, the professional military men came to formulate concepts and discern principles to impose intellectual order upon the apparently chaotic nature of an armed contest, selling their services to the highest bidder. The resulting manuals eventually constituted the officially sanctioned curriculum for systematically studying military doctrine.

The imperial examination system, permeating Chinese bureaucracy from top to bottom, provided an extra incentive to bring the orthodox military texts under thorough scrutiny. It furnished the hypothesis and vocabulary required for commanders to mutually communicate in their specialized areas. Warfare thus became a science, encompassing battlefield analysis, enemy assessment, command and control, tactical decision-making, and countless other important nuances of military routine. It was also constantly augmented by the expertise and ruminations of veteran generals and could be ignored by field officers only at great peril.

Interestingly, raging violence and incessant fighting went hand in hand with sophisticated – veritably blossoming – culture and advancing technology of Chinese civilization. One factor at work here was the ever growing theoretical complexity. Military writings of the era often range over issues relating to the intersection of political efficacy, training, resource management, ideology, legitimacy, and morality. The diverse concerns of these texts meant that they in turn opened up a space for thinkers, strategists, career officers, and politicians of different times and places to work through questions of how the military sphere of the state was implicated in other aspects of statecraft, administrative policy, and political philosophy.

At the same time there was an intimate relationship between philosophy and warfare – many of the early Chinese thinkers took warfare to be an area of sustained philosophical reflection, while

the military texts were themselves applied philosophy. In the imperial library catalogues military writers are repeatedly listed as philosophers or, rather, masters.

Hence the military paradigms initially discovered and formulated in map rooms and on battlefields, with an aid of abstract contemplation and meditative enlightenment, have come to reflect upon the very nature of struggle, of *doing things* – to risk the widest possible definition – and in this sense still lead themselves to infinite applications. The strategic and tactical advice scattered within thousands of years of Chinese military and non-military writings and expressed in characteristically proverbial language holds true to this day.

It must be emphasized however that as plausible, even obvious, as it may seem to us today, the Chinese of the Warring States era would have forcibly denied an over-generalization of the martial.

For one thing, the necessity to keep the civil and the military – two parts of the same whole – separated is often stressed even in military writings. Moreover, the precedence, aside from the conduct of an actual war, would unanimously be given to the civil, and not only in theory but also in practice, in the everyday attitude of the Chinese. The military service was not considered honorable in the society at large, the military men won no respect save among each other, the triumphant general was not supposed to gain political power. In contrast to Western history, dominated by warrior kings and conquering emperors, celebrated and glorified, the Chinese ruling class nobility consisted of bureaucrats, men with a brush, not with a sword.

From the prevalent view of peace-time management warfare always constituted loss and could only be tolerated with distaste, as necessary evil. Even a brilliant victory is a defeat in a sense that it entails an expenditure of manpower and resources.

Of more importance, perhaps, was the fact that similarity of warfare to other spheres of human pursuit was due to having certain ubiquitous phenomena in common and therefore being merely one particular way – of many – of dealing with them.

For instance, the concept of *shi* refers to strategic advantage, which is to say, the potential energy of situation and placement, and is found in manuals and guidebooks on such diverse subjects as calligraphy, cooking, literature, music, painting, and sex, among others. Curiously, despite the evident difference in subject matter, the language and terminology of these texts would often resemble each other to the extent that they would be almost indistinguishable, so that a Chinese reader might have had some difficulty in knowing whether he was perusing a sex manual or a strategy one (indeed these two have been seen to maintain the closest association).

For Western logic it might be easier to conceive, or at least practically handle, these as variations on implementation of a military theory. For Chinese logic the principle is neutral and universal and has as much legitimacy when applied to a choice of the right place for a table in a room as to a positioning of an armed unit on a battleground.

Nowhere was it better embodied than in one of China's most elusive teachings, Taoism. It is remarkable, even if not quite surprising, that an ideology as arcane as Taoism, which could not even be discussed save in parables and allegories and paradoxes, informed much of ruthless pragmatism and sheer practicality of warfare. Many basic Taoist notions are shared, often quite literally, within context of military or semi-military discourse.

To use one possible explanation, the Tao is an intelligible or sensible pattern that can be gleamed from each different perspective within the world and its innumerable parts. It is both the way the world is (and should be) and the way it works (and should work). It is literary *the Way* that can be traced out to find one's place and to make one's actions coherent. In this tradition there is no final distinction between an independent source of order and what it orders, between cause and effect.

All things are correlated and interdependent and every thing is what it is at the pleasure of everything else. Whatever can be predicated of one thing is a function of a network of relationships,

all of which conspire to give it its role and to constitute its place and its definition. Analytical categorization, so natural to Western thought, is impossible and analogy is used instead.

Compliance with the Tao is not dissimilar to the Western concept of the relation between microcosm and macrocosm – the whole reflected in parts and vice versa. The Tao is the DNA of the universe, its mode of operation. What conforms to the Tao, then, cannot but prosper and what is contrary to it cannot but perish. This harmony represents the quality of the combination at any one moment, created by correlating the available elements and cannot be discovered, that is, grasped as some eternal reality beneath the illusive appearance, but only followed, through a creative journey where the quality of the journey is itself the end. The cultivation of such a harmony is the ultimate goal, both personally and socially.

The first and foremost defining feature of a model military commander is that he must be an exemplary person and must ply his military skills from a foundation of superior character. His ability to achieve great things within the parameters of his office – his efficacy – is a function of his cultivated harmony rather than any specific competence.

On that account Chinese military theory presents a more practical side of Taoism, even if taking it beyond the prescribed ethical comfort zone. From a purist standpoint any practical *use* of the Tao, but especially those in statecraft, warfare and sex, is really plain *abuse*, as the primary guideline for perfect action is non-action, non-interference. In fact, practical Taoism is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. That said, the use (or abuse) of the Tao in real-life problem-solving may lead to strikingly effective results and has not gone unnoticed by many a practitioner, which makes it almost expected to see a consummate general portrayed as a traditional – and pacifist – wise man of Taoist fables.

Unlike Confucianism (also a huge influence in other respects), later adopted as a sort of official ideology for much of the Chinese history and focused chiefly on ethical side of things, Taoism regarded moral aspect as secondary at best, while Taoist strategists were not concerned about it at all. Benevolence and humanity are crucial qualities of a commander, true, but only so far as they can serve very practical purposes, namely to the end of calculated and utterly cynical exploitation of one's fellow human beings.

One of the most fundamental concepts of Taoism, *going with the flow* [shun], resonates vastly differently with the Chinese and the Westerner. Taken – for argument's sake – as a tactical or strategic device, it hardly makes any sense at all. It is incompatible, incommensurable with the very idea of struggle and sounds more like fatal non-action if not downright submission. The incongruity lies, it is needless to say, in putting a concept from one worldview within another, instead of examining it in its original environment.

For the Chinese the world was not a place filled with objects interacting with each other at the expense of some external energy, it was an ever-shifting situation filled with changes, of which objects were nothing more than mere manifestations. That being so, stability is only temporary, while change is more real than form and actually is the only permanent thing there is. It is a continuous movement between polar opposites of an endless continuum.

Although the changes that occur within any local field of conditions are always unique to it, they proceed according to a general pattern that can not only be anticipated but also utilized to one's own advantage. It is the ever-changing configuration of these specific conditions that determines one's place at any point of time and lends one a defining disposition.

Understanding both the uniqueness of any given event and the underlying framework binding it to the general setting is the key to a successful operation. Familiarity can be unpredictable because slight variations, when magnified through their interrelations, can have massive consequences. Minute fluctuations can amplify into dramatic metamorphosis.

Manipulation of change is a catalyst that affects the reaction without itself being spent. It makes possible to align one's own course with the course of all things, the Tao, effortlessly yet effectively.

Consequently, maximum effect through minimal expenditure of effort, utopian as it may seem, is a foremost postulate in the entire Chinese military thinking.

Note on the Text

For the first time in the English language a wide selection of relevant texts, both well-known and relatively obscure, from various periods of Chinese history spanning almost three thousand years has been sourced with a singular principal criterion in mind – to present a comprehensive, straightforward and logically consistent survey of practical military thought which could be still used today and far outside the narrow constricts of the military proper, on everyday basis and in everyday circumstances.

As mentioned above, warfare may be interpreted as virtually anything: life and business, education and career, art, science, sport, sex. The only limit is one's imagination and, of course, pragmatic necessity. The commander can stand for a supervisor of any kind, and the troops – for a staff of subordinates. The enemy is a rival, a competitor. The ally is a friend, a colleague. A military situation does not differ much from a problem-solving situation. Victory is a solution. Customs and cultures vary from nation to nation and from period to period, but human nature remains the same in its foundations, and nowhere else it is recognizably more so than in the conduct of struggle.

Not unconventionally, such brand of commonplace wisdom might at times look quite trivial. Yet, as with many all-too-familiar concepts, they often tend to be ignored, and when they are needed most, too. Besides, they have become trivial precisely for the reason of having passed the test of time and experience – a successful experience at that. Their careful examination, or indeed contemplation, serves as a perennial guide on a path of accomplishing one's ambitions.

Nevertheless, the present anthology is by no means supposed to supplant the authentic classical texts. On the contrary, while it is hopefully sufficient as an entrance level overview, the interested reader should not neglect to turn to the primary sources, even if for curiosity's sake alone – the most important of those are listed at the end of this introduction.

All the maxims in this collection have been lifted directly from the sources essentially unaltered. However, two exceptions have been made.

First, in many cases the same idea, albeit phrased marginally differently, could be found in various texts. Whenever it happened, the most concise and pithy variant has been chosen, but on a rare occasion a hybrid synthetic version has been produced.

Second, despite the habitually epigrammatic style of Chinese texts it sometimes happened, that a particular idea seemed clear enough yet was not stated explicitly, being implied within a lengthy passage. A liberty has been thus taken to provide a missing dictum.

The only major adaptation involved literary rendering of the text to make it clear and unambiguous (whenever ambiguity was not pre-requisite in the first place) for the non-specialist. There is no textual commentary and every phrase is made self-explanatory while staying as close to the original as the compiler's linguistic prowess allowed. Also, a certain unification of style and standardization of key terms have been attempted.

Naturally, a considerable amount of judgment had to be exercised in regards to selecting the maxims themselves. That is admittedly the part most open to criticism. The personal preferences were cast aside as much as possible in favor of objectivity. A modern-day average Western citizen would hardly find much use for the technique of deploying chariots on an open terrain or for a method of calculating maintenance costs for an army on a march.

The detailed descriptions of exact tactical and strategic situations, constituting a bulk of military handbooks, have been largely omitted as well, partially because they have little value outside of an actual battlefield (and an historic battlefield for that) and partially because their function is mostly illustrative anyway. Explicating them metaphorically felt presumptuous, as it was likely not the authors' intention. Only in those instances where the proposition could undoubtedly be taken in a broader sense they have been included.

The text layout needs a few words of explanation. It is at a first glance more akin to poetry than to prose, organized in short lines to add some extra emphasis to the syntactic structure and accentuate the meaning better, which is paramount when dealing with a brevity of form such as this. It is also somewhat half way between the Chinese and the English idioms – the Chinese language has very little grammar and is written vertically, with each hieroglyph normally representing a standalone concept which may demand a whole line of translation.

The maxims are joined together on a logical basis intuitively understandable to a Western reader (while the inner logic of reasoning is still mostly Chinese), but each one of them is more or less self-sufficient even if previously employed in some context, hence the general look of the page. Many could have easily fitted into several categories, so a number of arbitrary decisions have been made as well.

Such a method as employed in creating this book, however crude and unscholarly it may appear to some, is nevertheless not altogether out of line with a common medieval attitude to venerated classics.

Oral teachings of prominent people were compiled, often decades or even centuries later, commented upon, then recompiled with commentaries interpolated in the (more or less) genuine text, taken apart for anthologies and reassembled and recompiled yet again, with a possible falsification or two somewhere along the way, to a point when it was quite impossible to say whether the original author had anything to do with any of it at all.

The medieval passion for compilation and commentary, not infrequently rather unscrupulous (shared, as it would seem, by both the Chinese and – much later – the Europeans), is presumably the case even with the treatises *par excellence*: Master Sun's *The Art of War*, Master Lao's *Dao De Jing*, Master Kong's *Analects*.

Texts of this sort may read as coherent narratives today (although Master Sun's does not), particularly after a fair amount of editing has been involved, but they are not, nor have ever been. Which means, that bringing them to an attention of a modern reader through yet another textual deconstruction could be justified.

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