



Sun Tzu and Modern Strategic Thought

Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read The Art of War by Derek M.C. Yuen.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014. Pp. xii, 214. ISBN 978-0-19-937351-2.

Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare by Mark R. McNeilly.

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"You know you never defeated us on the battlefield," said the American colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. "That may be so," he replied, "but it is also irrelevant."

—Conversation in Hanoi, April 1975¹

This exchange captures the principal thesis of both books under review here. Specifically, the requirements for success in war transcend the simple application of force, and Sun Tzu's statement of them remains the most insightful.

Strategic theorist Derek Yuen (PhD, Univ. of Reading)² maintains that, "despite its popularity in the Western world, *The Art of War* has rarely been understood correctly with due understanding of its Chinese context and Taoist roots." Instead, readers see only "facile references to short one- to two-sentence axioms, aphorisms, and phrases..." (4). He means *Deciphering Sun Tzu* to open "new avenues for further research that can play an essential role in enhancing the Western understanding of Chinese strategy" (7); to that end, he emphasizes

- the foundations of Chinese strategic thought and strategic culture,
- the *Tao Te Ching* as a strategic text,
- Lao Tzu's place in Chinese strategic thought,
- Chinese military dialectics,
- the epistemology of Chinese strategy,
- the "Easternization" of Western strategic thought,
- the future direction of the study of Chinese strategic thought and culture,
- a new general theory of strategy transcending the East and West.

The volume comprises an ambitious introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The first three chapters "explore the life and ideas of Sun Tzu with the aim of recapturing the Chinese and Taoist contexts that are absent" in the incomplete and "simplistic" material available in the West (7). Chapter 1, "The System of Chinese Strategic Thought," lays out Yuen's two-dimensional scheme in which horizontal and vertical components represent the varieties (the Four Schools) and the evolution (the Three Levels) of Chinese strategy.

Chapter 2, "The Genesis of *The Art of War*," provides, "in a way that a Western audience will ... understand," a detailed historical analysis of "the military, strategic, diplomatic and cultural origins of *The Art of War*, as well as the zeitgeist in which Sun Tzu formed his ideas" (42). Yuen traces from the mid-

1. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (NY: Presidio Pr, 1982) 1.

2. Where he studied with Colin S. Gray.

eleventh-century BC the cultural traditions of the Qi state (in the present-day Shandong region) that influenced Sun Tzu's writing.

Chapter 3, "From Sun Tzu and Lao Tzu," introduces the *Tao Te Ching* as a key text in the "transformation and final completion of Chinese strategic thought" (97). Given this stress on the Taoist worldview as a logical development of Sun Tzu's ideas, it is surprising that Yuen opens the next chapter by observing that, "fortunately, most of Sun Tzu's ideas can still be understood and explained without reference to Taoism" (99).

In chapter 4, "Deciphering Sun Tzu," the author clarifies the master's concepts for a Western audience "elucidating them with the aid of Western strategic works ... of Carl von Clausewitz, Basil H. Liddell-Hart, J.C. Wylie, and John Boyd, and by cross-referencing them to other classical Chinese strategic works" (7). He concludes that Western theorists are "successors" to Sun Tzu, confirming the "proposition that the basic logic of strategy is universal—there is no such thing as an exclusively 'Western' or 'Eastern' approach to strategy" (125).

Chapter 5, "The Successors of Sun Tzu in the West," examines the thinking of Boyd and Liddell-Hart through "a Chinese lens" to discern their incorporation of some Chinese elements that have "indeed opened new avenues for the development and self-rectification of Western strategy" (127). For Boyd, in particular, "*The Art of War* became [a] Rosetta stone ... he returned to again and again. *It is the only theoretical book on war that Boyd did not find fundamentally flawed*" (140, emphasis original).

Chapter 6, "On Chinese Strategic Culture," opens with a declaration that "'strategic culture' is a Western concept" that presumes "the existence of two competing strategic cultures in China," one based on Confucianism and the other on realpolitik (155). Though he admits that this theoretical framework facilitates research into Chinese national and military strategic cultures, he argues that it does not reflect how the Chinese see themselves and cautions that Western scholars must become more conversant with Chinese history and philosophy.

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Mark McNeilly's approach in *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* is more conventional than Yuen's. He touches only briefly on the history of *The Art of War* and the influences of Chinese culture and philosophy. But, despite Yuen's claim that Western thinkers do not properly understand Sun Tzu, McNeilly (Univ. of North Carolina), a former businessman and Army reserve officer, reaches many of the same conclusions as Yuen. He, too, finds Sun Tzu's original collection of short quotations and now unfamiliar examples ill-suited to accurately conveying his unifying principles, which are never explicitly derived or analyzed.

Like Yuen, McNeilly recognizes that politics and military science in the West are distinct specialties. Hence, "the West lays claim to two separate books"—Clausewitz's *On War* and Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*—to cover the same ground as *The Art of War* (3-4). He isolates six master imperatives in Sun Tzu's work:

- achieve the objective without destroying it,
- strike where the enemy is most vulnerable,
- win the information war through intelligence and deception,
- prepare well and move swiftly to overcome resistance,
- prepare the battlefield,
- lead by example.

Noting that the first principle is "the overarching one; the other five principles provide the means of achieving it" (24), the author devotes a chapter to each, using selected historical events to illustrate his argument. Two final chapters wrap up the book.

Chapter 1, “Win All without Fighting,” considers the 1968 Tet Offensive, when, McNeilly claims, American leaders’ focus on “military means” led to strategy disaster. This simplistic characterization of US policy ignores the activities of the other American agencies in South Vietnam.

Subsequent chapters begin with a historical vignette and follow up with an extended discussion of the principle under review, while briefly interspersing other historical events. These added examples are interesting but not always particularly germane to the point under discussion. For example, in chapter 2, “Avoid Strength, Attack Weakness,” the author echoes Victor Davis Hanson’s argument that Western militaries prefer “pitting strength against strength.”³ That is, “the direct approach is strongly embedded in the Western mind, [the result of] the heritage we have received from the Greeks” with their phalanx formations and head-on collisions of heavy infantrymen (31–32). But this characterization of Western warfare immediately follows a description of Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf’s 1991 desert offensive in Iraq, which pointedly avoided a head-to-head clash with dug-in Iraqi troops to achieve a stunning, comprehensive victory in just four days. And, too, it has been shown⁴ that the sort of combat McNeilly (and Hanson) attribute to the Greeks can be identified in many cultures at various stages of their development; in short, it is not unique in Western military tradition.

The last two chapters in this new edition of *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* depart farthest from the earlier edition. In chapter 7, “Terrorism and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,” McNeilly asks “What Would Sun Tzu Advise?” His answer reads like an extended reflection on military actions of the last dozen years or so, with verdicts like “Nation-building is not a wise use of assets”; any critical application of his selected six principles is not much in evidence, however (183, 190).

Chapter 8, “Ancient Principles for Future Battlefields,” compares Sun Tzu’s teachings to those of Clausewitz to determine where the Prussian theorist is right or wrong. He concludes with some observations on the value of Sun Tzu’s principles in peace, war, and postwar settings.

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Taken together, the books reviewed here read rather like the theological ruminations of two disciples on the teachings of a great prophet. Or a pioneering scientist. McNeilly writes that

The principles I have culled from *The Art of War* are much like the laws of physics; they exist whether we know them or not. A scientist or engineer acting in accordance with the laws of physics is successful. The same is true of a commander; using these principles of strategy, he, too, is successful.... As Sun Tzu said: “If a general who heeds my strategy is employed he is certain to win. Retain him! When one who refuses to listen to my strategy is employed, he is certain to be defeated. Dismiss him!” (6)

That is, he argues, Sun Tzu’s principles are like natural laws, and natural laws are inviolable. Therefore, Sun Tzu’s principles are inviolable. The logical difficulty is obvious. While it can be argued that Sun Tzu’s principles are analogous to the *theories* and *practices* used by scientists to explore the natural world, they are not in themselves statements of the *actual laws* of nature. Moreover, even if scientists and engineers act perfectly in accord with their best theories and practices, they can still fail. (Consider the spellbinding movie of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge collapse in November 1940 or the history of the de Havilland DH 106 Comet crashes.) Neither scientists nor engineers (nor soldiers) can escape the consequences of the difference between their theories and the—often unknown—laws of physics.

Yuen, too, treats the master with a reverence that is peculiar in an academic study. He stresses that a knowledge of Taoism is essential to achieving a sound understanding of *The Art of War*, observing that Westerners view Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* as a work of philosophy, while in China “the text has of-

3. See Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (1989; 2nd ed. Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2009).

4. See, e.g., Ian Morris, *War! What Is It Good For? Conflict and the Progress of Civilization from Primates to Robots* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

ten been viewed as a work of strategy. Lao Tzu's famous saying, 'governing the state by being straightforward and waging war by being crafty' ... was used to define the ... leading school among the Four Schools of Chinese Strategic Thought" (65).

Both books share an emphasis on Sun Tzu's holistic view of national strategy, which presupposes a centralization of control or a solitary coordinating authority directing all aspects of national strategy. Sun Tzu wrote when the nation and the leader effectively constituted a single entity. By contrast, a distinct civil-military divide exists in most modern Western democracies. Neither McNeilly nor Yuen indicates whether such societies are less able than totalitarian states to adopt national strategies that follow from Sun Tzu's teachings.

Both books have their virtues. *Deciphering Sun Tzu* will appeal more to academics able to stomach its enthusiasm for Chinese strategic exceptionalism and belief in Sun Tzu's near infallibility. *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare*, on the other hand, will appeal more to casual readers, though its author is at times too certain of the efficacy of Sun Tzu's teachings. These are more the works of True Believers than of critical students of strategy.