

New Perspectives on the *Sunzi* (Sun Tzu) from Contemporary Chinese Military Writings

By Mark Metcalf



Detail of a sculpture of Sun Tzu.
Source: RogerMader.com at
<http://tinyurl.com/gowhxf>.

Since the publication of Samuel Griffith's seminal English-language translation of *The Art of War* (*Sunzi Bingfa*; hereafter the *Sunzi*) in 1963, readers have been drawn to the text as a source of non-Western perspectives on strategy and warfare.¹ Not only has it been the source of a thriving cottage industry for writers who creatively apply its precepts to nonmilitary domains, but *Sunzi* studies have become a staple of the US military's strategic studies curricula. While the text is inarguably a valuable source of strategic theory, its specific applicability to modern warfare remains open to debate.

As a retired US Naval Officer, I have had a longstanding interest in how the *Sunzi* is read and applied by the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the world's largest military force as measured in terms of total manpower.² The essay that follows discusses English-language translations of the *Sunzi* and other writings about the work, and considers their potential for providing insights regarding application of Sunzian precepts to modern warfare. It then describes recently published Chinese-language books from PLA authors and affiliated publishers that could provide a Chinese military perspective on the relevance of the *Sunzi* to modern warfare. Finally, examples are provided from PLA authors that demonstrate the unique insights that can be gleaned from these publicly available writings.

Reading the *Sunzi* in English

A perfunctory search of online bookstores reveals a tremendous number of English-language *Sunzi* translations and other writings with "Sunzi" (or "Sun Tzu") in the title. Such writings, including journal articles, can be broadly categorized into translations of the *Sunzi* and related sinological materials, military applications of the *Sunzi*, and nonmilitary applications of the *Sunzi*.

Translations and sinological texts are by scholars who are proficient in early Chinese academic research methods and literate in classical Chinese—the language of the *Sunzi*. These specialists are acquainted with the corpus of pre-Han Dynasty classical Chinese texts and are well-versed in the historical and philosophical context of the *Sunzi*; they can analyze the *Sunzi* on its own terms. Materials in this category include the eminently readable and thoroughly annotated translations of the *Sunzi* by sinologists such as Roger Ames, Victor Mair, and Ralph Sawyer.³ As there is no "best" *Sunzi* translation, different translations complement each other and can together provide insights into important concepts (e.g., empty and full) that cannot be precisely translated into English.⁴ Other useful materials are available for understanding the *Sunzi* in its historical context, and how its principles relate to the events and practices of the Warring States era (ca. fifth through third centuries BCE).⁵ By and of themselves, however, they are of little value to the evaluation of the usefulness of *Sunzi* for those responsible for modern warfare.

As the text is titled *The Art of War*, it is hardly surprising that the second category of writings is military applications of the *Sunzi*. Many of these present a scholarly and rigorous examination of the principles of the *Sunzi* from a Western military perspective. Written primarily by academic experts in military history and/or strategic thought, such writings compare and contrast the text's precepts with those of paragons of Western strategic thought such as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Clausewitz, and Mahan.⁶ While many of these works are theoretical, some authors also strive to identify historical events that demonstrate military principles described in the *Sunzi*. By explaining the relevance of the *Sunzi* to military history, such writings are of great value to military leaders and other planners who are responsible for formulating strategy. Given the paucity of information available for supporting detailed analysis, however, few writings address specific operational or tactical applications of the *Sunzi*, for example, how China might apply the *Sunzi*'s precepts to its contemporary military doctrine.

Unfortunately, not all so-called “*Sunzi*” writings in this category are of the same high quality—particularly many published in professional military journals. Instead of presenting rigorous analysis of a particular topic in the context of the *Sunzi*, authors with a superficial understanding of the text all too frequently pepper their articles with a few out-of-context citations from the text and add *Sunzi* to the title of the article in an apparent attempt to add credibility to their arguments.⁷ As will be discussed, this practice is also evident in writings about nonmilitary applications of the text.

The final category of writings is nonmilitary applications of the *Sunzi*. This category encompasses the purported application of Sunzian principles to domains as disparate as business negotiations and golf. The universal nature of many of the precepts presented in the *Sunzi* make them sufficiently malleable, particularly when taken out of context, to be interpreted in a variety of ways.⁸ This pliability is further enhanced when the “Sunzian” aspects of a given topic are based on a single, unannotated passage from the work. Without the encumbrance of philosophical, historical, or linguistic context, the writer is free to interpret the meaning of the *Sunzi* as best suits his or her interests. For example, the first chapter of the *Sunzi* explains:

*War is a vital matter of the state. It is the field on which life or death is determined and the road that leads to either survival or ruin, and must be examined with the greatest care.*⁹

However, when repurposed to be a source of financial advice, the text is given the following interpretation:

*The art of making money is of vital importance to the well-being of your bank account. It is a matter of survival. Without cash in the bank you are exposed to the rough elements of the world in which you live. You must study the best ways for you to earn, save, and invest money if you wish to prosper.*¹⁰

While the writer provides commonsense advice, the advice is as Sunzian as “Buy low. Sell high.” Similarly, when applying this precept to golf, another writer explains:

*Clearly, golf is not a matter of life and death, but taking Sun Tzu’s dictum with the knowledge that golf is a game, it is still one that requires the serious competitor to make every effort to maximize his advantages while minimizing his weaknesses. That said, it is useful to remember that the most successful champions are those who are able to keep completion in perspective and thus, thrive off the pressure rather than be adversely impacted by it.*¹¹

As a result, while an author may provide valuable insights on a particular topic, such insights may not necessarily be associated with the *Sunzi*. However, some works in this category are substantive. For example, many excellent business books make powerful cases for applying precepts from the *Sunzi* to principles of leadership or in the context of the “marketplace as a battlefield.” Given the nonmilitary orientation of such writings, though, it is unlikely that they can provide significant contributions to the question of applying Sunzian precepts to modern warfare.

More *Sunzi* Resources

In addition to the publications cited in the article, a bilingual version of the text (using Lionel Giles’s translation) is available online at the *Chinese Text Project* at <http://ctext.org/art-of-war>. Examples of business applications of the *Sunzi* can be found in Wee Chow Hou’s *Sun Tzu: War & Management* (Singapore: Addison-Wesley, 1991) and Tony Fang’s *Chinese Business Negotiating Style* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998). *Fortune* magazine columnist Stanley Bing presents a more tongue-in-cheek, yet insightful, analysis of the text in his book *Sun Tzu Was a Sissy: Conquer Your Enemies, Promote Your Friends, and Wage the Real Art of War* (New York: Harper Business, 2004).

Reading the *Sunzi* in Chinese

The past decade has seen the publication of an incredible variety of *Sunzi* editions and related books in China.¹² This is, in part, due to the richly deserved national pride that Chinese readers have in the *Sunzi* and their resulting desire to familiarize themselves with the text. It is also owing to the reality that the original *Sunzi*, written in classical Chinese, is incomprehensible to most readers of modern Chinese. Accordingly, much has been written to make the *Sunzi* accessible to Chinese readers.

As with Western writings on the *Sunzi*, most Chinese books can be categorized as academic, nonmilitary applications, or military applications publications. Academic publishers produce a variety of annotated editions of the *Sunzi* written by Chinese scholars that typically include the classical Chinese text, a modern Chinese paraphrase of the work, excerpts from traditional commentaries, and explanations of the *Sunzi*’s specialized terminology.

The next category, nonmilitary applications of the *Sunzi*, includes topics such as business leadership, medical management, and athletic competition. As with the English-language materials in this category, the Sunzian associations of these writings in this category range from insightful to preposterous.

The final category of *Sunzi* publications concerns military applications of the text. As in the West, some writers affiliated with the PLA, as either academics or students, have published books and journal articles that address the *Sunzi*'s Chinese and Western theoretical aspects. Such writings seldom discuss practical military applications of the text and, as with English-language sources, "Sunzi" in the title does not necessarily guarantee that the material includes anything more than a couple of generic citations from the *Sunzi*.

There is, however, a genre of writing by PLA-affiliated authors and/or distributed by PLA-affiliated publishers that specifically addresses practical military applications of the *Sunzi*.¹³ Fu Chao, *Sunzi* scholar and PLA Press author, explains that such publications are vital to the military since, unlike theoretically oriented academic research, military scholarship provides an emphasis on practical applications.¹⁴

While such books are structured in a variety of formats (e.g., commentaries, topical analyses, structural analyses, chapter-by-chapter narrative), the overarching purpose of each publication is to explain how the *Sunzi* is to be applied to military strategy and operations. Several of the books provide a modern Chinese paraphrase of each section from the text and then explain the meaning and the significance of the section; such explanations are frequently consistent across a multiplicity of writings. It is noteworthy that authors also demonstrate their familiarity with Western military history and strategic theory by incorporating examples from those domains. Based on the PLA affiliation of both the authors and publishers, the materials are potentially useful in providing new insights that can help Western readers better comprehend how the precepts of the *Sunzi* are understood by the PLA and applied to their military strategy and operations.

Insights from PLA Writings on the *Sunzi*

Consider how the following examples from different PLA texts enhance understanding of important Sunzian concepts or describe practical applications of the *Sunzi* to modern warfare.

The first example considers two terms that are addressed in the *Sunzi* that do not cleanly translate into English: *xu* and *shi*. "Xu [and] Shi" is the title of *Sunzi* 6; and the terms are variously translated as "empty and full" (Minford), "weak points and strong points" (Ames), "vacuity and substance" (Sawyer), "weaknesses and strengths" (Griffith), "emptiness and solidity" (Mair), and "weak points and strong" (Giles). Ames describes such terms as "correlative opposites," polar opposites that "can only be explained by reference to each other."¹⁵ While it is possible to intuit a sense of their meanings from the various translations and the contexts in which they are used, there are no exact English equivalents for the terms.

So how might one of the PLA texts shed light on meanings of these terms? As previously mentioned, the *Sunzi* was originally written in classical Chinese and contains many antiquated terms, which are also problematic for modern Chinese readers. Senior Colonel Ma Jun, a prolific author, TV personality, and Professor of Strategy at China's National Defense University, explains that the concepts of *xu* and *shi* are important to the *Sunzi*, but he also acknowledges that their meanings are difficult to articulate. Ma introduces *xu* and *shi* as a "pair of contradictory unity of opposites," which, together, comprise "one relatively wide-ranging concept." Then, instead of providing definitions, he explains the terms with a list of examples that describe how they are manifest in military operations, a list that he memorized while in military school:

Regarding deployment of military strength, dispersed military strength is xu and concentrated military strength is shi;

Regarding operational preparations, slackened vigilance is xu, and preparation completed is shi;

Regarding troop quality, low quality is xu, and high quality is shi;

Regarding troop management, undisciplined is xu, strict is shi;

Regarding troop support, ineffective support is xu, strong support is shi;

Regarding troop morale, morale declining is xu, morale rising is shi;

Regarding troop psychology, timid is xu, brave is shi;

Regarding military terrain, disadvantageous to combat is xu, advantageous to combat is shi;

Regarding troop whereabouts, exposed is xu, concealed is shi;

Regarding the troop situation, perilous is xu, secure is shi;

Regarding knowing the opposition, being unfamiliar with the enemy situation is xu, understanding the enemy situation is shi;

Regarding troop condition, being hungry and cold is xu, being well-fed and warm is shi.¹⁶

Based on the types of examples used in this list, it is obvious that the PLA considers the concepts of xu and shi to go well beyond a “strong enemy” or a “weak target.” Instead, xu and shi are used to describe a variety of elements that contribute to the overall readiness and effectiveness of a military unit. It is also interesting that the citation actually extends the scope of xu and shi to considerations beyond those, which are explicitly stated in the *Sunzi*. Instead, the examples argue that from the PLA’s perspective xu and shi are relevant to nearly every aspect of military preparedness.

Another example of how xu and shi are explained in PLA texts comes from Wu Ru-song’s *Sunzi’s Art of War—15 Lectures*, a thorough, chapter-by-chapter investigation of key Sunzian concepts. The author, a PLA Military Sciences Academy research fellow, notes that in an essay on the *Sunzi* by seventh-century Tang Dynasty Emperor Tang Tai-zong, the ruler contended that one who can discern the xushi situation of both sides will be invincible.¹⁷ Wu proceeds to explain that xushi can be characterized as either “static” or “dynamic,” claiming that static xushi are easy to ascertain, whether in the “era of bladed weapons” or the “era of information warfare.” In contrast, it is very difficult to determine dynamic xushi. As he explains:

For example, if you are capable, but indicate that you are incapable, this “capable” is shi, a reality, and is static. The “incapable” is xu, is false, and is dynamic. Here the real shi “capable” becomes the xu false “incapable.” What is relied on is a form that is shown, which is camouflage and deception, relying on craftiness and feigning. The reason that Sunzi discusses “avoid shi and strike xu” and “conform to the enemy and control victory” concurrently is because these two issues are mutually complementary. Xushi changes must rely on a realization that results from adaptability. During combat, adaptive employment of troops must also, by observing enemy xushi as a prerequisite, clearly ascertain the enemy xushi in order to correctly make up one’s mind. And then one can select strategy and tactics based on the enemy situation.¹⁸

By using specific military procedures (e.g., camouflage, deception) to illustrate different implementations of xu and shi, Wu helps the reader turn abstract concepts into practical activities. Based on this explanation, we can also observe that there are aspects of both weakness and emptiness in xu and, correspondingly, strength and reality in shi.

A final example, also from *Sunzi* 1, addresses the well-known Sunzian adage that “warfare is a way of deception.” A unique feature of PLA texts on the *Sunzi* is that they occasionally present examples of practical applications of Sunzian principles to modern warfare. *Essentials of Sunzi and the Art of War and Submarine Operations*, written by staff members of the PLA Navy Submarine Academy, provides the following four examples of ways that this precept might be applied to submarine operations:

“Show yourself to intimidate the enemy” (shi xing she di). A submarine is equipped with formidable assault power. A submarine can appear at a certain time or place to create a psychological threat to an adversary and prevent it from taking military action.

“Show the false to confuse the enemy” (shi jia huo di). [We] can take a few submarines and deploy them to a non-principal battle area and direction, even show ourselves to divert the adversary, and covertly deploy the main submarine force to the main battle area and direction and catch [the adversary] by surprise.

“Create momentum to harass the enemy” (zao shi rao di). When a submarine is in the vastness of open ocean long range operations, it can create the appearance of the submarine being anywhere at any time, causing the enemy to set up defenses everywhere and yet not being able to defend anywhere, thereby dispersing [their] forces and exposing their weaknesses.

“Deceive to obstruct the enemy” (qi pian zu di). [If] owing to the objective reason of the slow deployment speed of a submarine it is unable to realistically arrive at the operating area, it can employ deceptive measures. Using methods such as public opinion propaganda, intentionally divulging information, etc., can cause the adversary to believe that submarines exist in important sea areas. This can particularly deter an adversary’s warships that have poor anti-submarine capabilities.¹⁹

While the types of actions proposed in this example are fairly standard methods for employing submarines, it is interesting to note how Sunzian precepts regarding deception are used as rationales for making such recommendations.

Conclusions

The provision of the types of unique perspectives that can be gleaned from contemporary Chinese writings on the *Sunzi*, particularly those by authors with a PLA affiliation, may not necessarily be categorized as “momentous,” but will likely provide Western readers with new insights into the ways that the *Sunzi* is interpreted by PLA-affiliated authors.

As evidenced in the brief excerpts provided, there are novel perspectives regarding the *Sunzi* that can be obtained from books written by PLA-affiliated authors, particularly from writings that provide PLA insights into the practical applications of the text. As Western readers delve more deeply into these types of materials, it is anticipated that, in addition to gaining new perspectives on the *Sunzi* as a text, they will also increase their familiarity with contemporary PLA perspectives on how the precepts of the *Sunzi* can be applied to modern warfare. ■

NOTES

1. Sunzi (pinyin romanization) is also rendered as the familiar “Sun Tzu” (Wade-Giles romanization). In this paper, the term “non-Western” is used to describe strategists other than European and US writers such as Thucydides, Clausewitz, Mahan, etc. Analogously, the adjective “Western” (e.g., Western readers) refers to Europe and the US.
2. The People’s Liberation Army includes all branches of China’s military, including ground, naval, air, missile, and support forces.
3. *Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger Ames (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993); *The Art of War: Sun Zi’s Military Methods*, trans. Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); *Sun Tzu: Art of War*, trans. Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).
4. In addition to experiencing the classical Chinese text, my undergraduate *Sunzi* students read three translations that each emphasize a different aspect of the text: philosophical (Ames), historical (Sawyer), and sinological (Mair).
5. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2004); Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); Lisa Raphals, *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).
6. A few academic strategists, such as Dr. Andrew Wilson at the US Naval War College, are also sinologists who have a thorough understanding of the *Sunzi* and other early Chinese military texts.
7. This is not intended to denigrate the military professionalism or expertise of the authors as military officers; most contributors are experts in their respective military specializations.
8. Wilson also characterizes such universals as “axiomatic platitudes.” See Andrew R. Wilson, “Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*,” from *Masters of War: History’s Greatest Strategic Thinkers* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2012), DVD. For examples of textual malleability, see Don Wade, *Golf and the Art of War* (Thunder’s Mouth Press: New York, 2006); Michael M. K. Cheung, *Sun Tzu: The Art of Making Money* (London: Allsky Limited, 2012); Eric Rogell, *The Art of War for Dating* (Avon, Massachusetts: Adams Media, 2011).
9. Mair, 103.
10. Cheung, 5.
11. Wade, 10.
12. There is also a wide range of excellent Chinese scholarship on the *Sunzi* published in Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong; however, these are not considered directly relevant to the goal of obtaining insights into PLA perspectives on the text.
13. Author affiliations include National Defense University and the PLA Military Sciences Academy. Publishers include the PLA Press.
14. Fu Chao, *Sunzi’s Art of War: A Structural Analysis [Sunzi Bingfa Jiegou Yanjiu]* (PLA Press: Beijing, 2010), 211.
15. Ames, 77. *Yin* and *yang* is another familiar pair of correlative opposites. Throughout this section, I leave *xu* and *shi* untranslated to highlight their lack of exact English equivalents.
16. Ma Jun, *Ma Jun Explains Sunzi’s Art of War [Ma Jun Shui Sunzi Bingfa]* (Zhonghua Shuju: Beijing, 2008), 144. The punctuation in the text indicates that this is a partial list of examples.
17. Wu Rusong, *Sunzi’s Art of War: 15 Lectures [Sunzi Bingfa Shiwu Jiang]* (Zhonghua Shuju: Beijing, 2010), 77. The text combines *xu* and *shi* as the unitary term *xushi*, possibly to highlight the relationship between the two terms.
18. *Ibid.*, 77.
19. Geng Shixin, *Sunzi’s Art of War Essentials and Submarine Operations [Sunzi Bingfa Jingyao Yu Qianting Zuozhan]* (Academy of Military Sciences Press: Beijing, 2002), 24.

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