

STILL RELEVANT AFTER 2500 YEARS

The Art of War and Tao Te Ching

By Rochelle Kaplan

Sun Tzu (Sunzi in pinyin) was hired by the Emperor as a general, and instead of an interview, the Emperor told him to teach his concubines to march. Because if he could do that, he could do anything. So Sun Tzu said: 'Do I have complete control?' The emperor said yes. So he told them to march, and the concubines just laughed. Then he summoned the head concubine and cut off her head. Then they marched.¹

In the above paragraph, Harlan Ullman, the American military strategist who developed the concept of “Shock and Awe,” the Pentagon’s initial approach to the war in Iraq, paraphrased an anecdote from the Chinese classic, *The Art of War (Bing Fa)* to make this point:

“The question is: how do you influence the will and perception of the enemy, to get them to behave how you want them to? So you focus on things that collapse their ability to resist. The idea is to get the other side to quit by not firing a shot and if war comes, to win it with minimum cost all around. The notion (of shock and awe) is to do minimum damage, minimum casualties, using minimum force.”² Shock and awe was never supposed to be about obliteration but about will power: stunning one’s opponent into realizing that your might was so enormous, so unbeatable, that the fight was as good as over.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Art of War is the world’s oldest military treatise, having been anthologized in the second half of the fourth century BCE, during the Warring States period (403–221). The treatise is attributed to Sun Tzu. However, scholars disagree over his very existence, much less his authorship of *The Art of War*. Some feel the book is a distillation of military thought at that time. David Shepherd Nivison writes that all “books” prior to 221 BCE, no matter whose names they bear, are either obviously layered texts that “grew” over centuries or are suspected to have been added to, taken from, rearranged, or pieced together after the main author (if there was one) died.³

By the fourth century BCE, the Chinese had a centuries-old advanced bronze-making industry and they were casting iron. Warriors were using the *ko* (dagger-ax), spears and the compound bow. “True swords didn’t become common until the middle of the War-

ring States period. . . . The chariot remained important until well into the Warring States, when it was gradually supplanted by large infantry masses and eventually, during the third century BCE, began to be supplanted by the cavalry.”⁴ Use of the crossbow became widespread.

By 403 BCE, the conflicts of the Spring and Autumn period, which preceded the Warring States era, had segmented China into seven powerful survivor-states, each contending for control of the realm, and fifteen weaker states for them to prey upon. The feudal lords had evolved into despotic monarchs who had to expand their agricultural output to survive. Armies grew in size, and managing them effectively meant that their core had to be composed of practiced, disciplined officers and soldiers. Drill manuals, deployment methods, and tactics suddenly became indispensable.⁵ These needs led to *The Art of War*.

Mark Edward Lewis in the *Cambridge History of Ancient China* characterizes the Warring States period as having “a small number of territorial states involved in constant diplomatic maneuvering and intermittent but frequent large-scale military conflagrations.”⁶ He mentions shifting alliances, states organized for warfare (with population registration, universal military service, adaptations of military rank, massed infantry, states based on the service of the peasant household, siege warfare, the use of cavalry, the manufacture of armor and helmets, larger armies, and the creation of a specialized, intellectual discipline devoted to the conduct and principles of combat).

THE TEXTS COMPARED

D. C. Lau explains in his translation of the *Tao Te Ching (Dao De Jing)*, a philosophical work anthologized in the same period, that during the Warring States period, survival for most folks was an immediate concern. The *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* attempted to address this issue. Stanza 75 states, “He who lives out his days has had a long life.”

Stanza 71 states, “Arms are instruments of ill-omen. . . . When great numbers of people are killed, one should weep over them with sorrow. When victorious in war, one should observe the rites of mourning.”

Lau continues, “Politics and ethics, for the Chinese as for the ancient Greeks, were two aspects of the same thing, and this, the Chinese thinkers called the *tao*. One who has the *tao* will be “inwardly a sage and outwardly a true king.” “The term sage (*sheng jen*) occurs more than twenty times in the *Lao Tzu* and refers to a ruler who understands the *tao*. . . . Knowledge of the *tao* makes the

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sage a good ruler because the government of the people should be modeled on the way the myriad creatures in the universe are ruled by the *tao*. To Lau, the *Lao Tzu* is, through and through, a work on the art of government.”⁷

Victor Mair concurs in his discussion following his translation, based on discoveries made in 1973 of the earliest extant versions of the *Tao Te Ching*. Mair, by the way, notes more than thirty occurrences of the term *sheng jen*. He calls the *Tao Te Ching* a handbook for the ruler with mystical overtones.⁸

“The original *Tao Te Ching* is actually a very political book. . . . Clearly, the aim of the author(s) was to show how to achieve hegemony over the empire. The sage who appears so often in the *Tao Te Ching* is the ideal ruler with the heart of a Yogin. . . . The best way to control is through minimal interference and by keeping the people simple, without knowledge and without desires—two pervasive themes of the *Tao Te Ching*. . . . The text as a whole is designed to serve as a handbook for a ruler.”⁹

Mair writes that the *Tao Te Ching* is the result of a period of oral composition that lasted three centuries (circa 650–350 BCE). During that period, it was common for philosophers to travel from state to state within the disintegrating Chinese state, looking for a king who would put their ideas into practice.¹⁰ Mair describes the work as a reaction against the hierarchical, bureaucratic ideology of Confucius and his followers. Mair and other scholars feel that the originally oral doctrines were eventually written down and essentially completed by the end of the third century BCE. The oral roots of the work account for the use of repetition, obvious writing errors, mnemonic devices, formulaic language, and parallel grammatical and syntactical structures.

Sun Tzu realized that war was “a matter of vital importance to the State”¹¹ and he tried to formulate a rational basis for the planning and conduct of military operations. As Griffith writes:

“He believed that the skilful strategist should be able to subdue the enemy’s army without engaging it, to take his cities without laying siege to them, and to overthrow his State without bloodying swords. . . . He considered the moral, intellectual and circumstantial elements of war to be more important than the physical.”¹²

This ideal strategy of restraint, of winning without fighting and accomplishing the most by doing the least, is characteristic of Taoism. Both *The Art of War* and the *Tao Te Ching* were designed to help rulers and their assistants achieve victory and clarity during the tumultuous Warring States period. Each of them may be viewed as anti-war tracts and reactions to Confucian thought. Thus, it is logical to use these two key works as companion pieces in the classroom.

Sun Tzu states, “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”¹³ “This effortless way brings *The Art of War* close to the *Tao Te Ching*,” according to philosophy professor George Teschner. “Warfare is more a matter of the quiet skill of a fine craftsman than of drama and heroics.”¹⁴

The *Lao Tzu (Laozi) Tao Te Ching*, the most widely translated

Chinese book, is an anonymous product known as the *Lao Tzu* (which means “Old Master” or “Old Philosopher”) or the *Tao Te Ching (The Book of the Way and Its Power)*. The *Lao Tzu* probably represents the current of thought in China around 300 BCE, though by tradition (it) was written by a contemporary of Confucius named Li Er.¹⁵ Mair says that the “real title of this book should be something like *Sayings of the Old Masters*.”¹⁶

A key concept of *Tao Te Ching* is *wei wu wei*, which means “without action.” This means doing something so naturally, so effortlessly, that it almost appears to be non-action. *Wu wei* doesn’t really mean non-action, but rather action in accord with Nature. One scholar, Professor Robert Henricks, explains the Tao in the *Lao Tzu* “does nothing, and yet there is nothing left undone (*wu-wei erh wu-pu wei*.)” The ideal ruler in the *Lao Tzu* is someone who rules in this way. *Wu wei* does not mean literally to do nothing, but rather “to act without acting,” to spontaneously say or do what is genuinely felt rather than putting on a show for others (“acting”).¹⁷ Mair feels *wu-wei* indicates spontaneity and noninterference, letting things follow their own natural course.¹⁸

D. C. Lau, in the introduction to his translation of *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, discusses other important concepts besides *wu-wei*. Some are opposites, nothing (*wu*), the unknowable or without name (*wu ming*), the cycle of development and decline, and virtue (*te*). Mair and David Hinton, yet another translator, feel that the Chinese term *te* is best translated as integrity. Mair writes that “the *Tao Te Ching* describes the assimilation of the individual personality (*te*) into the eternal Way (*Tao*).”¹⁹ Ralph Sawyer, in his translation of *Art of War*, notes that the observation that reversal characterizes the natural world figures prominently in the *Tao Te Ching*. *Cheng* turns into *ch’i*, things revert to their opposites after reaching their pinnacle.²⁰ Mair calls paradox the essence of the *Tao Te Ching*. *The Art of War* deals with some of the same concepts. Required reading today at many military colleges, it has profoundly influenced Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and American martial thought. Read avidly by businessmen, it was praised in the 1987 film *Wall Street* as the corporate raider’s bible.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

In teaching the *Tao Te Ching* and *The Art of War* with students, I offer the following pre-reading activities:

1. Ask students to research what was happening in China from 500–300 BCE. Have them consider the events that may have led Confucius and Li Er to think seriously about the individual, the government, and the best way to live, and what led to the crafting of *The Art of War*. Students then discuss their findings in groups of five. Each group should select a recorder who notes key events on chart paper. Helpful resources include the Griffith translation and discussion of *The Art of War*—particularly the chapters “The Warring States” and “War in Sun Tzu’s Age,” Ralph Sawyer’s general introduction and historical background chapters to his

translation of *Art of War*, Victor Mair's notes, commentary, and afterward to his translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, David Hinton's introduction to his translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, and *The Cambridge History of Ancient China* edited by Edward L. Shaughnessy and Michael Loewe. Useful Web sites are listed at the end of the article.

2. The teacher and students read various translations of Chapter 68 of the *Tao Te Ching*.

D. C. Lau's translation:

*One who excels as a warrior does not appear formidable;
One who excels in fighting is never roused in anger;
One who excels in defeating his enemy does not join issue;
One who excels in employing others humbles himself before them.
This is known as the virtue of non-contention;
This is known as making use of the efforts of others;
This is known as matching the sublimity of heaven.*

Henricks' translation of the same chapter. (Note that Henricks advises reading chapters 67, 68, and 69 together as a unit.)

*Therefore, one who is good at being a warrior doesn't make a show of his might;
One who is good in battle doesn't get angry;
One who is good at defeating the enemy doesn't engage him.
And one who is good at using men places himself below them.
This is called the virtue of not competing;
This is called correctly using men;
This is called matching Heaven.
It's the high point of the past.*

Mair's translation:

*A good warrior is not bellicose,
A good fighter does not anger,
A good conqueror does not contest his enemy,
One who is good at using others puts himself below them.
This is called "integrity without competition,"
This is called "using others,"
This is called "parity with heaven,"
—the pinnacle of the ancients.*

Roberts' translation:

*Warriors who excel do not parade;
Commanders who excel do not anger;
Victors who excel don't lightly engage;
Skilled managers of men are humble:
This defines the power of no-conflict,
The way to manage men's strength,
The union with heaven, the acme of old.*

The instructor distributes copies of Nancy Atwell's suggestions for **how to read a poem**. The class reads the list.

- Slow down and savor the language.
- Read it more than once.
- Read parts of it more than once.
- Read it out loud.
- Notice how you feel and how words and images create feelings.
- Notice images, the pictures the poem puts in your mind.

- Notice other sensory language—the phrases and lines you can taste, touch, hear, and smell.
- Notice words and phrases you like.
- Notice metaphors (comparisons) you like.
- Notice sound patterns, like alliteration or assonance, rhyme or rhythm.
- Notice how a poet uses punctuation and white space, breaks lines, breaks stanzas, and locates the words on a page.
- Notice how the poem begins and ends.
- Think about the poet's big idea: why he or she may have written the poem.
- Think about who is speaking in the poem.
- Mark the lines you love, that tell you something about yourself, the power of language, or the human condition.
- Mark the lines you need to talk about—because they fill you up, move you, make you laugh, confuse you, create images, give you goose bumps.²¹

Go around the room, individually responding to these elements, as they relate to the various translations of Chapter 68. The teacher is one responder.

Think about these questions: How might a warrior excel and yet not seem formidable or mighty? What benefits accrue to the fighter who does not get angry? How might humility aid a person who employs others? Answer these questions in small groups. Give specific examples. Each group should select a recorder to jot down on chart paper summaries of what group members state.

Now that the teacher has modeled the exercise with the class, follow up with these:

READING AND POST-READING EXERCISES:

Divide the class into five heterogeneous groups. Each group will have one chapter from the *Tao Te Ching*, relating to government and to individuals. I use chapters 17, 30, 31, 60, and 61. You might consider others. The teacher circulates among the groups during the activity, providing feedback and support.

Instructions for each group:

- a) Select a moderator, a recorder, and a timekeeper. The moderator will facilitate the discussion, the recorder will keep notes, the timekeeper will ensure that no one person or discussion point dominates.
- b) Using Atwell's guidelines for how to read a poem, read, then reread the *Tao Te Ching* chapter for your group.
- c) Make sure that you (1) summarize the big idea, (2) give specific examples from your background knowledge and/or experiences, (3) comment on the patterns and/or the language, (4) decide whether you as a group agree or disagree with the main points and defend your opinion, and (5) ask a question that the poem provokes.
- d) Present your group's work orally to the rest of the class. Chart paper notes are useful.

For classroom discussions of *The Art of War*, teachers may wish to use translations by Griffith (1963), Sawyer (1994), or Cleary (2003). One suggested **pre-reading** activity uses the treatise's introduction.

The Art of War begins with these lines (Sawyer translation):

Sun Tzu said:

Warfare is the greatest affair of state; the basis of life and death, the Way (Tao) to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed.

Therefore, structure it according to [the following] five factors, evaluate it comparatively through estimations, and seek out its true nature. The first is termed the Tao, the second Heaven, the third Earth, the fourth generals, and the fifth the laws [for military organization and discipline].

The Tao causes the people to be fully in accord with the ruler. [Thus] they will die with him; they will live with him and not fear danger.

Heaven encompasses yin and yang, cold and heat, and the constraints of the seasons.

Earth encompasses far or near, difficult or easy, expansive or confined, fatal or tenable terrain.

The general encompasses wisdom, credibility, benevolence, courage, and strictness.

The laws [for military organization and discipline] encompass organization and regulations, the Tao of command, and the management of logistics.

There are no generals who have not heard of these five. Those who understand them will be victorious; those who do not understand them will not be victorious.

Thus when making a comparative evaluation through estimations, seeking out its true nature, ask:

Which ruler has the Tao?

Which general has greater ability?

Who has gained [the advantages of] Heaven and Earth?

Whose laws and orders are more thoroughly implemented?

Whose forces are stronger?

Whose officers and troops are better trained?

Whose rewards and punishments are clearer?

From these I will know victory and defeat!

The instructor asks that students carefully read and then reread these lines. Divide the class into groups of three to five students to discuss Sun Tzu's main points. Groups are instructed to paraphrase, or put into their own words, what Sun Tzu said. Each group selects a recorder, who uses chart paper to write down key points made. The teacher circulates among the groups during the activity. Each group then shares its work with the class—to further open up discussion. A question for students to consider is: Do you agree or disagree with Sun Tzu's first premise that warfare is the greatest affair of state? Why or why not?

A SUGGESTED READING ACTIVITY FOLLOWS

The class reads Chapter 3 and is instructed to pay particular notice to the format Sun Tzu uses in his writing. When possible, make copies of the chapter for individual students to mark up as they read. For example, pupils might highlight critical points, paraphrase, make connections to other texts, world events, or their lives in the margins, pose questions or areas of confusion and indicate agreement, disagreement, or surprise. Class members then consider (a) How is the form relevant to the message? (b) How do the additional remarks by the commentators give substance to Sun Tzu's pithy statements?

I offer these **post-reading** activities.

Ask students to:

(a) Quote the most effective sentence. (b) Ask Sun Tzu a question provoked by a statement he wrote. (c) Ask one of the commentators a question or make a remark to a commentator based on something he wrote. (d) Write down something that disturbed you about the chapter.

As a subscriber to National Writing Project principles, I believe in answering each question I pose to my students. Thus, I simultaneously do the activity I ask my students to do. Then, in a round-robin exercise, I volunteer one of my responses as a model and ask each student to volunteer one of his responses.

Ask students to select one of the thirty statements and find an example from history (other than the ones given) that supports or weakens the statement. Ask students to explain how their examples do this. I would first model the activity for the students.

Ask students:

(a) How might a businessman apply a statement from this chapter?
(b) In pairs, to paraphrase ten of the thirty statements which are the easiest for them to understand.
(c) Interview, on tape or by letter, a local entrepreneur or salesman, asking him/her to comment on the relevance of the statements paraphrased from *The Art of War* to his/her line of work. Share these in small groups of six students.

Write a letter to Harlan Ullman to find out how he was influenced by *The Art of War*. You may ask him to address particular quotes from the book. Harlan Ullman can be reached at:

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Ask students to research how Mao Tse-Tung used *The Art of War* in his rise to power. Griffith discusses this in his chapter "Sun Tzu and Mao Tse-Tung." Mao's *Little Red Book* may help here. A Web site that lists some of Mao's quotations is: http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/m/mao_zedong.html Another useful Web site is: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/>

Ask students to consider these questions:

How might *The Art of War* help you today?

Are there strategies from the work that you might apply in your own social life? In school? In your job?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

Compare both the *Tao Te Ching* and *The Art of War* in their treatment of the following concepts:

- wu wei or non-action
- anti-war imagery
- criticism of Confucianism ■

NOTES

1. *The Guardian*, March 25, 2003.
2. Ibid.
3. Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, 745.
4. Sun Tzu. *Art of War*, translated by Ralph D. Sawyer, 35–36, 56.
5. Ibid., 54.
6. *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, 616.
7. Lau, D. C., *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, 1963, xxvi-xxix.
8. *Tao Te Ching Lao Tzu*, translated by Victor H. Mair, 145.
9. Ibid., 128.
10. Ibid., 120.
11. Sun Tzu. *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith, 63.
12. Ibid., x.
13. Ibid., 77.
14. Interview with George Teschner on the Web site <http://www.sonshi.com/teschner.html>.
15. *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching*, translated by Robert G. Henricks, 1989, xi.
16. *Tao Te Ching*, translated by Victor H. Mair, 1990, xv.
17. *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching*, translated by Robert Henricks, xxvi.
18. Victor Mair, *Tao Te Ching*, 138.
19. Ibid., 135.
20. Ralph Sawyer. *Art of War*, 149.
21. Nancy Atwell. *In the Middle*, 424.

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