

Sun-tzu

The Art of War

BY DIANE SMITH

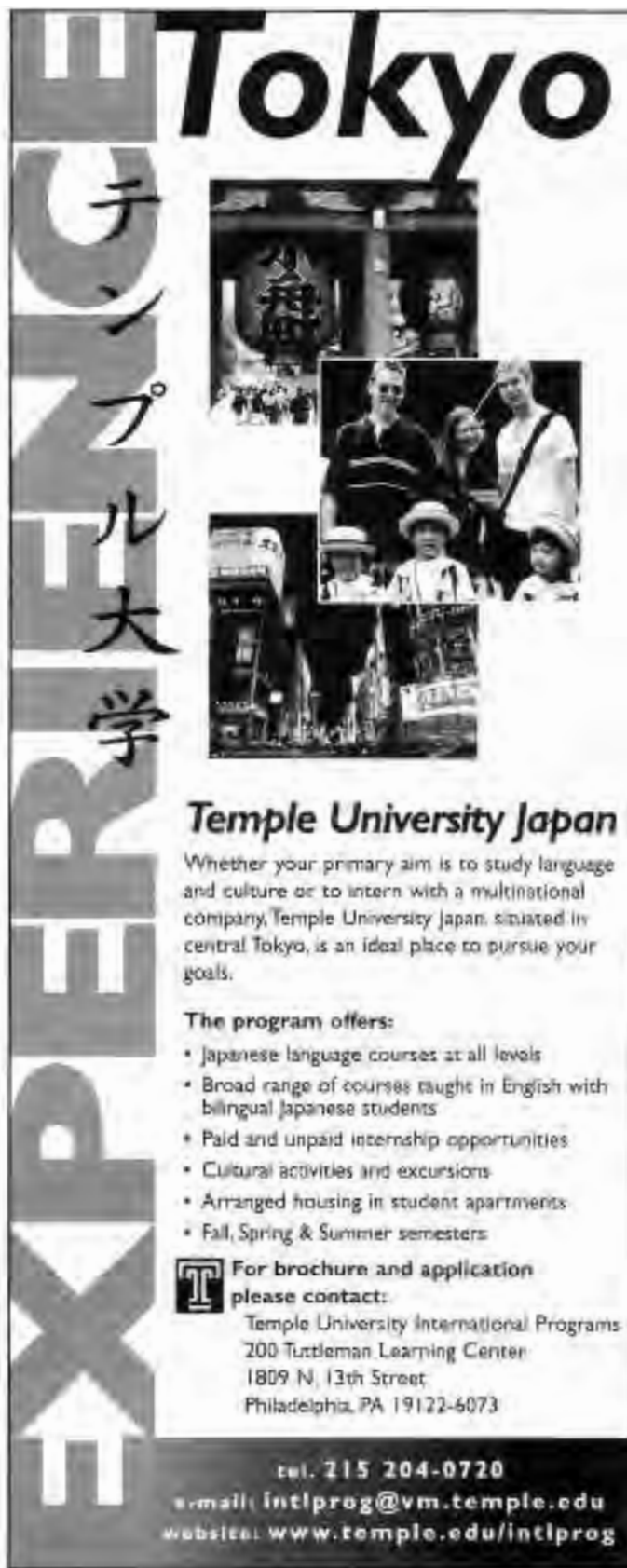
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Of all the Great Books written in East Asia since writing began, *The Art of War* is probably the best known title in the English-speaking world today, thanks in part to its popularity among business strategists and international consultants. The producers of this film thus had a great opportunity to use the existing fascination for the book to encourage a deeper understanding of early East Asian philosophy and history. Unfortunately, they chose to skim lightly over the history of *The Art of War* and instead use the book to draw out a simplistic theory of the differences in ways of thinking in “the East” and “the West.” In our opinion, this film is not suitable for use in a course on East Asia, except possibly as part of an exercise to critically examine constructions of “East” and “West.”

The Art of War is attributed to a sixth-century B.C.E. military strategist from the state of Qi known as Master Sun, or Sun-tzu (spelled Sunzi in the pinyin romanization system), who was entrusted with command of the armies of the Yangzi delta state of Wu. The film briefly describes the historical period in which Sunzi lived, pointing out how the changing nature of warfare in the Warring States period—from ritualistic chariot encounters to all-out infantry battles—created a demand for military expertise such as Sunzi offered. Roger Ames of the East-West Center discusses the rise of a class of itinerant philosophers who offered the rival states strategies to stop the violence and bring harmony to society. Sunzi, we learn, was one of these.

At this point, the video becomes frustratingly vague on the nature of Sunzi’s philosophy and approach to warfare and the social order. At intervals throughout the film, an off-screen voice intones famous lines from *The Art of War*, such as “Know your enemy, know yourself,” but it would have been helpful to have a more detailed and plain description of the contents of the book near the beginning. The film also could have addressed more fully Sunzi’s impact on military tactics and philosophy throughout imperial Chinese history. There is almost no discussion of how Sunzi’s followers, such as the famous strategist Sun Bin, preserved their master’s teachings and added their own perspectives to *The Art of War*. Arthur Waldron of the Naval War College provides the clearest analysis of the work, comparing the ideas of Sunzi to those of the Prussian strategist Clausewitz. Clausewitz, he explains, concentrates on the mechanics of the use of force. For Sunzi, conflict involves much more than force. A ruler’s psychological



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Asia Video Reports was created and compiled at the Asian Educational Media Service in the Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies at the Urbana-Champaign campus on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

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preparation for and approach to conflict is even more important than battle techniques and weaponry.

The film then takes an odd turn. Rather than documenting the influence of *The Art of War* on political and military leaders across the millennia, it examines three recent conflicts "between East and West": the U.S.-Japan conflict in World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. The film seems to suggest that if the United States had understood the philosophy of *The Art of War*, then it might have been more successful in its military encounters in East Asia. Due to the lack of this knowledge, the film argues, the United States failed to comprehend two of Sunzi's fundamental principles: deception is the key to success in war and the greatest generals are those who can overcome the enemy without fighting. Interviews with William Westmoreland, overall commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam, and North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap highlight the different ways the two sides approached the war, certainly. But did appreciation for and understanding of *The Art of War* have anything to do with these differences? Although the filmmakers imply that they did, they offer no concrete evidence that Japanese, Koreans, or Vietnamese derived their methods of war from Sunzi's philosophy, and thus the question is never directly addressed.

Sunzi's influence on the corporate world is featured at the end of the film, with clips of Michael Douglas citing *The Art of War* in the 1987 movie *Wall Street* and interviews with well-known Chinese and American business consultants. Again, as in the section on twentieth-century warfare in East Asia, the relationship between *The Art of War* and East Asian business culture is discussed in extremely general terms. The main message is that "the West" excels in analytical logic, but, compared to the people of "the East," Westerners are almost laughably naive when it comes to understanding the psychology of interpersonal relations. Film footage of Chinese soldiers practicing Taiji in front of missiles and a middle-aged Chinese woman exercising with a sword in a public park ominously underscores the film's message that, in the words of business consultant Chin-Ning Chu, "everything is a mind game to the Chinese."

Those looking for a good historical introduction and analysis of Sunzi's *The Art of War* will find this film disappointing, although actor Donald Sutherland does a good job as narrator. It may be of some use as a tool to spark discussion in cultural anthropology courses, if accompanied with readings and other materials that provide more sophisticated perspectives on East Asian culture. Several very graphic video clips of battles from the U.S.-Vietnam War make the film unsuitable for younger audiences. ■

KRISTIN STAPLETON received her Ph.D. at Harvard University. She teaches East Asian History at the University of Kentucky. She is the author of *Civilizing Chengdu: Chinese Urban Reform, 1895-1937* (Harvard Asian Center, 2000) and is working on a book that explores changes in family and urban life in China's republican period using Ba Jin's novel *Family*.

J. NATHAN CAMPBELL received his Master's degree in history at the University of Kentucky in May 2000.