

## Reconsidering Sun Tzu

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**ABSTRACT:** This article challenges readers to reconsider the implied meanings of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, which contemporary strategists commonly assume to be true. An analysis of the text within the context of global warfare during the period, and juxtaposed with recently recovered manuscripts, offers a new understanding of this strategic handbook.

A recent newspaper article carried the headline, “Lack of Oxford Comma Could Cost Maine Company Millions in Overtime Dispute.”<sup>1</sup> At issue was the wording of a statute meant to designate which workers were eligible for overtime pay. The absent serial comma made it unclear if the regulations applied only to those who pack items for shipment, or also to those who actually transported goods.

In the landmark US Supreme Court case, *District of Columbia v. Heller*, Justice Antonin Scalia began the majority opinion with a 10,000-word dissertation outlining his understanding of the link between the two clauses that make up the Second Amendment.<sup>2</sup> Despite the effort, Scalia was unable to convince four of his eight colleagues that his detailed interpretation of the amendment's text, composed of a mere 27 words, was ultimately persuasive.

None of this is surprising. Textual ambiguity seeps into even the most careful efforts to distill highly complex thoughts into concise written form. The fact that fierce debate over the interpretation of our own Constitution and laws still exists hardly seems worthy of note. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, however, appears to escape this fate despite being well over 2,000 years old and written in a language radically different from even its own modern equivalent. Accepted as the oldest military treatise in the world, the work amazingly maintains a sterling reputation for providing clear, direct, and applicable strategic guidance to its modern adherents.

Our Western assessment of Sun Tzu's lucidity and continued relevance was most famously articulated by the British military theorist Sir Basil Liddell Hart. In the foreword to General Samuel B. Griffith's 1963 translation of *The Art of War*, Hart drew a sharp distinction between Eastern and Western philosophies of war, noting “the clarity of Sun Tzu's thought” serves as a counterweight to “the obscurity of

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1 Daniel Victor, “Lack of Oxford Comma Could Cost Maine Company Millions in Overtime Dispute,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2017.

2 *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008).

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Clausewitz's."<sup>3</sup> In Hart's view, *The Art of War* had "never been surpassed in comprehensiveness and depth of understanding. . . . Sun Tzu has clearer vision, more profound insight, and eternal freshness."<sup>4</sup> Half a century later General David Petraeus, in the foreword to an updated translation of Sun Tzu's work, declared it to be "every bit as relevant now as when it was written."<sup>5</sup>

The notion that Sun Tzu represents the multifaceted brilliance and timeless appeal of Amadeus Mozart to Clausewitz's dour and overwrought Antonio Salieri maintains a powerful grip over our collective imagination. But we have not yet come close to cataloging fully the good, the bad, and the plainly ugly within this endlessly fascinating, but ultimately flawed document. Sun Tzu commentator Mark McNeilly insists the text's principles "are much like the laws of physics; they exist whether we know them or not. . . . if a commander is ignorant, does not understand or (worse) ignores these principles, he does so at his peril."<sup>6</sup> In fact, almost every principle McNeilly believes he properly lifted directly from the text is open to challenge. Contrary to popular sentiment, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* remains far from a settled law.

### Violent Delights, Violent Ends

The main characteristic of Sun Tzu's work is its seemingly bold rejection of violent means in the pursuit of strategic ends. People's Liberation Army Colonel Liu Mingfu articulated this key difference in his manifesto predicting China's conflict-free displacement of the United States as the global hegemon within the next few decades: "*On War* has been called Europe's *Art of War*. But the character of European and Chinese military strategy is as different as their representative works. . . . China's art of war is a peaceful, defensive, benevolent, moral, civilized art of war, one that uses softness to overpower steel, and quiet to overcome force."<sup>7</sup>

Many Westerners certainly agree with this assessment. Arthur Waldron, a professor of Chinese history at the University of Pennsylvania, attempted to quantify this distinction between a pacifist Eastern philosophy of war with the conflict-prone West.

Above all, virtually all strains of Chinese philosophy frowned on the use of force. Even Sun Tzu's description of war and conquest avoids much talk about violence. He uses the word *li*, force, only nine times in his entire *Art of War*, while Clausewitz uses *Gewalt* eight times alone when defining war in the two paragraphs of Book I.2. Furthermore, when Sun Tzu does use the

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3 B. H. Liddell Hart, foreword to *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), vi.

4 Hart, foreword, v.

5 David H. Petraeus, foreword to *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, trans. Peter Harris (New York: Everyman's Library, 2018), 11.

6 Mark R. McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

7 Liu Mingfu, *The China Dream: Great Power Thinking & Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era* (New York: CN Times Books, 2015), 99.

word force, he does so almost always to stress the need to conserve it. . . . China's preeminent military theorist shrunk from the use of direct force.<sup>8</sup>

The first issue is a simple comparison of word frequency in works of vastly different length and scope. Without deeper analysis, it can lead us to facile conclusions. The insinuation that Clausewitz's eight usages of *Gewalt* within his description of war indicates a preference for using force, as opposed to a scholar's careful and thorough definition of a key term in his theory, is misplaced. As a counterpoint, what are we to make of the fact that Clausewitz uses the German word for "peace" (*Frieden*) 27 times in the first of his eight books that make up *On War*, while Sun Tzu uses the Chinese equivalent term for "peace" (*he*) only once in his entire text? Moreover, in a work composed of slightly over 6,000 characters, with only 762 of them being unique, the appearance of a single character nine times in *The Art of War* is far from insignificant; it puts *li* in the top 15 percent of all characters used within the text based solely on the frequency of its occurrence.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the character *li* is not the proper linguistic equivalent of *Gewalt*. As used in *The Art of War*, *li* is better translated as physical strength, vitality, or intensity, not force as Clausewitz defined it in his work.<sup>10</sup> In one instance, Sun Tzu uses *li* in an analogy conceptualizing an inconsequential achievement: "Lifting up a strand of fine animal hair newly grown in autumn does not require great strength [*li*]." <sup>11</sup> In another, he uses *li* to describe the intensity of a fire set amongst enemy troop formations: "Once the fire has peaked in strength [*li*], if conditions are right, follow up with an attack."<sup>12</sup>

The term does not equate directly to Clausewitz's *Gewalt*. But this does not mean the concept of *Gewalt* is absent from *The Art of War*; nor that Sun Tzu's idea of using force is any less violent than what is advocated by his Prussian counterpart. In fact, Sun Tzu chooses to conserve *li* (strength) for the purpose of more effectively inflicting violence on the enemy at the most opportune moment. If we are looking for the key difference between Sun Tzu's and Clausewitz's thinking, we will not find it in the former's alleged rejection of violence in war.

## Divine Strategic Order

Even if Sun Tzu did not shy away from using force in battle, strategically he favored less violent and catastrophic methods to conquer the enemy. This is a defensible viewpoint, most likely derived from the well-known third verse of the third chapter, "Offensive Strategy": "Thus

8 Arthur Waldron, "Chinese Strategy from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Centuries," in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 101–2; and Arthur Waldron, foreword to *The Art of War: Sun Zi's Military Methods*, by Sunzi, trans. Victor H. Mair (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), xv.

9 John F. Sullivan, "Sun Tzu Character Frequency," (draft, Academia, October 4, 2018).

10 John F. Sullivan, "Li (力) in *The Art of War*: Force or Strength?" (draft, Academia, November 9, 2018).

11 Mair, *Art of War*, 89.

12 Sun Tzu, *Master Sun's Art of War*, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2011), 86.

the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy’s plans; next is to attack their alliances; next to attack their army; and the lowest is to attack their fortified cities.”<sup>13</sup>

We must initially note a few discrepancies. First, the text clearly states that for each of the objects of the four methods, one needs to “attack” them. If we choose to interpret the idea of attacking the enemy’s plans and alliances as indicating a reliance on primarily nonviolent means, we need to lay out clearly what evidence in the text leads us to that conclusion. This has never been satisfactorily accomplished.<sup>14</sup>

Second, while the text unmistakably lists the four methods from best to worst (literally, highest to lowest), Sun Tzu does not explain to the reader what criteria is being used to assign this ranking. Is the order based on best to worst in terms of minimizing violence, most to least in terms of effectiveness, or some other ranking principle? Before we can properly assess the impact of this verse on strategic choices, we need to determine what criteria Sun Tzu uses as the basis for his recommendations.

The most popular interpretation is that this ordering reflects Sun Tzu’s desire to minimize enemy casualties. Thomas Huynh, moderator of a website about *The Art of War*, explains the sequential logic as follows: “The progression from most desirable to least desirable focus of attack is inversely proportional to the amount of physical damage an army can inflict on its enemy: the less damage inflicted, the more desirable the outcome.”<sup>15</sup> In line with this thinking, Huynh highlights what he believes to be “the value Sun Tzu places on compassion.”<sup>16</sup>

According to this logic, the ordering appears rational and there is a simple and clear explanation for the strict prohibition on attacking cities. Conducting sieges, historically, was often one of the most brutal methods of waging war, resulting in death by starvation and disease (particularly affecting women, children, and the elderly), followed by vicious house-to-house slaughter of unarmed civilians once the walls were breached. Even after victory, the cruelty of the methods used remains in the hearts and minds of the vanquished populace.

But another interpretation is possible. Although Sun Tzu did not provide a clear rationale for assigning order to the first three modes of attack, in the next verse he furnishes an uncharacteristically detailed exposition as to why attacking cities ranks last.

Attack cities only when there is no alternative. . . . To prepare the shielded wagons and make ready the necessary arms and equipment requires at least three months; to pile up earthen ramps against the walls an additional three months will be needed. . . . If the general is unable to control his impatience

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13 Sawyer, *Art of War*, 177.

14 See Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 104–5.

15 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War—Spirituality for Conflict: Annotated & Explained*, trans. Thomas Huynh (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2008), 32.

16 Huynh, *Art of War*, 32.

and orders his troops to swarm up the wall like ants, one-third of them will be killed without taking the city. Such is the calamity of these attacks.<sup>17</sup>

Notice, though, that Sun Tzu expresses absolutely no concern over the fate of the women and children trapped within the city walls. His empathy extends only to the besiegers, not the besieged. Preparing for a siege takes a lot of time and effort, and once the attack begins, *one's own soldiers* might suffer heavy casualties. The tragedy, therefore, is not that too many enemy soldiers or noncombatants might perish, but that conducting a siege saps too much of one's own time, energy, and combat capability.

If one could develop a method to prefabricate siege equipment, train specialized crews to erect ramps quickly, and ensure commanders keep their tempers in check, one might plausibly infer attacking walled cities could move up in the rankings. By the time Sun Bin's military treatise appears in the fourth century BC, the prohibition on siege warfare was removed and distinctions are made regarding fortifications ripe for attack.<sup>18</sup> While it is comforting to believe Sun Tzu's strategic order is based upon an enlightened desire to limit enemy casualties, the text does not support this reading.

In his recent book, *Deciphering Sun Tzu*, Derek Yuen offers a slightly different take by claiming "Sun Tzu is actually comparing the four [options] in terms of their efficacy in leading to victory."<sup>19</sup> If this were correct, we would expect the text to spend considerable effort describing in some detail the two most efficacious strategies, attacking stratagems and alliances. Oddly, this is not the case. Consider Sun Tzu's listing in the first chapter of the most vital assessments one needs to make prior to engaging in conflict:

Therefore, to gauge the outcome of war we must compare the two sides by assessing their relative strengths. This is to ask the following questions:

- Which ruler has the way (tao)?
- Which commander has the greatest ability?
- Which side has the advantages of climate and terrain?
- Which army follows regulations and obeys orders more strictly?
- Which army has superior strength?
- Whose officers and men are better trained?
- Which side is more strict and impartial in meting out rewards and punishments?

On the basis of this comparison I know who will win and who will lose.<sup>20</sup>

17 Griffith, *Art of War*, 78–79.

18 Sun Bin, *Sun Bin: The Art of Warfare: A Translation of the Classic Chinese Work of Philosophy and Strategy*, trans. D. C. Lau and Roger T. Ames (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 166–68.

19 Derek M. C. Yuen, *Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read the 'Art of War'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 106.

20 Ames, *Sun-Tzu*, 104.

Note what Sun Tzu chooses to omit from his list. If “attacking alliances” is the second most effective method to achieving victory, as Yuen posits, why would Sun Tzu not include an evaluation of the enemy’s alliance structure as a necessary consideration when making a decision to go to war? The majority of Sun Tzu’s assessments, counterintuitively, would fall into what would be the *third* most efficacious strategy, attacking the enemy’s army. This observation suggests the order is not based on increasingly effective methods to realizing victory.

Yuen’s theory is further eroded later in chapter 3, when Sun Tzu considers the force ratios necessary to support various strategies, including initiating an attack if one is five times the enemy’s size. Given Yuen’s interpretation, the idea of recommended force ratios is moot, since even if one holds an overwhelming numerical advantage, attacking the enemy’s army is still considered one of the least effective methods to achieving victory.

Another interpretation, is the order reflects Sun Tzu’s desire to limit the possibility of his own army suffering catastrophic defeat. Under this thinking, the order does not necessarily reflect the best or most efficacious strategies, but rather the most prudent given a clear-eyed reckoning of one’s own inherent weaknesses and liabilities. To substantiate this view, though, we would need to see evidence within the text itself of Sun Tzu’s pessimistic views regarding his own army’s ability to fight and to win. The evidence exists. But we must search for it in one of the most fascinating but also underrated chapters of the text.

## Death Ground

The eleventh chapter, “The Nine Terrains,” has often confounded students of *The Art of War*. It is by far the longest chapter in the book. Its organization seems chaotic; some sections are corrupted, and others drift aimlessly. Moreover, given the descriptions of various terrains found in chapters 8, 9, and 10, this chapter is often thought of as simply a summary of previous sections of the book.

Chapter 11, though, is unique and worthy of careful analysis. More than any other portion of the text, this chapter follows a close approximation of modern operational design. The sequence of terrains outlines Sun Tzu’s vision for how an offensive operation should ideally unfold in terms of both time and space, from the initial invasion across the enemy border to the culminating decisive battle that will achieve victory for one’s army.

There are two main elements to Sun Tzu’s operational concept: drive deeply into the enemy’s territory, then seek “death ground” for your soldiers before initiating the attack. He counsels against engaging the enemy either within one’s own territory or even close to the border once the invasion is initiated, even if the actual terrain would be favorable to one’s own forces. Historical commentators of the text have noted Sun Tzu’s main concern is soldiers are likely to desert en masse if drifting back home is a viable option. This accords with Sun Tzu’s claim: “When

the troops have penetrated deeply, they will be unified, but where only shallowly, will [be inclined to] scatter.”<sup>21</sup>

It is clear that the conscripts that made up Sun Tzu’s army lacked the dedication and courage of the small group of elite warriors tasked to fight in earlier eras. “On the day they ordered out to battle, your soldiers may weep,” he warned, “those sitting up bedewing their garments, and those lying down letting the tears run down their cheeks.”<sup>22</sup> Sun Tzu’s dismal assessment of his own army’s reliability permeates the entire chapter. He feared his soldiers would refuse to reinforce one another voluntarily during the heat of battle. Concerned about his own forces, he notes, “The men of Wu and Yüeh hate each other. Yet if they were crossing the river in the same boat and were caught by gale winds, they would go to each other’s aid like the right hand helping the left.”<sup>23</sup>

The fact that Sun Tzu exemplifies sworn enemies forced to find common ground in a crisis within a lament that his own soldiers might not display the same level of comity toward their fellow comrades in arms is remarkable. He goes on to say reliance prior to battle on “tethered horses and buried chariot wheels”—so one’s own soldiers cannot flee—is an insufficient remedy.<sup>24</sup> Although he drives his army deep into enemy territory in part to let them know there is no easy route back home to safety, this measure will not be enough. Terrain is the missing key necessary to lock his army into the psychological brig he feels compelled to construct.

Sun Tzu analyzes all nine terrains. But he clearly has one final terrain in mind for his own army: death ground. All other areas are to be endured, avoided, or exploited. Only on death ground does one have the hope of tasting victory. He describes it as terrain where “there is no way out,” and “ground on which you will survive only if you fight with all your might, but will perish if you fail to do so.”<sup>25</sup> Only on this inescapable terrain, bereft of any alternate means of survival, will the army be mentally prepared to unleash the violence necessary to defeat the enemy decisively: “Throw the troops into a position from which there is no escape and even when faced with death they will not flee. For if prepared to die, what can they not achieve?”<sup>26</sup> There is only one catch. His own army might not willingly follow him onto the sacrificial altar.

When Sun Tzu notes in the first chapter that all warfare is based on deception, most interpreters infer the deception focuses solely against one’s enemy. But in chapter 11, Sun Tzu primarily employs deceptive practices against his own soldiers. He states the business of the commander is to keep his own army ignorant of his intentions; they should be led like a flock of sheep being dragged to-and-fro without

21 Sawyer, *Art of War*, 333.

22 Sun Tzu, *Sun Tzu’s The Art of War: Bilingual Edition Complete Chinese and English Text*, trans. Lionel Giles (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle, 2016), 51.

23 Ames, *Sun-Tzu*, 158–59.

24 Ames, *Sun-Tzu*, 159.

25 Minford, *Art of War*, 79; and Ames, *Sun-Tzu*, 155.

26 Griffith, *Art of War*, 134.

being aware of their final destination. When he finally maneuvers them onto death ground, he likens it to scaling a great height and then kicking down the ladder so that escape is impossible. Only when the ruse is complete does Sun Tzu feel confident enough in his own army's forced positioning to launch the attack: "He assembles his whole army and leads it into danger so that his troops have to fight fearlessly for their lives. All this is what a general should master."<sup>27</sup>

### **Fear and Loathing**

Many look at Sun Tzu's inclination to avoid battle or to engage the enemy directly, and rationalize these actions as manifestations of Sun Tzu's innate desire to limit the destructive impact of war, especially on the enemy. Instead, these verses reflect the logical consequence of his fear. Fear that, at the moment of testing, his soldiers will ultimately come up short. Fear that his army will abandon the enterprise before the battle even begins. But concern over the enemy's welfare is nonexistent within the text.<sup>28</sup> Some may point to the second chapter as evidence of Sun Tzu's compassion in dealing with prisoners of war. This view is mistaken. Sun Tzu's shielding of prisoners, according to the text, only extends to a small subset of the enemy's army (charioteers) who possess a unique skill Sun Tzu most likely wanted to exploit for the purpose of continuing his assault on the enemy forces.

To counteract fear, Sun Tzu chooses not to rely on the unreliable. He will drive his army deep into the enemy's domain to forestall desertion. He will deceive his own troops as to his intentions. And then, he will callously throw them onto death ground to ensure they will fight. He will maneuver them onto terrain offering a distinct positional advantage, so momentum will overcome the deficiencies in training and morale. Many will die in the process. But with the ferocity of a cornered animal and the latent power of a torrent channeled through a narrow ravine, Sun Tzu's army just might tip the scales in their favor and grasp victory from the jaws of certain defeat.

To be fair, this method of manipulating an army into withstanding the crucible of battle does not necessarily make a brute, especially given the historical period in which the text was most likely composed. Prior to the moment of conflict, Sun Tzu's leadership style is neither overly harsh nor naively permissive. At the end of chapter 10, he assesses his army's potential to face the enemy head-on in battle: "Because such a general regards his men as infants they will march with him into the deepest valleys. He treats them as his own beloved sons and they will die with him."<sup>29</sup>

But in comparing his soldiers to infants and children, he also tacitly acknowledges they may not be up to the task of defeating the enemy

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<sup>27</sup> Sun Zi, *Sun Zi: The Art of War with Commentaries*, trans. Zhang Huimin, comm. Xie Guoliang (Beijing: China Cultural Publishing, 1995), 262.

<sup>28</sup> John F. Sullivan, "Rethinking Sun Tzu: POWs and the Captured Chariot Incentive Program," Strategy Bridge, December 5, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Griffith, *Art of War*, 128.

without the assistance of significant external pressure. For this reason, our modern lexicon rejects patriarchal terms, instead preferring to view the profession of arms as a brotherhood, not a father and son filial relationship. A modern commander, leading a competent, well-equipped volunteer force, would not feel compelled to toss his or her troops onto death ground simply to motivate them to fight better. When we claim *The Art of War* is as relevant now as when it was written, we must not overlook its bleak view of the necessity of developing highly trained, motivated, and empowered subordinate leaders and soldiers.

To be sure, other historical references to Sun Tzu, such as the infamous concubine army tale, indicate he held a dim view on the importance of training. In the story, Sun Tzu is asked to demonstrate his military methods through the use of palace concubines. Accepting the challenge, Sun Tzu assigns the palace ladies into one of two groups under one of the king's favorite concubines. Each woman is given a halberd and asked to face left, right, or about-face when ordered, but all burst out laughing when the commands are issued. Repeating the instructions, the concubines again giggle instead of following orders. Declaring that after instructions are issued twice and still disobeyed, Sun Tzu assigns the fault to the subordinate commanders and immediately beheads the two leaders despite the protests of the king. The remaining concubines, quickly grasping the gravity of the situation, studiously follow instructions. After the "training" is complete, Sun Tzu presents his army to the king, claiming they are prepared for battle.

Many commentators focus on the brutality of the beheadings, or the civil-military issues inherent in Sun Tzu's refusal to grant the king's plea for clemency, but most miss the implied criticism over the quality of soldiers and their training. During an era long predating gender equality, Sun Tzu's willingness to train palace concubines as soldiers is a sharp indictment of the mettle of the recruits making up its newly formed conscript armies (the same men who will wet their garments with tears before battle). Furthermore, after only an afternoon's work of running the women through the most basic parade ground drills, Sun Tzu declares his unit fully combat capable, highlighting the extremely low-level of martial skill expected out of one's cannon-fodder soldiers.<sup>30</sup>

### **Fox, Hedgehog, or Rooster**

Appropriating Isaiah Berlin's famous categorization of canonical authors, conventional thinking too readily assigns Sun Tzu the role of the proverbial fox, able to shift fluidly from the grand strategic to the tactical levels of war and seamlessly pivot from applications of psychological coercion to physical force.<sup>31</sup> A more judicious and historically grounded analysis of the text reveals him to be more akin to the hedgehog: the knower of one big thing, he uses physical terrain to compensate for

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<sup>30</sup> Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961).

<sup>31</sup> Isaiah Berlin, "The Hedgehog and the Fox," in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 436–98.

the lack of morale rotting at the core of each newly formed conscript army.<sup>32</sup> Ensuring your own force occupies advantageous physical terrain while simultaneously denying the enemy awareness of its positional disadvantage is the sine qua non of Sun Tzu's thinking.

Military theorist John Boyd, often lauded as the intellectual heir to Sun Tzu's philosophy, attempted to simplify the key distinction between the Chinese sage and his strategic antipode: "Sun Tzu tried to drive his adversary bananas while Clausewitz tried to keep himself from being driven bananas."<sup>33</sup> A closer reading of the text, however, reveals Sun Tzu might be more obsessed with maintaining his sanity. As a result, much of the text devises a highly creative, albeit negligently risky, method to counteract the inherent weakness of the army he was tasked to lead.

If we subscribe to the popular theory that the historical Sun Tzu was an itinerant philosopher-general using his book as a calling card to seek employment from various rulers, this view should not surprise us. A wealthy state with a powerful and well-trained army would have little incentive to contract a hired gun to lead its soldiers in battle. An impoverished state with a weak military force would be much more receptive to the idea of turning its army over to an outsider, especially one whose lessons promise cheap and quick methods to offset critical deficiencies and to achieve stunning victories even over more powerful neighboring states.

A popular view is Sun Tzu's text was an ancient proponent of guerrilla warfare. That view is problematic. First, he demanded a swift victory, and discouraged prolonged operations. Second, he insisted wars be conducted only on the enemy's terrain, thereby denying himself the support of the local populace. Third, he recommended maintaining the unity of his own army at all times and discouraged dispersed operations. Of the three key components to insurgency operations, therefore, Sun Tzu applied none.

## Conclusion

Perhaps we allow too much of our own modern critique of war into our contemporary interpretation of Sun Tzu's ancient tome. Many can recite from memory one of Sun Tzu's most celebrated verses: "For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill."<sup>34</sup>

Yet few seem to reflect much on the fact that subduing the enemy remains the required end state necessary to justify this forbearance of arms. Nowhere in the text did Sun Tzu use the equivalent terms for negotiate, compromise, or limiting one's own objective. When the Mongol warlord Tamerlane besieged the Turkish town of Sivas, he

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32 Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

33 Robert Coram, *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002), 332.

34 Griffith, *Art of War*, 77.

informed the defending garrison if it surrendered immediately, no blood would be shed. Upon capitulation Tamerlane made good on his promise by burying them all alive.<sup>35</sup> We deceive ourselves if we believe Sun Tzu would never consider such cruelty worthy of the “acme of skill.”

These opinions are not the definitive version of Sun Tzu. Many will disagree. But these interpretations highlight how critical verses are open to alternative readings. We need to examine all assumptions. Interpretations should be tied to textual evidence and grounded in historical realities, not driven by ephemeral impressions born of a desire to correct perceived flaws in Western theoretical approaches. We certainly can read whatever we want into *The Art of War*. But we should consciously avoid distorting it whenever possible.

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35 Ssu-ma Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Records, Volume VII: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China*, ed. William H. Nienhauser Jr. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 263–71.

