

Introduction

Speaking on the floor of the United States Senate in 2008 regarding her frustrations with the extensive, but ultimately, she feared, indecisive, discussions of the Climate Security Act, Senator Maria Cantwell remarked, “As Sun Tzu said in the ‘Art of War,’ ‘the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step’.”¹ Senator Cantwell may well be excused for mistaking Sunzi for Laozi and *The Art of War* for the *Daodejing*, since she was apparently familiar enough with both mythical thinkers and their works to confuse them.² The more intriguing issue is how a United States senator came to invoke Sunzi and his *Art of War* in a discussion of a climate change bill rather than in a military context. To be fair, the Congressional Record is replete with military references to Sunzi, not only with respect to China, but more usually concerning universal strategic wisdom as well. Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831), a key Western writer on strategy and war, is seldom mentioned, and then only concerning military strategy. When Clausewitz is discussed he is often paired with Sunzi, and even occasionally with Mao Zedong (1893–1976). To think strategically or even philosophically in contemporary American culture, then, is to speak of Sunzi.

Sunzi’s *Art of War* became a popular work of strategy in America, in Great Britain, and more broadly in the West, as the direct result of Samuel Griffith’s 1963 translation. His translation of Sunzi, with a preface by Basil Liddell Hart, the most famous strategist in the world at that time, inserted Sunzi into the Western imagination in ways that one earlier French and two English translations had not. Griffith, a retired Marine Corps general who had served in China and fought the Japanese in the Pacific during World War II, brought credibility and stature to the work. He was not an academic, even though he earned a doctor of philosophy at Oxford, and he had also published translations of Mao

¹ Congressional Record, Senate June 6, 2008, “Lieberman-Warner Climate Security Act of 2008,” 110th Congress, 2nd Session, Issue: Vol. 154, No. 93. Senator Cantwell’s concerns were well warranted. Republicans killed the bill that day.

² Laozi 老子, *Daodejing* 道德經, Chapter 64.

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Zedong's *On Guerrilla Warfare*. The timing was also right, with the Chinese Communist Party in control of China after winning the civil war with the Nationalists in 1949. American power and support for the Nationalists had not been enough to defeat a seemingly less powerful opponent. China had, indeed, as Mao put it, “stood up,” and became a world power, but in opposition to America and the West.

If the draw of trying to understand China as an emergent military power was not enough, there was a subtler connection of Sunzi to the Western concept of “strategy.” This connection, which has only recently become clear, ties the 1772 publication of Father Amiot's (1718–1793) French translation of Sunzi, the first into a Western language, directly to Paul-Gédéon Joly de Maizeroy's transformation of the word “strategy” into its modern meaning.³ Sunzi was, in fact, present at the creation of the modern Western concept of strategy. It is thus not surprising that Sunzi is so closely tied in the popular sense to “strategy,” since “strategy” is tied in the intellectual sense to Sunzi.

This book, then, is about the place of Sunzi and strategy in Western culture, and about how these two things – an ancient Chinese text on warfare and the modern concept of strategy – became virtually synonymous in popular culture. Samuel Griffith's translation arrived just as John F. Kennedy and the United States were turning, intentionally or not, away from conventional war and massive nuclear retaliation, and toward small wars and insurgencies. While conventional and nuclear war did not disappear, and Kennedy was assassinated in the year Griffith's translation was published, America's military was already beginning its entry into counterinsurgency in Vietnam. Counterinsurgency and small wars were strongly associated with the Marine Corps, and Marine General Victor Krulak (himself a China marine) served as the military adviser on counterinsurgency in Kennedy's White House. After the great conventional wars of the twentieth century, combat was becoming unconventional, guerrilla, indirect, and non-Western. In the center of this confused and conflated mass of terms was Sunzi's *Art of War*.

Sunzi as Talisman

Sunzi's *Art of War* is a remarkable artifact of Chinese civilization. Not only has it been central to the Chinese conception of warfare and strategy for two millennia; it has also come to fulfill that same role in the non-Chinese

³ Adam Parr, *The Mandate of Heaven: Strategy, Revolution, and the First European Translation of Sunzi's Art of War*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 217–220. For Maizeroy's invention of strategy see, most recently, Alexandre David, *Joly de Maizeroy: L'inventeur de la stratégie*, Paris: L'École de guerre, 2018.

world since the middle of the twentieth century. *The Art of War* is the paradigmatic non-Western text on military thought. Yet it is more than that; it is *the* paradigmatic text on strategy everywhere, at least in the popular imagination. Where Clausewitz's *On War* is barely known outside academic circles, *The Art of War* is mentioned without explanation on television shows and in movies, and cited canonically by businessmen. The apotheosis of *The Art of War* says a lot about Chinese culture and the way in which Chinese culture is seen outside China. It says even more about the way war, military thought, and the non-West have been marginalized in the Euro-American realm of historical inquiry. War and the non-West have been marginalized in order to define the West itself.

The Art of War has been used to divide people since at least the late second century BCE (if we date the completion of *Records of the Grand Historian* to 109 BCE). This function is entirely external to the text itself, which is solely concerned with military thought and more generally with strategy. In the West after World War II, *The Art of War* was first connected to Liddell Hart's anti-Clausewitzian "indirect approach" strategy and the unconventional warfare strategies of Mao Zedong's communist conquest of China. Chinese clashes with the US-led United Nations force defending South Korea and the success of insurgent forces in Vietnam, among other Cold War clashes, reified the Chinese–Western military divide. Devious, underhanded Chinese strategy won or fought to draw the most powerful modern Western militaries. Since *The Art of War* supposedly underlay Mao Zedong's strategy for anti-imperialist, anticolonial insurgent armies, the West had to contend with a non-West identified at a deep level with *The Art of War*.

Even in *The Art of War*'s first step toward canonization, Sima Qian's (145 or 135–86 BCE) biography of Sunzi in the chapter on "Militarists" in his *Records of the Grand Historian*, the text became a way to distinguish a rational way of conducting war from those rulers who waged war to satisfy their own whims and who were unconcerned with the welfare of their state and their subjects. War for Sunzi was an intellectual pursuit that, when done well, yielded no glory. In the Chinese milieu, this military intellectualism made *The Art of War* a marker of Chinese culture and Chineseness much like the other canonical Chinese texts. Sunzi divided the Chinese from the barbarians.

The Art of War subsequently became a means to divide civil and military in Chinese culture. Cao Cao (155–220 CE), a man who would become a famous (or infamous) warlord, wrote the first extant commentary on *The Art of War*. Yet he wrote the commentary before he became a military commander, and composed it as an educated civil official, not an army

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officer.⁴ Military intellectualism was a substitute for military experience, at least in the minds of the educated. Knowledge of military texts separated the rational scholar with profound, classically sanctioned wisdom from the mere general with a narrow perspective based upon battlefield experience. Literati faith in the power of books also led to attempts in the eleventh century to improve the quality of officers by getting military men to read military books. These efforts to bridge this divide perhaps not surprisingly further clarified the separation. The private ownership of military books was prohibited for much of imperial Chinese history, and reading military books was a peculiarity noteworthy enough to be mentioned in scholars' biographies. *The Art of War* became a symbol of Chinese martial culture, feared by the government, disdained by some scholars, yet unquestionably canonical and powerful.

The Problem of “Strategy”

“Strategy” has only taken on non-military uses since World War II. Prior to that it was a term confined to questions of military planning and operations.⁵ What constituted and constitutes “strategy” as opposed to “tactics,” “grand tactics,” or “grand strategy” is still subject to personal definition. The transfer of strategy outside the military realm has only further complicated matters. What a businessperson means when she speaks of strategy may well be very different than what a general means. While livelihoods are certainly at stake in business decisions, and managers may act ruthlessly, there remains a significant gap between what a general does and what a manager does. Even though Clausewitz used the analogy of a business transaction in one of his descriptions of war, he did not mean that war and business were the same.⁶ *The Art of War* was unquestionably composed by and for men concerned with war, who would never have conceived of those lessons having any relationship to business.

Sunzi's underlying argument was that war was comprehensible, and that a thoughtful approach to its prosecution would produce more favorable outcomes. He argues in Chapter 1 that the outcome of a campaign can be predicted beforehand by calculating who has the advantages in certain areas. War is not governed by luck or spirits but by understandable

⁴ Rafe De Crespigny, *Imperial Warlord: A Biography of Cao Cao 155–220 AD*, Leiden: Brill, 2010.

⁵ Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz (trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret), *On War*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 603 (Book 8, Chapter 6) and 182 (Book 3 Chapter 1).

factors. Someone who grasps Sunzi’s method is not guaranteed of victory since those factors may not be in his favor. Part of strategy is knowing when doing what you want to do will not work. One has to know when not to fight because you will lose, and what can and cannot be done. Real strategy requires a clear understanding of real conditions.

This highlights the point that strategy is a set of actions that a person does not want to do. No one looks for a strategy if their desired actions achieve their desired results. Strategy comes into play when the desire to achieve one’s goal takes precedence over the means to achieve it. *The Art of War* was a repudiation of earlier aristocratic views of war that saw it as a defining cultural practice for their class. Aristocrats achieved their personal goals to prove themselves aristocrats by going to war, hunting, and other ritual activities. Their personal goals did not, however, serve the emerging states, whose rulers used war in a very different way.⁷ Sunzi’s strategy served the state at the expense of the declining aristocratic class.

Sunzi’s strategy did not only run counter to the interests of the aristocratic class, it also clashed with generals and rulers who sought military glory as a means to enhance their political power. Inherent in Sunzi’s rationalism is an abstract *raison d’état* above that of a state’s ruler. There were things so important to the state that the ruler had to set aside his personal whims and think things through (or listen to someone he employed for that purpose). War was too important to be left to emotion. It was, “a matter of life and death, the path to existence or ruin,” as Sunzi points out in the first line of *The Art of War*.

The very act of writing about strategy, of making a text, seems to run contrary to most people’s approach to war and conflict. It is an assertion of thought over emotion. Ultimately a book on strategy, any book on strategy, though particularly a short and pithy one like *The Art of War*, is a revelation to anyone seeking a rational approach to achieving goals (hence the attraction for people outside the military realm). But making achieving a goal into an intellectual process troubles some people. In China, the Ruist (Confucian) philosopher Xunzi (320–235 BCE) objected to the strategic practices of Sunzi and Wu Qi advanced by the Lord of Linwu, a general (which, paraphrasing Sunzi, included deception), arguing that a humane ruler would neither use deception nor be deceived.⁸ (Wu Qi, also known as Wuzi, or Master Wu, was a Warring States period general, statesman, and military writer.) In the West, this is the sort of reaction people have to Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. The idea of

⁷ For the classic discussion of the transition from the Spring and Autumn period aristocracy to the state-centered Warring States period see Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, New York: SUNY Press, 1989.

⁸ Xunzi 荀子, Chapter 15 (*Yibing* 議兵).

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thinking strategically seems inherently underhanded because it is not genuine and straightforward. Planning a way to reach a goal is less emotionally compelling than simply trying as hard as one can without thinking too hard. Far fewer people read Machiavelli's *Art of War*, seeing it as merely a historic artifact of warfare in a particular time and place.⁹ *The Prince*, in contrast, contains eternal truths about achieving power in human society.

War itself can seem to be justified as a tool of policy or politics, to echo Clausewitz, if it can be employed rationally. It seems, not without reason, immoral to calculate how much death and destruction a given policy goal is worth. War as a “crime of passion” absolves the participants of the full moral consequences of their actions because they were being spontaneous and emotional. A well-thought-out plan for fighting a war implies full awareness of the costs of those actions and acceptance of them. Worse still, if one chooses whether to go to war not because the gravamen of the dispute is just or unjust but instead based on a calculation of the chances of success, then morality is no longer fully operational. This seems true despite Vittoria and Suarez's sixteenth-century addition to the Augustinian just-war tradition that it is immoral to go to war without the likelihood of success.¹⁰

My point here is not to argue whether or not strategy has moral valence, but rather to highlight the culturally suspect act of thinking strategically. Using stratagems, surprise attacks, and ambushes is being clever when we do them, but a sign of underhanded, morally compromised schemers when our opponent does them. The West has constructed the success of its early modern imperialism and colonialism as an expression of its fundamental strength overcoming weak non-Western cultures and peoples.¹¹ When some of those non-Western peoples or cultures somehow defeated or fended off the West it was put down to underhanded, scheming behavior. Consequently, the morally compromised realm of strategy naturally seemed more at home in the weak but cunning non-Western cultures. And *The Art of War* is the earliest non-Western text on strategy.

There are three ways of approaching a text on strategy: as a key to enduring, objective wisdom on strategy; as the reflection of warfare in a place and time; and as a fundamental expression of a culture's approach

⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War* (trans. Christopher Lynch), Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

¹⁰ Michael Howard, “*Temperamenta Belli*: Can War be Controlled?”, in Michael Howard (ed.) *Restraints on War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 8.

¹¹ See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1978, for the classic description of how Western imperialist ideology represented the Orient as weak and effeminate.

to warfare. An ancient text like Sunzi is often subjected to a fourth approach, strongly related to the first: the careful archaeological and philological effort to recover the original text. This book is none of those things; rather, it is a book about how a particular text on military thought, Sunzi’s *Art of War*, has been used as a cultural talisman. *The Art of War* has much to say about strategy, but it has more often been used as a stand-in for thinking strategically without particular or even accurate reference to its actual contents. This is no less true in China today than outside it.

Very few people in fact delve deeply into the extensive intellectual traditions of strategic thought. Like any area of philosophy or abstract thinking, the systematic study and practice of a complex field are beyond the interest or needs of most people. Western strategic thought, despite a number of excellent studies of this rich tradition, remains a military specialist’s field.¹² Indeed, it was only during World War II that Edward Mead Earle, recognizing how little studied strategic thought was in the United States, convened a conference and produced an edited volume, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, to address the issue.¹³ World War II and its aftermath, particularly the advent of nuclear weapons and the Cold War, gave rise to the serious study of strategic thought, as well as producing new fields of research like security studies. Samuel Griffith’s 1963 translation of *The Art of War* was published in that developing postwar interest in strategic studies. Not surprisingly, however, *The Art of War* was not discussed in either the first or the second editions of the Eurocentric *Makers of Modern Strategy*.

The needs of the military, military academies, and general hostility to the study of military history, at least in American universities and colleges, have still limited the study of strategy. Professional military officers, while acknowledging some value to strategic thought, tend to regard it as too time-consuming to engage in deeply and perhaps a bit too academic. Strategic thought in Western militaries (though this is generally true of all militaries) tends to be simplified down to a very few texts like Clausewitz and Sunzi. More usually, summary training manuals render a given military or service branch’s doctrines into easily deliverable forms.

¹² The best overviews of the Western tradition are Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy*; Edward Mead Earle (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944; and the revised version, Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

¹³ Earle, *Makers of Modern Strategy*. See also Michael P. M. Finch, “Edward Mead Earle and the Unfinished *Makers of Modern Strategy*,” *Journal of Military History*, 80 (July 2016), 781–814.

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Officers have too many other tasks that take precedence over deep considerations of strategy. Historically, even the highest levels of Western militaries have often been inclined to leave the setting of strategic goals to their respective governments. Civilian authorities are usually caught between encouraging the military to leave larger issues of strategy in their hands, and expecting the military to have something useful to say about strategy.

The problem of strategy is twofold: it seems to many people that states should have strategies (while still regarding the process as morally questionable), but no one is quite sure what strategy is or how one might be acquired. Moreover, the implications of a given strategy, should one be agreed upon, are often unacceptable. It is not just that a strategy may appear to be immoral, but also that it may run counter to political interests within a government or state. If a state decided that its military goals were best carried out by a strong navy, for example, then that state's army would likely find its funding cut or limited. Modern democracies purchase weapons from large companies and base troops in political constituencies who thus all have a stake in strategic planning. A strategy is a choice among possibilities that ramify throughout a military and society.

Strategy remains a morally fraught and badly misunderstood practice. It is studied and used within modern militaries, though often with as much of an eye on budgets, procurement, and resources as on ultimate goals. Outside the military, the popular discourse of strategy refers more generally to thinking of means to achieve one's goals without specific reference to military texts. The one exception to this is *The Art of War*, which, because it is ancient and Chinese, seems to excite notions of clever tricks to overcome stronger opponents or conventional obstacles. Strategy in this sense is inherently unconventional, something only a non-Western text could be. To think and plan is to "think outside the box" because most people don't usually think or plan how to achieve their goals. Invoking *The Art of War* is a declaration of thinking strategically, even if none of the resulting thinking has anything to do with the contents of *The Art of War*.

Sunzi the Myth

I have thus far spoken of "Sunzi" as if there were an individual at some time or place in the past who could lay claim to that name or title and who had some association with the text I call "*The Art of War*." I have done this and will continue to do this for rhetorical purposes, in order to make my discussion more felicitous, but it should in no way imply that there ever

was such a person as Sunzi. Modern scholarship has made it abundantly clear that there was no Sunzi, and that the text of *The Art of War* was the product of a school of military thought rather than an individual. *The Art of War* is obviously the work of a number of writers or compilers, though I would argue that in its received form it has been coherently organized. The mythical nature of its putative author should in no way diminish the quality of its contents.

All that we “know” about Sunzi is contained in his biography in Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*. I will take up the question of why Sima Qian created the category of “militarist” (*bingjia*) and why he formed Sunzi’s biography as he did in Chapter 1. Here I would like to explain how we know that the biography is mythical. It is important to do this at the beginning of this discussion in order to make sure the reader is clear that Sunzi is mythical. It should also make clear how much *The Art of War* has been used from quite early on as a cultural tool. *The Art of War* has always had uses beyond its mere contents. Indeed, it is likely that Sima Qian’s historiography needed military texts regardless of their contents.

A brief discursus is also in order before getting to the myth of Sunzi. Most readers in the Western world know Sunzi as “Sun Tzu,” “Sun-tzu,” or very rarely as “Sun Zi.” His text is known as *The Art of War*. “Sun Tzu” and “Sun-tzu” are romanizations of the modern Chinese pronunciation using the Wade–Giles system. That system has been superseded by the Pinyin romanization system. In the Pinyin system, the Chinese is rendered as “Sunzi” or “Sun Zi.” Because the Wade–Giles system was dominant for most of the twentieth century, most Westerners are more familiar with “Sun-tzu” or “Sun Tzu.” The meaning remains the same, “Master Sun” or “Our Master Sun,” which in the text is frequently abbreviated at the beginning of a passage as “Zi,” “The Master” or “Our Master.” In English pronunciation, it would sound something like “swin dzi.”¹⁴

The Art of War gained its Western name more from following the pattern of the names of Western books on war than any from direct translation of meaning. Father Amiot, the first translator of Sunzi into a Western language, described the work as: “a note, a compilation, or a type of translation (*espèce de traduction*) of what has been written, least badly, in this extremity of Asia, on the military profession (*art des guerriers*).”¹⁵ This fit it into a tradition of works with titles like *Dell’arte*

¹⁴ I have chosen not to use any of the phonetic alphabets (e.g. the International Phonetic Alphabet, Americanist Phonetic Notation) since they are not popularly known.

¹⁵ Joseph Amiot to Henri Bertin, dated September 23, 1766 (Bibliothèque de l’Institut de France (BIF), MS 1515, fol. 2). Cited and translated in Adam Parr, “John Clarke’s *Military Institutions of Vegetius* and Joseph Amiot’s *Art Militaire des Chinois*: translating

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della Guerra” (Machiavelli), *Précis de l’Art de la guerre* (Jomini), and *Art de la guerre par principes et par règles* (Puiséguir). Victor Mair, in his recent translation of Sunzi, managed to insert the more accurate subtitle “Military Methods,” though without shifting general Western practice. Since neither the Western tradition of writing about war nor the Chinese tradition strictly defined what could or should be discussed in such a text, a more accurate rendering of the classical Chinese is hard to support against long-standing tradition. Finally, the term *bīngfǎ* 兵法 translated as *The Art of War* was often used as a general term for “the art of war,” “military methods,” or “strategy,” rather than as a book title. Writers might discuss the work of Sun and Wu Qi, or Sun’s *bīngfǎ*. In modern China, the work is usually referred to as *Sunzi bīngfǎ*.

This returns us to the mythical nature of Sunzi himself. Our earliest recovered copy of the text attributed to him dates to the second century BCE, but we only find any information about Sunzi at the end of the second century BCE. In Sima Qian’s telling, Sunzi had already composed his text before appearing at the court of King Helu of Wu (r. 524–496 BCE). The king stated that he had read Sunzi’s thirteen chapters and wanted to test out Sunzi’s abilities as a commander. Sunzi agreed to get 180 palace women to follow commands and stay in formation. He accomplished this by executing the two leading women when they disobeyed his commands, after which the remaining women immediately obeyed. After this iconic story, the biography goes on to attribute several military successes to Sunzi. Another biography immediately follows that of Sunzi, a descendant of his named Sun Bin, who was also an accomplished general and strategist.

Sima Qian created a sage of strategic thought to bolster the credibility of an existing military text. Curiously, neither Wu Qi, whose biography also accompanied Sunzi’s, nor Sun Bin achieved a similarly elevated state. Sun Bin’s text was lost within a few centuries of Sima Qian’s writing and was only recovered by modern archaeology.¹⁶ Wu Qi’s work remained in circulation along with Sunzi’s. Wu Qi regularly accompanied Sunzi when writers cited strategic thinkers, and he was unquestionably the second great strategist of Chinese culture. Yet he never achieved anything like Sunzi’s centrality and far fewer scholars wrote commentaries of his work. Perhaps Wu Qi was burdened by having actually existed, along with several anecdotes recording quite ruthless strategic behavior on his part.

classical military theory in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War,” PhD diss., University College London, 2016, 7. Note too that Amiot called the work “*Art Militaire*.”

¹⁶ D. C. Lao and Roger Ames, trans., *Sun Bin: The Art of Warfare. A Translation of the Classic Chinese Work of Philosophy and Strategy*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2003; Ralph Sawyer and Mei-chün Sawyer, *Sun Pin: Military Methods*, Boulder: Westview, 1995.