

An Analysis of Traditional Chinese Strategic Thought

This paper will examine traditional Chinese strategic thought, as represented in the works of Sun Tzu, the Chinese military classics, and the commentaries of Zhuge Liang and Liu Ji. We will begin by establishing the basic assumptions: a Hobbesian state of constant warfare and the necessity of victory for survival; and, military action as the primary means of conflict resolution. We will examine the sources of victory in conflict as conceptualized by these thinkers, namely, the primacy of the mental battlefield and paramount importance of psychological victory. Finally, we will investigate the efficacy of the use of force, and Chinese thought on when and how it is to be employed. We will see that force is to be employed tactically with precision and great preparation, and that the outcome of such an action should be known in advance. The minimal amount of force is to be applied for greatest possible effect.

Sun Tzu epitomized, “War is the most important affair of the state.”¹ In the political and military environment of classical China, success in war was essential to the survival of the state. States that failed in war would be violently consumed by their neighbors. The texts, in concerning themselves almost entirely with questions of strategy, tactics, and leadership, make the implicit assumption that a condition of war is to be taken for granted and that failure is not an option. There could be no “peace with honor,” to borrow a more modern concept. The state of war was assumed to offer victory or annihilation.

Stability occurred through the military dominance of a superior political entity, usually a dynasty which itself had absorbed enough weaker states to become powerful. Peace through mutual “benevolence,” as Sawyer translates the *Ssu-ma Fa*, was preferable, but a state must uphold military readiness in order to maintain it.² In the final

¹ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p.157

² Ssu-ma, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 126

calculation, peace was enforced rather than negotiated. The *Ssu-ma Fa* states, “Authority comes from warfare, not from harmony among men.”³

While Western political and military thought contains extensive deliberations on the “just” conduct of war, the morality of initiating conflict and when such action is acceptable, these ruminations are conspicuously absent from the Chinese corpus. Opinions that most nearly approach “Jus ad Bello” tend to orbit around Wei Liao-Tzu’s “...the military provides the means to execute the brutal and chaotic and to stop the unrighteous.”⁴ This offers little in the way of guidance for the correctness of initiating hostilities, as it seems to imply that hostilities already exist, or at least imply the existence of a situation requiring correction. The statement, then, is that the military is the proper corrective instrument. More generally, the assumption that a state of war is a basic fact of existence, more than any other, is the key assumption underlying classical Chinese strategy. The military is not a means towards political ends, but towards survival. As Sun-Tzu notes in his discussion of the importance of forming alliances in certain situations, political means are applied in pursuit of military ends. This seems to imply an inversion of the Clausewitzian paradigm.

The concept of victory in classical Chinese strategic thought is firmly centered on the psychological. This paradigm is twofold: it both emphasizes psychological victory and the psychological preparation required for victory. Touching upon this, as well as other issues involving the use of force in battle, Sun-Tzu states: “...one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements.”⁵

Mental or spiritual defeat of the enemy is considered an essential aspect of military victory – while physical annihilation may or may not follow psychological defeat, the psychological component is a necessary prerequisite. A predominant corollary to this theme of mental determinism would state that every battle is won or lost before it is joined – implicitly discounting the role of prowess in actual combat, and reflecting the writings of Sun-Tzu. A wise commander, then, is prescribed to determine his prospects for a given battle and chose to engage or avoid.

³ *Ibid.*,

⁴ Wei Liao-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 247

⁵ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 162

Missing from this discussion is the destruction of the opposing forces – it seems to refer only to a strictly tactical victory, in which a position is gained but the opposing forces are not significantly injured. While one might believe this implies that the psychological aspect of war is limited to tactical thinking, this is not the case. Wei Liao-Tzu epitomizes “One who excels at employing the army is able to seize men... This seizing is a technique of the mind.”⁶ Conversely, the role of physical military power is not entirely abandoned: Wei specifies three modalities of victory: through “Tao,” “awesomeness,” and “strength.”⁷ Tellingly, only the third of these addresses the actual use of force. Wei continues:

“...the means by which the people fight is their *ch'i*. When their *ch'i* is substantial they will fight; when their *ch'i* has been snatched away they will run off.”⁸

Wei makes the case that the battle is decided in the ebb and flow of the warriors' *ch'i*, a character which Ames translates as “psychophysical energy,”⁹ and Sawyer as “breath” or “pneuma,”¹⁰ presumably in the metaphorical rather than the literal sense. Liu Ji discusses the exploitation of *ch'i* in “Energy and Battle”.¹¹ There is consensus that the material aspects of battle are of subsidiary importance. Sun-Tzu also explores *ch'i*, namely, its “manipulation,” and suggests that one attack at a time when it is weakest in one's enemy. In this chapter, “Military Combat,” Sun-Tzu expounds upon the need to “control the mind,” and states “the [enemy] commanding general's mind can be seized.”¹²

It is worth noting that Smith and Gimian translate “mind” as “heart-mind” in the above passages, touching on the spiritual aspect of Sun-Tzu, and by extension, the classical Chinese military corpus.¹³ Victory is a matter of the heart-mind – the physical battle is secondary.

⁶ Wei Liao-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 247

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Sun-Tzu, trans. Ames, 1993: p. 50

¹⁰ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 170

¹¹ Liu Ji, trans. Cleary, 1989: p. 123

¹² Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 170

¹³ Sun-Tzu, trans. Smith and Gimian, 2002: p. 31

Chinese strategic thinkers approach the questions of the efficacy of the use of force, and the proper time and mode of its employment, with a focus upon preparation for battle, precision in application and avoidance when possible. Force must be employed in pursuit of a clearly defined objective, with the outcome precisely conceptualized. One must avoid employing force – not for any ethical reason, but for the utilitarian goal of avoiding battle to preserve one’s own strength. Finally, one may employ force effectively only when the goal to be attained is defined, and the commander knows the outcome in advance.

Zhuge Liang writes, “The proper course of military action is to establish strategy first, and then carry it out.”¹⁴ He expounds in this passage, “Military Action,” on the myriad preparations necessary for warfare. Liu Ji adds, quoting Wu Qi, “The bold will readily clash, readily clash without knowing what is to their advantage.”¹⁵ Liu quotes this passage in the chapter “Fighting Too Readily,” which offers a story of a commander attacking impulsively and being routed. Thorough planning must presage the employment of force.

Sun-Tzu speaks definitively on the efficacy of employing force and the conditions for its use: “Subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.”¹⁶ He later adds, “The best military policy is to attack strategies,”¹⁷ by which is meant that a superior use of military power (though not necessarily force) is to act against the enemy’s physical and psychological plans, rather than against the enemy military itself. In this way the actual use of force is avoided until absolutely necessary, and when force is applied, it is applied in the minimalist fashion: the least amount used in the way to cause the most effect. Another statement from *The Art of War* that echoes these ideas reads: “Seize what [the enemy] loves.”¹⁸

On the necessity of foresight, Sun-Tzu writes,

¹⁴ Zhuge Liang, trans. Cleary, 1989: p. 56

¹⁵ Liu Ji, trans. Cleary, 1989: p. 106

¹⁶ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 161

¹⁷ Sun-Tzu, trans. Ames, 1993: p. 111

¹⁸ Sun-Tzu, trans. Smith and Gimian, 2002: p. 51

“The battle of the expert is never an exceptional victory...the victorious army only enters battle after having first won the victory, while the defeated army only seeks victory after having first entered the fray.”¹⁹

Sun-Tzu’s guidance here is twofold. First, it discounts the ideals of skill or bravery in battle – while he discusses these things extensively elsewhere in *The Art of War*, here he makes plain that they are matters for a calculus of success to be undertaken *before* the engagement – they are not virtues to be counted on for success once the battle is joined. Secondly, he ascribes victory to successful action undertaken prior to the battle itself, underscoring the emphasis on preparation and precision in the use of force.

Sun-Tzu’s opinion on the use of force is thus set forth. It is to be employed in the least amount possible and with the greatest precision possible. And, it is not the key to success in battle: the psychological aspects of war and one’s preparedness to fight will trump the application of naked force, or its corollary, heroic valor on the battlefield. Counting on such things is the mark of an army to be defeated.

The basic assumptions of Chinese classical strategic thought are the existence of political entities in a constant state of war, and the necessity of victory for survival. Military action is the primary means of conflict resolution. The source of victory in war is not military might, but psychological dominance. Force is to be employed with precision and preparation, and the minimal amount of force is to be leveraged for the maximum attainable effect.

¹⁹ Sun-Tzu, trans. Ames, 1993: p. 116

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