

Assessing the Contemporary Relevance of Sun Tzu

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Sun Tzu's The Art of War (TAOW), is a collection of concise insights based on his military experience. According to Derek Yuen, the book was presented to the King of Wu in 512 BC, for whom Sun Tzu later served as a commander in the Battle of BoJu¹. Sun Tzu has been studied from many perspectives such as his strategy and victory concepts, his relationship to Taoism, his life, his influence on Eastern military education, generalship's leading features, the use of force, and his tactics – i.e., reckoning, espionage, deception, indirect approach. This essay discusses Sun Tzu's relevance, focusing on three aspects: his perspective of statecraft and the strategic framework it proposes; his definition of victory; and his tactics, primarily espionage, adaptability, and deception.

Analytical while pragmatical, the book seems centered on the military commander. Succinct statements formatted as precepts to be followed, matched to its length, writing style, and structure, suggest a pocket manual. However, masterly concealed between the lines, a philosopher's silhouette emerges, as Christopher Coker asserts, "...[TAOW's] principal lessons lie beneath the surface"². Its title plays the same elegant deception, as TAOW unmistakably goes beyond battlefield guidelines. In fact, within its tactical lessons, it speaks about statecraft, and in doing so, ultimately speaks about leadership.

One of the perspectives to portray the essence of strategy is the continual interaction between ends-means-ways which, functionally, serves state policy. TAOW does not provide a definition of strategy, but it portrays a broad, flexible, and ongoing assessment, with a philosophical attitude, to review information concerning state matters. The assessment leads into decision-making, turning into actions, with encompassing analysis and adaptation. This process configures a strategic

framework within which war is defined³ as high-stake, vital, unneglectable, and the state “cannot afford to fail”⁴ at it. War should be mindfully pondered by the sovereign before it is carried out by the commander: “[i]n war, the general receives his commands from the sovereign”⁵. The hierarchy is clear.

Coker remarks that Sun Tzu’s perspective is “...to use the economic, the social and political [assets] as an alternative to military action”⁶. TAOW stresses avoiding confrontation as much as possible: “... [a] skillful leader subdues the enemy’s troops without any fighting”⁷. Military operations are an instrument at the sovereign’s discretion whenever others – i.e., espionage, diplomacy – are not conducive to pursued ends. This statecraft perspective, and its decision-making hierarchy, matches Colin Gray’s Grand Strategy definition, “[t]he direction and use made of any or all ... assets ... in support of [the state’s] policy goals as decided by politics. The theory and practice of grand strategy is the theory and practice of statecraft itself”⁸.

TAOW teaches to pursue state survival under an unifying leadership whose drivers are not emotional, and conducting war – when inevitable – as a strategic victory⁹, to paraphrase William Martel’s “better peace”. Similarly, Matthew Cohen states, “For Sun Tzu ... reason and policy should drive war, not the passions of the people or emotional decision-making”¹⁰. Tom Kane supports Cohen when underlines TAOW’s caution about egos: “[warriors] must not attempt individual acts of bravado purely out of desire for glory”¹¹. In addition, Sun Tzu stresses pondering war regarding its cost, in lives and in resources, at least in three chapters. Martel discusses TAOW’s “enduring contribution to understanding victory is the idea that the cost of victory is inseparable from its strategic value”¹². Authors agree that war engagement deserves careful consideration, a complex skill that can not be fully programmable in algorithms. Evidently, TAOW educates policymakers, statespersons, and the military in assessing the pertinence of war within a comprehensive yet flexible perspective.

Structurally speaking, Coker asserts, “War is a cultural phenomenon informed by particular historical experiences and understandings of the use of violence”¹³. Despite cultural particularities, and based on Frans de Waal’s Chimpanzee Politics

which concludes that “the roots of politics are older than humanity”¹⁴, Lawrence Freedman advocates for the “elemental features of human strategy that are common across time and space. These include deception and coalition formation, and the instrumental use of violent conflict and strategic behaviour”¹⁵. Sun Tzu’s teachings have a solid stance in these: his main tactic is deception; he advocates for limited and instrumental use of violence, physical and psychological; and, for a statecraft perspective.

As the essence of strategy is the continual interplay between ends-means-ways, some argue that upcoming technological developments could prevent classical theorists from remaining relevant. Christopher Tuck objects stating, “Technology is not an independent variable: war has a technological dimension, but success in war is as much about how technology is used in relation to an enemy and in the context of such factors as strategy, logistics and generalship as it is about weapons and equipment per se.”¹⁶ Kathleen McInnis also criticizes scholars’ and practitioners’ overstated focus on quantifiable analyses, “study histories and think-tank reports and technical pieces to guide our decisions”¹⁷, referring to the “‘failure of imagination’... in 9/11”¹⁸. TAOW raises the importance of “subtle ingenuity of mind”¹⁹, “intuitive sagacity”²⁰, and other qualitative skills, so far those cannot be algorithmed, i.e., John Wagner reports the limited perception of algorithms²¹ after Hillary Clinton lost the 2016 election.

Sun Tzu has been criticized for suggesting the predictability of victory based on an a priori comparison of the enemy’s and one’s own armies, in TAOW’s first chapter. However, it mentions the word ‘victory’ thirty-four other times, describing it in dynamic terms as the result of decisions and actions, such as following the book’s precepts²², making calculations²³, and practicing five essential factors: prudence, managing different size of armies, unifying army, preparedness, and leadership²⁴. Hence, reckoning and adaptability also lead to victory.

The definition of supreme excellence in battle, “consists[ting] in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting”, followed by “... the highest form of generalship

is to balk the enemy's plans"²⁵ suggest two concentric concepts of victory: state-level victory, and military victory subjected to it. Or, as Martel states, a "politico-strategic victory ... based on consolidating operational victories"²⁶. Such a definition transcends time, landing within Robert Mandel's Modern Victory model, in the Strategic Victory concept, "composed of interrelated informational, military, political, economic, social, and diplomatic elements"²⁷. Likewise, TAOW stresses that conquered states should be taken undestroyed²⁸; and that the sovereign controls the information given to officers²⁹.

Sun Tzu was at the center of the nuclear era too. After 1945, four waves of strategists studied how-to and – remarkably – how-not-to use nuclear weaponry. Similarity is in the essence, since the supreme excellence in warfare is avoiding confrontation yet controlling the adversaries' behaviour, all of which is the root of deterrence and compellence. Yuen's Theory of Control supports this perspective³⁰. Furthermore, TAOW instructs to gain control over the adversaries' behaviours, which implies bargaining power, as Thomas Schelling theorizes, "...[a] power that comes from its capacity to hurt, not just the direct consequence of successful military action"³¹. Schelling's "Coercive diplomacy, based on the power to hurt"³² also mirrors Sun Tzu's instructions on bending the enemy's will while avoiding confrontation. Bernard Brodie's assertion, "The threat of retaliation does not have to be 100 per cent certain; it is sufficient if there is a good chance of it, or [a] belief that there is a good chance of it"³³, promotes deception and coercive negotiations to avoid a large bloodshed (MAD), mirroring Sun Tzu's perspective.

Brodie recalls Sun Tzu's connection between the sovereign's assessment and the horrors of war when arguing that, "No belligerent would be stupid enough, in opening itself to reprisals in kind"³⁴, and "[a]s advancing technology makes war more horrible, it also makes the decision to resort to it more dependent on an elaborate psychological preparation"³⁵. The essence of their ideas again mirror each other. Ethical considerations about bloodshed – relevant to Sun Tzu and Brodie – related to nuclear weaponry come back to the forefront as Russia³⁶ and USA³⁷ brush-up their

never decommissioned nuclear arsenals. Noteworthy, morality is hardly programmable informatically, according to Coker³⁸; then, ethical discussions about nuclear strategies would hardly become obsolete in the foreseeable future.

Focusing on tactics, the UK Government's intelligence plan to address foreign espionage – which quotes Sun Tzu³⁹ – commensurates TAOW's systematic intelligence organization, in resources like the Defence Doctrine⁴⁰, the UK Cyber Security Strategy⁴¹, CONTEST⁴² (UK's Strategy for Countering Terrorism), and MI5⁴³. "Analysing information establishes and maintains situational understanding and supports better decision-making"⁴⁴. TAOW's spies network⁴⁵ provides foreknowledge regarding "every kind of business"⁴⁶ for the commander and the sovereign. Structurally similar: a network of intelligence officers providing information to inform strategic decisions. Also, MI5's definition of British "intelligence officers and agents" as spies protecting state interests, mirrors TAOW's final statement that "Spies are a most important element ... on them depends an army's ability to move"⁴⁷. In a connected note, the contemporary informational space facilitates the spreading of "false tidings"⁴⁸ and "false reports"⁴⁹, helping intelligence officers from all fronts to gather data and divert the enemy's attention at high speed, regardless distance. In addition, UK resources mentioned above develop comprehensive preparedness, which TAOW discusses in five chapters: I, III, VI, IX, and X.

TAOW exhorts commanders to exercise judgment and adaptability, "While heeding the profit of my counsel, avail yourself also of any helpful circumstances ... beyond the ordinary rules"⁵⁰. It equips the reader with scenarios and cases to adapt plans based on suitability to the context, "... not [to] repeat... tactics [but to] let your methods be regulated by the infinite variety of circumstances"⁵¹. David Petraeus highlights as "key"⁵² Sun Tzu's remarks of ability to adjust tactics in avoiding predictability⁵³ and combining operations.

Context evaluation⁵⁴ and decision making⁵⁵ – from TAOW – are the basis for the MOSAIC Warfare concept that DARPA currently develops. DARPA's website accounts for, "...a direct line between [TAOW] and this concept... when applying

[TAOW's] ideas... [it] can give asymmetrical advantage"⁵⁶. The individual warfighting platforms (tiles) create "a force package, capable to "attack simultaneously and overwhelm"⁵⁷ opponents' forces. DARPA alleges that the "sense-decide-and-act decision loop"⁵⁸ from TAOW transforms into an "observe-orient-decide-act decision cycle (OODA)"⁵⁹ in the MOSAIC environment. Timothy Grayson explains that the tiles "already exist"⁶⁰, and will be articulated into this resilient environment from where the commander could select individual pieces "on the flight... at mission speed"⁶¹. MOSAIC could add pieces developed later.

Sun Tzu's benchmark teaching is "All warfare is based on deception"⁶². Freedman considers it "... a vital strategic quality[:] deliberately sending untrue signals with a view to change another's behaviour"⁶³. Concealing plans, strengths, positions, and resources, TAOW's tactical lessons are all standard practices nowadays, i.e., NATO has a counterstrategy against deceptive enemies⁶⁴; Petraeus values that concealing "enabl[es] ... surprise"⁶⁵. Secrecy enables concealment, furthers protection of interests, and facilitates success; also, it is extended to one's own officers⁶⁶ when managing hierarchical access to classified information, which is a standard practice for governments, defence, intelligence, military, and interstate instances. Also, Freedman's assertion supports Sun Tzu's coercive tactics to control adversaries' behaviours.

Conclusions

While strategy and victory are dynamic concepts, and, tactics and weaponry respond to their times, certain aspects of warfare are structural, inherent to humanity, and to statecraft, such as a pursued end, strategic behaviour, decision-making, conflict, and fear. Sun Tzu's teachings – delving on such aspects – commensurate to current perspectives in defence, security, and strategy. The strategic framework that emerges from TAOW – analytical, practical, broad, flexible, and integrative – is relatable and cross-culturally adaptive to state, non-state, military, non-military, and interstate domains. Evidence suggests that the West (USA and UK) finds Sun Tzu's

teachings relevant in military field tactics, espionage and intelligence, and innovative developments like MOSAIC Warfare.

TAOW, appealing tactical, focuses, in fact, on statecraft, leadership, ongoing decision-making, and adaptability. Its concept of victory accommodates state and military success, always at the service of state policy. Simultaneously, it promotes a culture of reflection, preparedness, and resilience, favouring diplomacy, alliances, espionage, and coercive negotiations as a better approach to interstate relations.

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