

The Asian Martial Arts and the Art of War

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The Asian martial arts are composed not only the skills of individual combat, but also the skills of military conflict. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is one of the classic texts in the philosophical literature of the Asian martial arts. The oldest military treatise in the world, its centuries-old teachings are still relevant to modern military conflict and strategy, and are actively employed by military commanders around the world.

Originally written during the Warring States Period (c. 403-221 BCE), *The Art of War* holds at its core many of the ideals of the then-emergent Taoist philosophy, emphasizing victory without exertion. The manual has been read and reread by many of history's greatest generals, and has had a formative influence on modern strategy and tactics. For example, the teachings of *The Art of War* may be seen in the modern Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication on Warfighting (MCDP 1), and its derivative publications (MCDP 1-1 through 1-4).

A central concept in *The Art of War* is deception. In his writings on strategic assessments, Sun Tzu emphasizes this, stating that "A military operation involves deception. Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear to be ineffective." (*Art of War*, p.49). Modern military actions put this concept into practice, incorporating deception on varying levels through a wide variety of means in order to catch an enemy off-guard, and achieve an advantage in combat. Consider the Coalition attack on Iraq in early 1991 during the Persian Gulf War. General Norman Schwarzkopf organized coalition forces to give the impression of a large amphibious landing. The Iraqis prepared for this action by heavily fortifying their positions along the coast, leaving their rear largely undefended. After several feints against the coastal

defenses to maintain the believability of an amphibious assault, Schwarzkopf attacked the Iraqi lines from behind, using a large contingent of ground troops and helicopters. The attack caught the Iraqi forces off-guard and ill-equipped, and American forces brought an end to the Persian Gulf war after only four days of combat.

Using *The Art of War* as its base, MCDP 1-3 (Tactics) places a remarkable emphasis on deception and the element of surprise in combat situations, specifically citing *The Art of War* multiple times in its text. The document stresses the use of deception as a tool to direct opponents to act in ways that will eventually prove detrimental, leading them to realize their mistake only once there is no time left to react. As a result, both the MCDP 1 and *The Art of War* also place great importance on information gathering as a means to both find ways of deceiving an opponent, and ensuring that the opponents' attempts at deception are wasted.

Sun Tzu also touches on the idea of tactical ambiguity, or concealing intent in such a way as to cause opponents to over-prepare, spreading their forces thin in doing so. Consider this principle in the context of the German blitzkrieg tactic employed during World War II. The blitzkrieg attack involved multiple reinforced pushes along an enemy line, supporting the pushes that were most successful. These attacks created uncertainty among opponents that could not determine which push was the real attack. While not a stealth maneuver, the blitzkrieg enjoyed ambiguity on a scale that afforded it a tactical advantage by creating holes in the enemy line, and was in accord with Sun Tzu's teachings: "To advance irresistibly, push through their gaps." (p.105)

National character, derived from the location, culture, history, religion (and several other factors) of a region, is another important concept in warfare. National

character is the combined characteristics that embody the populace of a particular region or nation. Though national character is constantly evolving, major shifts tend to occur extremely slowly, or over the course of decades or centuries, and so it may be considered a constant when planning military strategy. National character is considered a key factor in the creation of modern strategy, as evidenced in MCDP 1-1 (Strategy):

“The strategist must compile a complete dossier on a nation similar to that commonly prepared on enemy commanders... At the strategic level, success in war is facilitated by having a similar comprehensive psychological profile of each nation or political group involved in the conflict, to include enemies, allies, potential enemies or allies, and even one’s own nation.” (MCDP 1-1, p.30)

This concept of national character (and compiling dossiers for nations in the same manner as for enemy commanders), bears striking similarity to Sun Tzu’s writings, which emphasize knowing one’s enemy, and knowing oneself. Inasmuch as the modern strategist must know his army, himself, and the opponent’s army, the modern strategist must also have a firm understanding of the national character of each state involved in an armed struggle, so that severe miscalculations are not made. Consider the gross errors made in estimating national character (or in some cases, ignoring it) in numerous wars against the Russians: King Charles XII of Sweden, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler all failed to account for the Russian ability (or willingness) to practice scorched earth tactics while retreating deep into their own country in order to achieve victory over an extended period of time. In each of these cases, the attacking military leaders attempted to rely purely on military strategy in order to defeat the Russians, and were decimated in the long run by an opponent that would not stand and fight.

In such a scenario, it becomes clear that a purely military strategy may not be desirable for all circumstances. Just as Sun Tzu advocates attacking enemy alliances (p. 69), so too may strategy be used to form plans for attacking an enemy on non-military fronts. MCDP 1-1 stresses the presence of political divisions that can be attacked and exploited during times of war. Consider the approach to the Russians taken by Kaiser Wilhelm III of Germany in 1914. After careful consideration of the Russian physical and moral characteristics (something that his predecessors and followers also had access to), Wilhelm chose to supplement the German invasion with support for an internal revolution, which would later cause massive upheaval and force Russian withdrawal from the war.

Of recent note is the model of Entropy-Based Warfare, or the system of warfare that emphasizes the measurement of enemy disorder and ineffectiveness to achieve a tactical advantage. Where Attrition-Based models of warfare emphasize superiority of firepower, mobility, and seizing and holding terrain objectives, Entropy-Based models of warfare seek to balance the asymmetrical effects of attrition, friction and disruption on the opponent, leading to surprise and disorganization among the enemy lines. Throughout *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu stresses these ideas by promoting the location and creation of disorder among enemy forces, noting that a panicked or disordered army is easily defeated in combat (and additionally suggesting avoiding combat with an army that is well-disciplined and well-formed). Consider the modern emphasis on disruption of communication and supply lines to cause confusion and equipment shortages among enemies. Entropy-Based warfare, with its emphasis on maximizing friction and disruption while minimizing lethality, is a remarkably deep extension of these concepts.

The Art of War is not without its failings, however. In his strategic manual, Sun Tzu neglects several essential principles and facets of warfare that are crucial to modern military operations. Foremost among these is the ideological clash between Sun Tzu and modern military doctrines over the role of civilian government in strategy. Whereas Sun Tzu firmly believes in the general's right to disobey the civilian government when it is advantageous to do so (or when obeying carries heavy disadvantages), modern military documents such as MCDP 1-1 and Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* clearly outline military strategy as a function of policy (politics), going so far as to define strategy as a plan for achieving goals set by policy (political goals, which are determined in turn, by a civilian government). In his book, Clausewitz claims that "War is the extension of policy by other means" (Clausewitz, 87), emphasizing the role of the military as a tool of the civilian government, and not a separate and equal entity. MCDP 1-1 carries this idea even further, stating:

"therefore, the military professional who says, 'Keep politics out of this. Just give us the policy, and we will take care of the strategy,' does not understand the fundamentals of strategy." (MCDP 1-1, p. 13)

Additionally, Sun Tzu seems both overly confident of his ability to predict the outcome in war, and largely apathetic to the aftermath. According to Sun Tzu, victory can be assured and determined through a five factors (knowing when to fight, knowing how many troops to use, having congruency in the goals of the ranks and leadership, preparation, and freedom from government constraint). However, more modern notions of warfare tend to describe the process as chaotic and unpredictable, too difficult to anticipate and too random to plan for, claiming that strategy is only effective for creating

short-term forecasts rather than long term predictions. This description of warfare as unpredictable can largely be attributed to the more modern military and political concerns with a larger variety of postwar factors (such as regime change, economic shifts, and power redistribution as opposed to simple territory gain). Modern models of warfare are largely concerned with the outcome of a conflict, and cannot rely on plundering the enemy as Sun Tzu taught: “Therefore a wise general strives to feed off the enemy.” (p.62)

While Sun Tzu concerns himself primarily with winning (stating repeatedly that victory is the most important factor in war), the *Art of War* does not clearly define winning in any scope, nor does it note the desired outcomes of war. Modern strategy is very much concerned with these, delineating between limited and unlimited goals in warfare, or goals that either leave intact or change the governing body of the defeated nation. Consider the number of military actions in the twentieth century that have not had annihilation as a central strategic goal, but rather deterrence, or a shift in policy from an opposing nation. In neglecting this important difference in goals, Sun Tzu misses the opportunity to discuss changes in strategy based on the overall goals of warfare—That is, the idea that some tactics are disadvantageous to overall goals even if they are helpful for winning the war. For example, burning cities to the ground is not a desirable tactic when one is attempting to capture territory, no matter how effective it may be.

Despite these failings, it is apparent that *The Art of War* is still relevant and useful to the formulation of strategy in modern warfare. General George Patton read the book several times, and claimed it gave him great insight. Each of the Marine Corps Doctrinal Publications contain passages and references to Sun Tzu’s writings, and modern

strategists strive to achieve the level of adaptability and speed that Sun Tzu claims is vital to military success.

Therefore, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, while uncomplicated in its structure and presentation, contains a number of key concepts that are both crucial to and still employed in the formulation of strategy and tactics for modern warfare. Additionally, although it is not completely applicable to modern military roles, *The Art of War* emphasizes many facets of warfare and strategy which are not entirely self-evident. As such, it serves as an excellent strategic "primer" to more in-depth texts on strategy and warfare, and should be considered required reading for the modern military strategist.

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