



# Sun Zi's *Art of War* and U.S. Joint Professional Military Education

October 6, 2009

The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) and National War College (NWC) jointly hosted a conference on “Sun Zi’s *Art of War* and U.S. Joint Professional Military Education” on October 6, 2009. This was the first conference to bring together leading academic experts and faculty from all major U.S. military academies and senior Service schools. The morning session, an integral part of the NWC core course on war and statecraft, featured speakers who explored the historical context and modern military applications of Sun Zi. The afternoon session provided a forum for dialogue and an exchange of ideas between leading academic experts from civilian institutions and professors and military practitioners who teach *Art of War* at professional military education (PME) institutions. The panelists addressed a range of topics relevant to how to teach Sun Zi, including identifying best practices and potential pitfalls, translation issues, research gaps, and opportunities to engage foreign counterparts.

The National Defense University conference fulfilled three objectives. The first goal was to gain an understanding of how *Sun Zi Bingfa*, usually translated as *Sun Zi’s Art of War*, is currently taught in U.S. military academies and senior Service schools. The last such comprehensive review, “Sun Zi Studies in the United States,” was conducted in 1999.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Alastair Iain Johnston found that Sun Zi was the second most widely taught military strategist, surpassed only by Carl von Clausewitz; but Johnston concluded that *Art of War* served mainly as a foil for Clausewitz’s *On War*, and was not adequately covered at most of the institutions surveyed.

Indeed, many conference presentations confirmed that Sun Zi continues to be used primarily as a counterpoint to Clausewitz in PME curricula. Some institutions have adopted more sophisticated approaches to teaching *Art of War* that require students to grasp and apply its core ideas in various contexts. However, Sun Zi is still often presented in a circumscribed fashion as the lone example of Chinese strategic thought. Of the eight institutions represented at this year’s conference, five include *Art of War* as part of the core curriculum, while the other three introduce the text in elective courses only. The Naval War College and Air Force Academy offer elective courses dedicated specifically to Sun Zi that are taught by China subject matter experts, as are Sun Zi segments of the required curriculum.

A second objective was to bring together leading academic experts and faculty who teach Sun Zi at PME institutions for an open dialogue to discuss how *Art of War* fits into a broader historical and cultural context. An instructor from each PME institution gave a brief description of how *Art of War* is taught to students, as well as which translation is used and why. Four general rationales emerged for teaching Sun Zi:

- ◆ as a tool for strategic analysis
- ◆ as a potential source of ideas for U.S. military operations
- ◆ as a way to understand the strategic thinking of Asian allies and facilitate cooperation
- ◆ as a way to understand the thinking of a potential adversary.

Academic experts gave presentations that outlined a number of issues related to the use of Sun Zi as a tool for learning. Presentations discussed the changing lessons that contemporary Chinese analysts have drawn from *Art of War* and how Sun Zi fits into a larger body of Chinese military thought, including the Seven Military Classics. Academic experts and PME instructors discussed the pros and cons of various translations of Sun Zi, highlighting the challenges involved in translation and concluding that the widely used Samuel Griffith translation offers a number of advantages for teaching purposes.

The third set of objectives involved identifying best practices that should be emulated and pitfalls to avoid in teaching Sun Zi, developing recommendations for future research that can inform joint PME curricula, and identifying opportunities for productive engagement with counterparts in other countries. A key point that emerged in discussion was that Sun Zi should not be taught as a means to understand contemporary Chinese military/strategic thought. People's Liberation Army (PLA) officers use *Art of War* as a way to think about strategy and not as an operational guide with specific applications to regular or irregular warfare. Even leading U.S. experts lack a detailed understanding of the lessons PLA teachers and students derive from the study of Sun Zi in their military schools. This gap in understanding provides a rationale for engaging with Chinese PME institutions to learn how they teach and apply Sun Zi.

Civilian academic experts suggested that PME students should read other Chinese strategic writings and commentaries to gain a proper understanding of *Art of War* and how it fits into the broader canon of Chinese strategic writings. Faculty at PME institutions observed that time limitations made it difficult to assign additional readings. Participants noted a lack of student-friendly teaching materials to supplement *Art of War* as a text. Academic experts agreed that a gap exists in the literature, but noted that there were no professional incentives for academic experts at civilian institutions to produce concise surveys of Chinese military thought or overviews of how Chinese commentaries on Sun Zi have varied over time. These gaps present opportunities for PME faculty and researchers.

Participants agreed that Sun Zi provides good insight into a number of enduring issues relevant to a modern military environment, such as morale, force structure, and undermining the enemy's strategy. Concepts in *Art of War* have been used to analyze a number of contemporary and historical strategic issues, but both PME instructors and academic experts found it difficult to recommend outstanding examples for classroom purposes. One idea would be to hold an essay contest open to PME students and academic experts on applications of Sun Zi to strategic problems.

Conference participants suggested that a good way to improve the quality of Sun Zi instruction would be to have PME faculty who are not China experts read Arthur Waldron's foreword and the author's introduction in Victor Mair's translation of *Art of War*, which provide a concise overview of the nature of the text and its historical context, an explication of key concepts, and illustrations of how translation choices affect understanding.<sup>2</sup> Participants also recommended chapter three of Mark Lewis' *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, which provides a thorough discussion of the relationship among the commander, the ruler, and the army as it was understood in ancient Chinese strategic thinking.<sup>3</sup>

Feedback from students and conference participants indicates that the conference more than fulfilled its objectives. Bringing leading academic experts on Sun Zi together with faculty from PME institutions led to informative discussions on translation issues, an understanding of how historical and cultural context affects interpretation of the text, and alternative strategies for using Sun Zi within PME curricula. The conference produced a number of specific suggestions for improving teaching of *Art of War*, identified opportunities to engage with foreign counterparts, and highlighted gaps in the literature that research by PME faculty and students could fill. The conference clearly demonstrated that substantive interactions between academic experts at civilian universities and faculty at military institutions can enrich professional military education.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, "Sun Zi Studies in the United States," July 25, 1999, available at <[www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~johnston/SunZi.pdf](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~johnston/SunZi.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Victor Mair, trans., *The Art of War: Sun Zi's Military Methods* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

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