

**THE *KITSCH* OF WAR:
Misappropriations of Sun Tzu for an American Imperial
Hypermasculinity**

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ABSTRACT

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* seems more popular than ever. US policymakers, analysts, and strategists often invoke this 5th-century Chinese military philosopher to justify the Bush Administration's war on terror, and specifically the war in Iraq. They often attribute strategies such as "shock and awe" and "decapitation," for instance, to *The Art of War*. These American interpretations, however, misappropriate Sun Tzu not only substantively but also epistemologically and ontologically. Contrary to Sun Tzu's relational and cosmopolitan worldview, the Bush Administration projects an imperial hypermasculinity not only for itself but also, by extension, to all others, especially China. Consequently, the Bush Administration finds an enemy where none necessarily exists, turning war not into an art but *kitsch*.

THE KITSCH OF WAR: Misappropriations of Sun Tzu for an American Imperial Hypermasculinity

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INTRODUCTION

“Chinese capabilities threaten U.S. forces in the region.”
CIA Director Porter Goss, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 16 February 2005.¹

Rhetoric to increase defense spending? Perhaps. Nonetheless, this rendition departs significantly from the Bush Administration’s earlier characterization of China as a strategic/trading “partner.” Indeed, the Bush Administration seems intent on using Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* not only to justify its war on terror, generally, and the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, specifically, but also to project an imperial hypermasculinity onto all Others, especially China, regardless of the evidence at hand. Aside from the fact that China’s military lags almost two decades behind that of the US in terms of technology and capability, *The Art of War* itself presents a relational and cosmopolitan worldview incompatible with the imperialistic, hypermasculine logic of neoconservatives currently dominating the Bush presidential agenda.

This paper begins with US substantive misappropriations of *The Art of War*. It proceeds onto Sun Tzu’s epistemological and ontological foundations and how they compare with US national security priorities. We conclude with the implications of these misappropriations for US-China relations, in particular, and rising US neoimperialism in world politics, in general.

I. MISAPPLICATIONS AND MISAPPROPRIATIONS

Interest in *The Art of War* has risen dramatically since 9/11. Both Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks, who masterminded the Iraq campaign, regularly quoted from this classical text.² In particular, they have utilized concepts attributed to Sun Tzu such as “shock and awe” and “decapitation.” The former asserts that an extreme show of force would so cower the enemy that war would not have to be prolonged; the latter reflects a similar logic: i.e., cutting off the head or leader of a state allows greater ease in capturing his nation.

Many in US politics have also invoked Sun Tzu but to criticize the Bush Administration.³ Others have used the same criteria to blame the Clinton Administration and Democratic presidential wannabes for weak leadership that, they claim, would

¹ See <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/ALLPOLITICS/02/17/goss.china.reut/>.

² See <http://www.sonshi.com/holmes.html>.

³ J.D. Brenny, “The Iraqi War: A Sun Tzu Perspective” (2004) (<http://urbanstar.com/newest/2004/07/irqui-war-sun-tzu-perspective.html>) (visited on 17/01/05).

jeopardize US national security interests.⁴ Pundits and commentators have evaluated leaders from George W. Bush to Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden through the filter of Sun Tzu's principles.⁵ Businessmen along with generals regularly consult *The Art of War*. Even Tony Soprano, a fictional character in the HBO series "The Sopranos," reads Sun Tzu, sparking interest in the 5th-century Chinese general and philosopher for another generation of Americans.⁶ Sun Tzu, it seems, stands alone with Thucydides in authoring a text that continues to influence statesmen and ordinary folk alike after 2,500 years.

Academic treatments of Sun Tzu also proliferate. Some scholars have used Sun Tzu to discuss military professionalism and the role played by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Chinese foreign policy decision-making.⁷ One pair extended a game-theoretic model to *The Art of War*.⁸ Others have compared Sun Tzu's teachings with former US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's doctrine of war.⁹ Still others have asked whether Sun Tzu's war theory necessitates a certain cultural environment that other societies cannot match.¹⁰

None, though, questions the accuracy of contemporary appropriations and applications of *The Art of War*. This sloppiness in thinking is especially egregious given war's toll on a nation's irreplaceable treasure: its people. We focus specifically on the concepts of "shock and awe" and "decapitation."

Shocking, Awing, and Decapitating

"Shock and awe" characterized the Pentagon's strategy for second war against Iraq in March 2003. US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld supplemented this strategy with "decapitating" the enemy, especially Saddam Hussein. Accordingly, the US dropped 3,000 bombs and missiles on Baghdad within the first forty-eight hours. Civilian casualties mushroomed. Saddam fled. Iraq collapsed.

Harlan Ullman and James P. Wade describe "shock and awe" as an explicit policy to overwhelm the enemy, rendering it "totally impotent and vulnerable" with no will to

⁴ James Henry, "China's Military and Sun Tzu: What Every American Should Know" (2004) (<http://www.brookesnews.com/04190/china.html>) (visited on 17/01/05).

⁵ Tom Adkins, "Sun Tzu Visits the Middle East" (2002) (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/928498/posts>) (visited on 17/01/05).

⁶ Interestingly, the first English translation of *The Art of War* did not appear until 1910. De-shun Lo (ed.), *Sun tzu bing fa* (Taipei: Li-ming Wen Hua Publishing House, 1991), pp. 21-22.

⁷ Gerald Segal, "The PLA and Chinese Foreign Policy Decision-Making," *International Affairs* 57 (3)1981: 449-66.

⁸ Emerson M. Niou and Peter C. Ordershook, "A Game-theoretic Interpretation of Sun Tzu's The Art of War," *Journal of Peace Research* 31(2)1994: 161-74.

⁹ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, James D. Morrow, Randolph M. Siverson, and Alastair Smith, "Testing Novel Implications from the Selectorate Theory of War," *World Politics* 56 (April) 2004: 363-88.

¹⁰ Stephen Peter Rosen, "Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters," *International Security* 19 (4)1995: 5-31.

resist.¹¹ In justifying this strategy, Tolan refers to photographs of survivors from World War I, their “comatose and glazed expressions” affirming that “shock and awe” in war “transcend race, culture, and history... [This strategy vaporizes] the public will of the adversary to resist and, ideally or theoretically, would instantly or quickly incapacitate that will over the space of a few hours or days.”¹²

The Art of War, however, does not tell of “shock and awe.” Instead, this strategy stems from a popular story. According to Western experts, it goes like this: Sun Tzu was conducting a military drill for a group of concubines. Two of the ladies laughed at him; to wit, he decapitated them, shocking and awing the other concubines into compliance.¹³ This is also why “decapitation” typically accompanies “shock and awe.”

De-shun Lo elaborates upon the tale, giving it a different twist.¹⁴ After reading *The Art of War*, Ho Lu, the king of Wu, summoned Sun Tzu to court to train the king’s concubines. He wanted them to learn about weapons and war.¹⁵ Sun Tzu divided one hundred and eighty concubines into two companies and put Ho Lu’s two favorite concubines in command. He taught them how to hold halberds and asked them to follow his orders. He gave the orders three times and explained them five times. But the women only tittered with laughter. Sun Tzu reasoned: “If regulations are not clear and orders not thoroughly explained, it is the commander’s fault.” He repeated the orders three times and explained them, again, five times. The women burst into laughter. This time, Sun Tzu responded: “If instructions are not clear and commands not explicit, it is the commander’s fault. However, when they have been made clear, and are not carried out in accordance with military law, it is a crime on the part of the officers.” He ordered that the two chief concubines be beheaded. Ho Lu was astounded. The king feared losing his two favorite concubines and asked for mercy on their behalf.

“I cannot live without these two women,” he impressed upon Sun Tzu. “Please pardon them.”

“Your servant received your appointment as Commander,” Sun Tzu replied, “and when the commander is at the head of the army he need not accept all the sovereign’s orders.”

Sun Tzu continued with both the execution and the drill. The other concubines dared not make a peep. Ho Lu fumed but he knew thereafter that Sun Tzu proved himself a capable leader.

¹¹ Harlan Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (1996).

¹² Sandy Tolan, “Incomprehensible Destruction,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* No. 630 (2003) (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/630/op13.htm>).

¹³ *Ibid.*; Ullman and Wade, *op.cit.*; Marwaan Macan-Markar, “Sun Tzu: The Real Father of ‘Shock and Awe’,” (2003) (<http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/8830662/posts>) (visited on 17/01/05).

¹⁴ Lo, *op.cit.*, 27-40.

¹⁵ The reasons are never specified.

Lo interprets this story as a moral concerning military authority.¹⁶ That is, when a general has been given the authority to lead his army, he takes this responsibility so seriously that even the king could not order him otherwise. However, shocking, awing, and decapitating had never been Sun Tzu's primary intent nor was it directed at the enemy. Rather, Sun Tzu turned to violent punishment only when reason failed. For him, these strategies were not a "must" but a last resort. Moreover, they were targeted at his own troops to consolidate command, not the enemy for capture.

A second take on this tale bears telling. What does it mean for a man, vested with all the authority of a king's commander, to "decapitate" two, defenseless women, "awing and shocking" their counterparts into...what, more submission than they must endure already? Kings held concubines in conditions similar to a lifetime of house-arrest: each restricted to her own small courtyard, subject to constant gossip and slander in competition against *hundreds* of other concubines,¹⁷ waiting for that one night when "the master" might visit, praying for the honor of bearing him a son but usually disgraced forever for failing to do so. Furthermore, the concubines at Sun Tzu's command were not operating in a real war with explicit stakes involved but participating in a drill!

To base military strategy on this story, then, reveals willing ignorance covering for a shameful perversion of power. Note Secretary Rumsfeld's response to the number of civilian casualties caused by the US bombing of Iraq: these demonstrate the Iraqi government's inhumanity to its own people, he preached, using them as "human shields." Such crimes affirm America's virtue as a beacon of democracy, liberty, and human rights: "[Using human shields] is murder, a violation of the laws of armed conflict, and a crime against humanity, and it will be treated as such," (Rumsfeld quoted in Tolan, 2003: 2). What the act, and the strategy behind it, reveals instead is the hollow projection of a military hypermasculinity that punishes the punished, subjugates the subjugated, exploits the exploited. It is, in short, bullyism at its worst.

Yet a third interpretation warrants attention. Even with elaboration, this tale of Sun Tzu should flag redly. *Should* commanders, albeit sanctioned by the king, wield such authority that the king himself cannot retract or check it? In sacking General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in the Pacific, Harry Truman demonstrated definitively that a working democracy cannot allow military authority to exceed or disregard its higher, political authority. Granted, Sun Tzu neither lived in nor wrote about military-political relations in a democracy. Nonetheless, the principle stands. Why would any commander-in-chief – whether king, president, or CEO – permit his lieutenants, whatever the rank, the ideological legitimacy to disobey a direct order? Even 5th-century China, reflecting lessons from the First Emperor (3 B.C.), had established a longstanding tradition of balancing military authority (*wu*) with civilian authority (*wen*).¹⁸

¹⁶ Lo, *op.cit.*, 19-21.

¹⁷ The Emperor usually presided over a court of 3,000 concubines.

¹⁸ See, for example, Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

The Bush Administration would do well, then, to heed the three caveats of shocking, awing, and decapitating: (1) these aim to consolidate loyalty and obedience within one's own troops, not to paralyze the enemy with fear, (2) when targeted at a defenseless population, these strategies serve only to highlight the cowardice, not brilliance, of the bully, and (3) these strategies could return to haunt the bully himself.

Not only is Sun Tzu misappropriated and misapplied, but he is also selectively understood. For instance, Sun Tzu is frequently quoted as rationalizing that "all warfare is based on deception."¹⁹ The Bush Administration has taken this strategy to include deceiving one's own population, not just the enemy. David Campbell shows how the Pentagon and the military have used sophisticated tools of "cultural governance" to prevent the public from distinguishing "the original and the new, the real from the reproduced."²⁰ Yet Sun Tzu advocated deception for the enemy only, never one's own people. To Sun Tzu, moreover, the word "deception" included the notion of flexibility. To appear flexible through diplomacy and other means before a war starts is also a kind of deception, according to Sun Tzu.²¹

These problems highlight a fundamental misunderstanding of Sun Tzu's epistemology and ontology.

II. EPISTEMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY IN *THE ART OF WAR*

Note, for example, these two statements by Sun Tzu:²²

[W]inning one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not real excellence, winning a victory and subduing the enemy without fighting is the highest excellence. (31)

[T]he best policy for the military operations is to gain victory by means of strategy. Next best policy is to disintegrate the enemy's alliances by means of diplomacy; the inferior way is to launch an attack on the enemy; the worst way is to storm cities and seize territory. (33)

In both, Sun Tzu exhorts us to avoid war and if that is not possible, then to minimize the costs of war. Indeed, we misinterpret Sun Tzu if we see him as mainly teaching us how best to execute a war. *The Art of War*, in fact, is not merely a manual on

¹⁹ See, for example, Assad Homayoun, "Sun Tzu: The Newest View," *Defense & Foreign Affairs' Strategic Policy* (2004) and Darryl L. Robertson, "Fight Against Terrorism: Sun Tzu Revisited," National Defense University National War College, Course 5602.

²⁰ David Campbell, "Cultural Governance and Pictorial Resistance: Reflections on the Imaging of War," *Review of International Studies* 29(2003): 57-73.

²¹ Xian Zhong Niu, *Sun tzu san lun: cong gu bing fa dao xin zhan lue* (Taipei: Mai Tian Publishing House, 1996), 47-49.

²² All quotes from Sun Tzu come from Zhiye Luo (trans.), *Sun Tzu's the Art of War* (Chinese-English) (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan, 1993).

war. It is also a book of philosophy and peace.²³ Though many in the West may recognize that for Sun Tzu, the supreme art of war is to subjugate the enemy without any real fighting, too many do not consider that peaceful means could serve as a complementary strategy to achieving this goal. What becomes highlighted, instead, are the technologies and efficacy of war.

Here, we see Sun Tzu's relational epistemology and cosmopolitan worldview at work. In the second statement, for instance, he advises a sequence to war: first try strategy; if that fails, then offer diplomacy; if that fails, then attack; if that fails, as a last resort, "storm cities and seize territory." But he's not just proposing a prudent approach to war. He's drawing a larger picture in which to situate the war and how each node within the picture connects with the other. Put differently, if he were only concerned with the efficacy of victory, he would recommend skipping all the intermediary steps (a la Rumsfeld) to reach the final goal: victory. Instead, Sun Tzu has a different normative and ontological commitment: Community, writ large, and harmony within it. For this reason, he underscores the need to avoid the final solution: outright war.

Confucian Interrelationality

Sun Tzu's philosophical stance reflects the Confucian logic of interrelationality. Indeed, one could say that *The Art of War* inverts Confucianism's positive construction of the world, most notably represented by this passage in *The Great Learning* (*daxue*):

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom (*tianxia*), first ordered well their own states (*zhiguo*). Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families (*qijia*). Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons (*xiushen*). Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts (*zhengxin*). Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts (*chengyi*). Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge (*zhizhi*). Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things (*gewu*).²⁴

The reverse applies as well:

Things being investigated (*gewu*), knowledge became complete (*zhizhi*). Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere (*chengyi*). Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified (*zhengxin*). Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated (*xiushen*). Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated (*qijia*). Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed (*zhiguo*). Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy (*tianxia pingan*).²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, 11-30.

²⁴ James Legge (trans.), *The Four Books* (Taipei: Culture Book Co., 1992), 2-7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

This passage further underscores the relational epistemology that underpins classical Chinese thinking. It is premised on the notion that mutuality governs the system, from the macro-objective-material (cosmos/state/family) to the micro-subjective-abstract (person/heart/thoughts/knowledge) and back again. *The Great Learning* departs from conventional dichotomies in the West that set individual vs society, private vs public, inside vs outside, objective vs subjective, material vs abstract. In constructivist terms, agents and structures do not function as pre-existing entities that happen to interact with one another to produce “social life.” Rather, they emerge from compounds of mutually generating rules and rule, institutions and practices, materialities and subjectivities.

Sun Tzu does not directly copy *The Great Learning*’s inward-outward relational logic. What he offers, instead, is another variation best characterized as better-worse. Note below:

The general principle of war is that making the whole state surrender is better than destroying it; subjugating the entire enemy’s army is better than crushing it; making a battalion, a company or a five-man squad surrender is better than destroying them. (31)

So it is said that if you know both the enemy and yourself, you will fight a hundred battles without danger of defeat; if you are ignorant of the enemy but only know yourself, your chances of winning and losing are equal; if you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will certainly be defeated in every battle. (43)

In the first passage, he prefers submission over outright destruction. This recommendation contrasts sharply from the Athenians’ dismissal of the Melians’ request for neutrality in *The Peloponnesian Wars*. Letting you stay neutral would make us look soft, the Athenians feared, thereby stoking our enemies against us. Yet Sun Tzu advocates just the opposite. Instead of reinforcing the realist mantra that “the strong do what they can; the weak suffer what they must,” Sun Tzu would advise: Save what you can.

In sum, Sun Tzu’s principles may talk of war, but their ultimate purpose is to speak of peace. Sun Tzu aims not to advocate the establishment of any particular state or ideology or way of life. Rather, he seeks to minimize the devastations of war – preferably avoid it altogether – in service of a larger sense of community for all concerned.

CONCLUSION

Our treatment of this complex subject is necessarily inadequate given the short time span and limited scope of a conference paper. However, we hope we have conveyed the sense that self-acclaimed strategists may not be applying *The Art of War* fully, comprehensively, or even appropriately. Defaming Sun Tzu's classic work may not be worth noting except that such misapplications may come back to haunt the source in the future. As noted in the Introduction, the Bush Administration persists in portraying China in aggressively, militant terms – an imperial hypermasculinity the US has taken on for itself. Furthermore, ruling hawks justify doing so by citing a classic text from China's own history and culture. What more evidence would do? Yet, as we have argued in this paper, *The Art of War* precisely undermines this stance. It offers a vision of cosmopolitanism not narrow national self-interest, relationality not border-making, and, yes, patriarchy, but not reactionary, militant hypermasculinity.