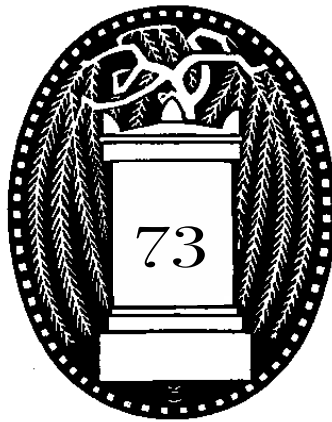


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Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War”: Interpretations for Faculty Life

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Introduction

A careful reading of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* reveals a book full of timeless life lessons, and an oddly contradictory purpose.¹ While the book is about how successfully to wage war, it is as much about how to avoid war by careful planning and thoroughly understanding one’s opponents and environment. The central lesson of *The Art of War* is how to outwit an opponent in order to minimize the actual violence and carnage of warfare so that a victory can be won quickly, easily, and at the least cost of lives to both sides.

However, if we pry more deeply into Sun Tzu’s writing as it spans across his book, it becomes evident that *The Art of War*’s most important lesson is how to succeed in an organization during changing circumstances, and how one can best apply oneself to developing their potential within an organization. The purpose of this essay is to examine Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* with respect to his ideas about how to foster individual success in organizations, and to find applications for faculty’s work in contemporary academe.

Most modern interpretations of *The Art of War* have been applied to the business world.² Other applications have been in law and legal advocacy.³ In education, the only study to draw connections to *The Art of War* is an autobiographical reflection in the form of a diary in the author’s attempt to find implications for professional development.⁴

Historical Background and Theoretical Framework

Sun Tzu’s thinking differs starkly from that of conquerors in more recent Western history such as Napoleon, Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, and even Putin. Unlike Sun Tzu, these were figures who set out to learn and master the principles of leadership purely to conquer territory and without regard to human cost. In contrast, Sun Tzu’s philosophical approach is more applicable to smaller forces trying to defend themselves from conquest or who are fighting for independence.

There have been several examples of books written centuries ago that still have contemporaneous lessons for readers. Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The*

Prince is among the best-known. Machiavelli served as a senior civil servant with responsibilities in diplomatic and military affairs. *The Prince* was written in 1532 as a gift to Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino, and conceptualized as a way for Machiavelli to try to ingratiate himself back into good favor after having been exiled upon Florence, Italy's change in leadership. A less-well-known text, *The Book of Five Rings* by Miamoto Musashi, was written around 1645. Musashi is considered Japan's finest swordsman; however, his book focuses more on battlefield and sword tactics rather than offering a wider strategic perspective or philosophical foundation. Therefore, *The Book of Five Rings* is lesser-known outside Japan and so contains fewer lessons that can be applied beyond the battlefield.

Both *The Art of War* and *The Prince* are based on personal observations by their authors, both of whom lived lives immersed in their respective topics. Both authors also draw heavily from social science disciplines such as politics, psychology, sociology, and history, in addition to economics and geography. Indeed, these two volumes are considered among the earliest examples of personal-experience narratives intended to pass on practical life lessons. *The Art of War* continues to be one of the most essential texts among militaries throughout the world. In 1939 it experienced a resurgence in popularity when issued to all soldiers of China's People's Liberation Army.⁵ It continues to be required reading at nearly every military academy in the world, including all U.S. service academies, as well as at Sandhurst, the United Kingdom's military academy.⁶

Sun Tzu's philosophical approach, when combined with an awareness of human behavior, results in a text which can be applied and interpreted across time and cultures. If we accept that some human behaviors span cultures, then we must likewise accept that lessons within *The Art of War* are widely transferable. William Shakespeare's work, for example, has been recognized for its awareness of the human condition which makes Shakespeare's works valued for their literary artistry as well as his portraiture of human motives and frailties. "The human condition" refers to central aspects of human life that span culture and time and have been examined through a variety of lenses in both the scientific and literary worlds.⁷ *The Art of War* addresses aspects of the human condition through an understanding of the role of individuals in institutions and how to foster success,⁸ which render Sun Tzu's views on leadership inseparable from a keen understanding of the human condition.

In the present essay I use cultural concepts to analyze aspects of *The Art of War* in order better to understand how a classic historical text grounded in the human condition can be used to interpret contemporary organizational problems.⁹ Because the purpose of this essay is to find applications for faculty life, I focus my analysis on those parts of the text that pertain to leadership and fostering success, including survival and adaptation. To

derive meaningful current-day lessons from *The Art of War*, it is necessary first to identify principles that cross cultural boundaries.¹⁰ I therefore focus my analysis on Sun Tzu's writings about broader philosophical principles rather than those addressing military tactics. Where tactics are included, I have done so because I deem that specific tactic a key part of a larger philosophical lesson.

Analysis

The Art of War is organized into 13 chapters. Most chapters pertain to avoiding military conflict and war through preparation and planning. Those chapters dedicated to military warfare are nevertheless heavily infused with advice on how to win at minimal cost to one's own forces, as well as those of the enemy. A careful read through *The Art of War* reveals several distinct themes that span multiple chapters. For example, the theme of planning is infused across all 13 chapters, yet some of Sun Tzu's thoughts on planning are more philosophical in nature, while other references are specific and do not apply once off the battlefield. The guiding purpose of my analysis is to find themes that span multiple chapters and that are sufficiently philosophical in nature broadly to inform organizational leadership.

Organizational Values

Confucianism is the primary philosophical perspective underlying *The Art of War*. Sun Tzu posits, "The Way causes men to be of one mind with their rulers, to live or die with them, and never to waiver."¹¹ What he refers to as The Way is perhaps the most important of his lessons because The Way shapes how humans relate to organizations. Confucianism emphasizes human work and discipline in order to become complete and functioned as ancient China's operating system for establishing laws and managing institutions.¹² This manner of following a right or proper way of existence is referred to as the "Tao" or "The Way."¹³

The Tao contrasts with De (sometimes written as Te) which encompasses one's character, virtue, and ethics.¹⁴ The term is difficult to translate because of its shifting meaning over time; however, it broadly refers to the spiritual aspect of Confucianism.¹⁵ The Tao is the principle emphasis of *The Art of War*, yet De is also important in that Sun Tzu considers the principled application of leadership in warfare a moral mandate. This idea is particularly potent because virtuous leadership promotes self-regulation, loyalty, and good morale. Tao and De reflect different aspects of Confucian thought, although they share a common emphasis on the development of positive control over institutions and the self.

When an individual becomes part of an organization, some sort of transaction inevitably takes place. At a minimum, we trade our services in exchange for compensation—and ideally career advancement. Our success is largely determined by how well we provide the organization with the

things expected from us as part of that transaction. Succeeding in The Way means understanding the values and expectations of an organization and incorporating them into our performance and priorities. The Way represents the mission and culture of the institution in daily practice, and is the living creed behind its mottos, badges and slogans. For The Way to be realized, all members of the institution, including its students, need to practice equal commitment. For this to happen, the institution must skillfully transfer organizational values to all who become associated with it.

One's deep understanding of The Way would be incomplete if focusing on optimizing behavior only for individual advancement. Members of higher education organizations, as faculty we also are charged with transmitting the organization's values and expectations to students. In this sense we play an essential formal and informal organizational role in shaping students. For example, I only teach graduate students, primarily doctoral students. A large part of my teaching is based on a series of qualitative research courses designed to instruct students in the philosophy of qualitative research: research ethics, design, data collection, identifying appropriate data sources, trustworthiness, data analysis, and data reporting. My work also involves serving on dissertation committees, mostly as a methodologist.

As a Carnegie R1 university and research institution, Texas Tech expects its doctoral students who complete the Ph.D. are prepared to embark on a career in social-science research. Indeed, many of the Ph.D. students who graduate will pursue faculty careers at similar institutions to Texas Tech. Therefore, my overarching role could be described as acting as transmitter of the university's values and skills to my students. This formal aspect of information transmission takes place in the classroom, on dissertation committees, and, as well, means involving students in their major professor's own research so students will have practical experience in social-science research before beginning their dissertation.

The faculty member's informal role, equally important, involves transmission of a variety of dispositions that can be loosely grouped under the term "collegiality." These days, there is a widespread sense among university faculty that collegiality is in decline—and that concern goes beyond the walls of academe. There is considerable controversy in university settings about how or even whether collegiality should be used to evaluate faculty performance. "Collegiality" has historically been associated with promoting faculty homogeneity, and its use in appraisal processes seems contrary to the increased heterogeneity of academe and of society in general. Importantly, an emphasis on collegiality in appraisal processes can have a dampening effect on free speech and the free exchange of ideas. Fear of being labeled "un-collegial," especially among untenured, probationary-period faculty, has been known to stifle freedom of expression and

encourage silence among those who would dissent. Nevertheless, faculty continue to consider collegiality in promotion and tenure decisions, for a faculty member's ability to work with others in a collegial manner proves helpful for a variety of reasons. We in academe have all likely observed over the course of our careers how some colleagues thrive, and others fail. Some seem to mesh well with the organizational power structure and with colleagues while others find themselves in a constant state of conflict with everyone around them. For this second group, promotion and tenure prospects remain highly uncertain and advancement into administrative ranks often becomes even more difficult.

In the university setting, collegiality typically falls into one of two subcategories: exclusionary vs. aspirational. Exclusionary behaviors are considered undesirable by the organization. Aspirational behaviors are those that are desired, encouraged, and should be actively pursued rather than performed at the level of minimal expectation. However, an aspirational definition proves more useful to the organization because aspirational collegiality fosters individual and community growth rather than merely focusing on prohibited behaviors. Many scholars who study collegiality focus purely on its function: helping academic organizations work most effectively. Yet, collegiality becomes imperative to the continual process of improved institutional effectiveness if we apply Sun Tzu's emphasis on helping an organization function cohesively. Collegiality is also essential to self-improvement, inspiring workers to be better individuals, citizens, and professionals. Such a definition interprets collegiality as benefitting both the organization and the individual.¹⁶

Sun Tzu reminds us that, "When you surround an army leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard."¹⁷ We have all likely encountered a colleague who approaches difference of opinion as a battle that must be won at all costs. Particularly in higher education institutions, Sun Tzu's advice about allowing an opponent an escape can be understood as taking particular care during such encounters to frame our remarks on a person's ideas rather than their identity. Disagreeing in a way that allows one to retain their dignity and sense of security provides a pathway to minimize potential to make long-term enemies or damage working relationships.

Understanding Oneself

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.¹⁸

A common adage is "information is power." In academe, one can liken this adage's meaning to the practices of data-driven decision-making and

strategic planning. Collecting information that will aid in one's success is no less important. In order to succeed it is essential for the individual to understand the values and priorities of their organization. For example, what are the institution's expectations for advancement in rank and earning tenure? While obtaining information may be easy, sorting out sometimes-contradictory information is a much more complicated task, and should itself be a source of concern.

For example, when interviewing for a faculty position, it is advisable to ask other faculty if the institution's expectations for promotion and tenure are clear? If one learns the standards are unclear, or receives wildly differing interpretations, one would be wise to be cautious about accepting employment in that organization—as cautious as a general would be to engage in battle with an unfamiliar enemy.

Sun Tzu teaches us that, "Collapse occurs when senior officers forget their responsibilities and take personal affront at the enemy."¹⁹ Another dimension to understanding self is found within the concept of self-regulation. A scholar's work dispositions are founded in the idea and practice of self-regulation that apply to being a member of a loosely coupled organization such as higher education institutions. Universities are frequently characterized by high levels of decentralization and individual autonomy resulting in low levels of agreement on priorities or policy implementation. Non-profit higher education institutions typically are characterized organizationally by unusually high levels of decentralization and disorganization and abnormally low levels of coordination, consensus, and control.²⁰ Unlike organizations where roles are tightly coupled and boundaries are clearly defined for its members, academe is particularly susceptible to individual influence. Human actions, driven by personal values and agendas, are sometimes the driving force behind how organizations operate.²¹ In tightly coupled organizations, a more rigid hierarchical organization with extensive means to regulate the behavior of its members, personal factors do not necessarily fit into a rational decision-making framework where individual compliance can be expected.²² Self-regulation, codified in behavioral expectations that can be termed "professional dispositions," are essential to counterbalance the tendencies within loosely coupled organization such as academe to act based on individual interest, informal structures, and personal conflict, all of which limit organizational effectiveness.²³

"Knowing when to fight and when not to brings victory."²⁴ It is essential that faculty possess a sense of self-restraint used frame their actions. Such a sense contributes to the effectiveness of organizations. Like civility, self-restraint can be defined in either exclusionary or aspirational terms and may include such actions as helping peers achieve success. One's degree of self-restraint may also pertain to how faculty cope with inconveniences

or contradictory directives and how they represent the organization externally, or the degree to which they may volunteer to take on additional responsibilities.²⁵ Individuals are more likely to engage in external activities when they find fulfillment in their work that is internal to the organization, and when they feel fairly treated by their organizations.²⁶ Individuals who embrace and practice civility and self-restraint tend to be those who put the interests of the organization ahead of their own egos. This means sometimes following the organizational mission when it goes against one's own priorities or interests. Sun Tzu describes such individuals as those who "advance without thought of personal glory, and retreat without a care for disgrace. Such a man is a treasure beyond price to his country."²⁷

Planning and Flexibility

Planning and flexibility are quite possibly the most important foci in *The Art of War*. "While heeding the profit of my counsel, avail yourself also of any helpful circumstances over and beyond the ordinary rules."²⁸ In fact, Sun Tzu argues he could predict who would prevail in any conflict based solely on observing their preparations. As social-science researchers this point should easily be appreciated.

In one research course I regularly teach, Michael Moffat's book *Coming of Age in New Jersey* is required reading. As well as being an excellent example of contemporary ethnography, Moffat's work also illustrates to students the pitfalls of a lack of planning. Moffat studies undergraduate student life in a residence hall. He first poses as a non-traditional student—plausible because at the time he was in his early thirties, and claimed to look much younger. Entering the research setting he did not have a plan for how he would deal with students who might ask him about his background, or the age difference between himself and the freshman students with whom he lived. When first asked he lied and said he was returning to college having taken some time off work.

Deception was never part of his research design, nor had deception been approved by the Institutional Review Board that approved the study. Moffat nevertheless practiced deception with his participants such as when, in order to learn more about student life, he went out for drinks with a female freshman student without disclosing to her his identity or purpose. Another ethically problematic event involved him disclosing to the Dean of Students a disturbing practice among some of the students in the residents known as "the wedgie patrol."²⁹ Before he entered the field, he had never considered what he would do if he witnessed or learned of behavior that was illegal, unethical, or a violation of institutional policy. In other words, going into the research setting he did not anticipate what he would do if his role as a researcher conflicted with his role as a citizen. His lack of planning resulted in his making some decisions that damaged relationships with

the population he studied and, more importantly, was ethically troubling behavior in a researcher.³⁰

Sun Tzu argues one should always develop a clear plan and conduct exercises that anticipate problems. The more exercises one conducts, the more likely one will be to uncover potential problems and build contingency plans. Planning exercises should be used to develop a sound, detailed plan that is also flexible enough to deal with the fluid nature of events in the field. Former professional boxer Mike Tyson cautioned against fighters having too rigid a plan when he said, “Every boxer has a plan until he gets punched in the mouth.”

Leadership

The ideals of leadership are infused throughout *The Art of War*, for Sun Tzu emphasizes that leaders are accountable both for victory and defeat; “A leader must understand the priorities of the local nobles before he can make profitable alliances.”³¹ Rather than blame soldiers for failure, he attributes their general’s treatment of his soldiers as one of the most important factors in their performance. In academe we see this manifest within how leaders try to change organizations. Sun Tzu urges generals to lead by motivating their followers through appealing to a sense of shared goals and interests. Such leaders empower their followers, reward those who take initiative, and promote subordinates and colleagues based on competence.

“A general who punishes his troops before he has won them over will never be accepted by them and they will be useless to him.”³² Essential to the success of a hierarchical organization, all levels must share the organization’s goals and values. In the business world, this is commonly referred to as “buy in.”³³ Leaders must make it clear why they support change, and ground that change securely in the organization’s culture and values. Leaders, like generals, need to stress that the organization’s mission is in everyone’s best interest and that all levels of the organization are working together toward a shared goal. Any idea with “buy in” among all members of an organization should be easily defended against criticism.³⁴

A third important principle that Sun Tzu proposes is that leaders must be realistic about expectations for their subordinates.

Equally to be considered is that if you force the men on long marches...the stronger ones will surge ahead and the weaker ones fall to the rear, and only a tenth of your strength will reach the destination on time.³⁵

A leader’s unrealistic expectations will result in only a small portion of one’s team achieving their goals, thus undermining the efforts of the entire organization. It will also consequently result in such problems as a collapse

of morale, lack of trust in leadership, and the eventual collapse of order and organizational cohesion.

Conclusion

One of Sun Tzu's observations about success is that individuals who see victory from outside the army were only aware of the victory itself, not the necessary careful and laborious planning.³⁶ Because *The Art of War* is intended to help one prevail in a competitive environment, I argue the work provides faculty with a framework to confront and negotiate challenges and uncertainty. "How will we allocate increasingly limited resources?" is a critical question that must be understood and justified. With reduced allocations from their respective state legislatures, public institutions now are forced to be increasingly resourceful about how they spend what budget they are granted while experiencing heightened pressure to compete with other institutions for money from other, external sources.

Planning is the single most important theme in *The Art of War*, and it underpins every successful course of action. Sun Tzu's work also provides faculty with strategies to be more likely to succeed in their careers. Detailed planning, combined with carefully collected and analyzed knowledge can be combined to prepare one for any challenge and set a path for career success. However, Sun Tzu also cautions readers that planning and information are still not enough to be victorious. He reminds us that overconfidence, arrogance, and anger can undermine even the best-laid plans. His understanding of the intersection between science and the human condition reveals a keen awareness of how we can become our own worst enemies if we fail to have a clear understanding of our own strengths and weaknesses.

Endnotes

- ¹ History on the life of Sun Tzu is unclear, and so it is difficult to separate fact from myth. It is known he lived in the fifth century BCE in China and was a military leader of great **reputation**. It was long considered that he was a fictional character and the book the work of numerous authors compiled over time into a single text. A more generally accepted idea is that *The Art of War* was written by Sun Tzu, but edited in the fourth century BCE by one of his descendants, Sun Bin. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles [fifth century BCE] (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 8–12.
- ² Gerald Michaelson, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War for Managers; 50 Strategic Rules* (Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2001); Mark McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Business: Six Strategic Principles for Managers* (New York: Oxford

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 - 4 David M. L. Jeffrey, "A Teacher Diary Study to Apply Ancient Art of War Strategies to Professional Development," *The International Journal of Learning* 17, no. 3 (2010): 21–36.
 - 5 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Lionel Giles, 8.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 6.
 - 7 Bertrand Russell, "Chapter III. Machiavelli," *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 504–511, 511; Bertrand Russell, "Chapter IV. Erasmus and More," *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 512–521, 516–517.
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 - 9 Harry Eckstein, "Political Theory and the Study of Politics: A Report of a Conference," *American Political Science Review* 50, no. 2 (1956): 475–487; Ziauddin Sardar, *Introducing Cultural Studies: A Graphic Guide* (London: Icon Books, 2001).
 - 10 Marcus W. Dickson, Deanne N. Den Hartog, and Jacqueline K. Mitchelson, "Research on Leadership in a Cross-Cultural Context: Making Progress, and Raising New Questions," *The Leadership Quarterly* 14, no. 6 (2003): 729–768.
 - 11 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. James Trapp [fifth century BCE] (Edison, NJ: Chartwell Books, 2012) 11.
 - 12 J. W. Freiberg, "The Dialectic of Confucianism and Taoism in Ancient China," *Dialectical Anthropology* 2/3 (1977), 175–198.
 - 13 Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching: A Translation and Commentary* (New York: SUNY Press, 1992).
 - 14 Alvin P. Cohen, *Selected Works of Peter A. Boodberg* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 32.
 - 15 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way: A New Translation by Victor H. Mair Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Manuscripts*, trans. Victor H. Mair (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 133–134.

- ¹⁶ In moral philosophy it is important to distinguish between actions that have instrumental value versus those that have intrinsic value. Actions that have instrumental value are desirable because they are a means to an end. Intrinsic value is grounded in the idea that some behaviors should be pursued for their developmentally continuous ends, such as fostering virtue and wisdom.
- ¹⁷ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. James Trapp, 91.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ²⁰ Lee Duemer, "From Collaboration to Corporation: Higher Education Trends in Texas," *Journal of Philosophy and History of Education* 62, no. 1 (2012): vii–xvi.
- ²¹ James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, *Ambiguity and Choice in Organizations* (Bergen, Norway: Universitets-Forlaget, 1979).
- ²² Frederick J. Manning "Morale, Cohesion, and Esprit de Corps," in *Handbook of Military Psychology*, eds. Reuven Gal and A. David Mangelsdorff (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), 453–470.
- ²³ Richard Ingersoll, "Loosely Coupled Organizations Revisited," *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 11 (1993): 81–112.
- ²⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. James Trapp, 31.
- ²⁵ Mark C. Bolino, Jaron Harvey, and Daniel G. Bachrach, "A Self-Regulation Approach to Understanding Citizenship Behavior in Organizations," *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 119, no. 1 (2012): 126–139.
- ²⁶ Dennis W. Organ, Philip M. Podsakoff, and Scott B. MacKenzie, *Organizational Citizenship Behavior: Its Nature, Antecedents, and Consequence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2006).
- ²⁷ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. James Trapp, 109.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.
- ²⁹ Michael Moffat, *Coming of Age in New Jersey: College and American Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 85.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 25–27.
- ³¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. James Trapp, 73.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 99.
- ³³ Jennifer Emery, *Leading for Organisational Change: Building Purpose, Motivation and Belonging* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2019).

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- ³⁵ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. James Trapp, 73.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.