

SELECTIONS FROM THE SUNZI (ART OF WAR)

Introduction

During the Eastern Zhou period (770-221 BCE) the Zhou kings exercised little real power. The feudal lords of the various constituent parts of the Zhou set themselves up as the kings of independent states and fought innumerable battles against each other in a constantly shifting pattern of alliances and enmities. It was in this context that men like Confucius, Mencius, Lord Shang, Han Fei and others offered their advice and services to the various feudal lords as civilian officials and political advisers. At the same time, other men offered their expertise in the arts of war. The most famous of the military strategists of the Eastern Zhou period is Sunzi (also called Sun Wu), the putative author of a collection of teachings entitled *Sunzi's Art of War*. As in the case of Laozi, there is no firm evidence that Sunzi existed. He is supposed to have been a contemporary of Confucius, but the book bearing his name was compiled a hundred years later, sometime in the second half of the fourth century BCE. Whatever the identity of the author or authors, the *Art of War* has had tremendous influence in China over the ages. It has also been read in military schools and corporate boardrooms around the world by men and women hoping to gain an advantage in the "dog-eat-dog" worlds of war and business.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Selections from the Sunzi (Art of War)

The military is a great matter of the state. It is the ground of life and death, the Way (*dao*) of survival or extinction. One cannot but investigate it. Thus base it in the five. Compare by means of the appraisals, and so seek out its nature.

The first is the way (*dao*), the second is Heaven, the third is Earth, the fourth is the general, the fifth is method.

The Way is what orders the people to have the same purpose as their superior. Thus they can die with him, live with him, and not harbor deceit.

...

The military is a way (*dao*) of deception.

Thus when able, manifest inability. When active, manifest inactivity.

When near, manifest as far. When far, manifest as near.

When he seeks advantage, lure him.

When he is in chaos, take him.

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When he is substantial, prepare against him.

When he is strong, avoid him.

Attack where he is unprepared. Emerge where he does not expect.

These are the victories of the military lineage. They cannot be transmitted in advance.

...

What is meant by skilled is to be victorious over the easily defeated. Thus the battles of the skilled are without extraordinary victory, without reputation for wisdom, and without merit for courage.

Thus one's victories are without error. Being without error, what one arranges is necessarily victorious, since one is victorious over the already defeated.

One skilled at battle takes a stand in the ground of no-defeat and so does not lose the enemy's defeat.

Therefore, the victorious military is first victorious and after that does battle. The defeated military first does battle and after that seeks victory.

Questions:

1. Compare Sunzi's thinking on war with the understanding of the Dao articulated in the *Daodejing* (The Classic of the Way and its Power). Are there similarities between the two?
2. What would a Confucian scholar think of the ideas expressed here? Is Confucius' understanding of "the Way" the same as that of Sunzi?
3. What does Sunzi mean when he says that "the victorious military is first victorious and after that does battle"?

Longer Selection

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Fundamental Definitions

The military is a great matter of the state. It is the ground of life and death, the Way (*dao*) of survival or extinction. One cannot but investigate it. Thus base it in the five. Compare by means of the appraisals, and so seek out its nature.

The first is the way (*dao*), the second is Heaven, the third is Earth, the fourth is the general, the fifth is method.

The Way is what orders the people to have the same purpose as their superior. Thus they can die with him, live with him, and not harbor deceit.

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Heaven is yin and yang, cold and hot, the order of the seasons. Going with it, going against it -- this is military victory.
Earth is high and low, broad and narrow, far and near, steep and level, death and life.
The general is wisdom, trustworthiness, courage, and strictness.
Method is ordering divisions, the way of ranking, and principal supply.

Deception and Reversal

The military is a way (*dao*) of deception.

Thus when able, manifest inability. When active, manifest inactivity.
When near, manifest as far. When far, manifest as near.
When he seeks advantage, lure him.
When he is in chaos, take him.
When he is substantial, prepare against him.
When he is strong, avoid him.
Attack where he is unprepared.
Emerge where he does not expect.
These are the victories of the military lineage. They cannot be transmitted in advance.

On Victory

In general, the method of employing the military --

Taking a state whole is superior. Destroying it is inferior to this.
Taking a division whole is superior. Destroying it is inferior to this.
Taking a battalion whole is superior. Destroying it is inferior to this.
Taking a company whole is superior. Destroying it is inferior to this.
Taking a squad whole is superior. Destroying it is inferior to this.
Therefore, one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not skillful. Subduing the other's military without battle is skillful.
Thus the superior military cuts down strategy. Its inferior cuts down alliances. Its inferior cuts down the military. The worst attacks cities.

Knowing victory has five aspects.

Knowing when one can and cannot do battle is victory.
Discerning the use of the many and the few is victory.
Superior and inferior desiring the same is victory.
Using preparation to await the unprepared is victory.
The general being capable and the ruler not interfering is victory.

These five are a way (*dao*) of knowing victory.

Thus it is said --

Knowing the other and knowing oneself,
In one hundred battles no danger.
Not knowing the other and knowing oneself,

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One victory for one defeat.
Not knowing the other and not knowing oneself,
In every battle certain danger.

In the past the skillful first made themselves invincible to await the enemy's vincibility. Invincibility lies in oneself. Vincibility lies in the enemy. Thus the skilled can make themselves invincible. They cannot cause the enemy's vincibility. Thus it is said, "Victory can be known but cannot be made." Invincibility is defense. Vincibility is attack. Defend and one has a surplus. Attack and one is insufficient. One skilled at defense hides below the nine earths and moves above the nine heavens. Thus one can preserve oneself and be all-victorious.

In seeing victory, not going beyond what everyone knows is not skilled. Victory in battle that all-under-Heaven calls skilled is not skilled. Thus lifting the down of an autumn leaf does not make great strength. Seeing the sun and the moon does not make a clear eye. Hearing thunder does not make a keen ear. What is meant by skilled is to be victorious over the easily defeated. Thus the battles of the skilled are without extraordinary victory, without reputation for wisdom, and without merit for courage. Thus one's victories are without error. Being without error, what one arranges is necessarily victorious, since one is victorious over the already defeated. One skilled at battle takes a stand in the ground of no-defeat and so does not lose the enemy's defeat. Therefore, the victorious military is first victorious and after that does battle. The defeated military first does battle and after that seeks victory.