Sun Tzu Ping Fa and its Relevance to Contemporary Management: An Introduction

by

Yao-Su Hu and Pierre Berthon

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Tel +44 (0)1491 571454 Fax +44 (0)1491 571635

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Henley Management College
Greenlands
Henley on Thames
Oxon RG93AU
England

Tel: +44 (0)1491 571454
Fax: +44 (0)1491 571635
http://www.henleymc.ac.uk

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Yao-Su Hu and Pierre Berthon

Henley Management College

Greenlands

Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

RG9 3AU

United Kingdom

(01491) 571 454

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Abstract

The Chinese general Sun Tzu stands as a leviathan in the annals of military thought. However, what is possibly less well recognised by Western managers is that the ideas contained within the treatise *Sun Tzu Ping Fa* have and continue to shape business thinking in the East to a profound degree. In this article we discuss the problems of authorship of the treatise and provide an overview of Sun Tzu's philosophy. The philosophy is then related to Western military thinking and parallels are drawn with contemporary perspectives on strategic management. Finally, the problems of interpreting and applying ancient texts to contemporary management are discussed.

Overview

The focus of this short article is on the book entitled *Sun Tzu Ping Fa*, often translated as Sun Tzu's Art of War, rather than on Sun Tzu, partly because the authorship of the book is an unsettled question and partly because it is the aphorisms contained in the book that have influenced generations of Chinese, Japanese and other East Asians. Predating Carl von Clausewitz's On War by some twenty two centuries *Sun Tzu Ping Fa* is the oldest extant systematic military treatise in the world, yet some of its fundamental ideas have been described as ageless by the great twentieth century military strategist, Captain B.H. Liddell Hart. Overall the *Sun Tzu Ping Fa* demonstrates the Chinese emphasis on the concrete and specific, the eschewal of the abstract and absolute, awareness of complex multiplicity and inter-relationships, and the esteem for both hierarchy and nature (e.g. Nakamura, 1964/1993). However, many of the principles expounded in the text are considered to have applicability outside the purely military spheres, and in particular in diplomacy, inter-personal relations and business strategy.

Introduction

Sun Tzu Ping Fa is of much more than historical interest. Many of its principles (such as the need to know oneself and to know the other side) have, over the centuries, become part of the intellectual makeup of generations of Chinese, Japanese and other East Asians, both soldiers and civilians. The book was probably introduced to Japan by the middle of the eighth century (Griffith 1963) and its influence can be seen, for example, by the fact that the slogans on the battle banners

of Takeda Shingen (a famous general of the sixteenth century): 'Swift as the wind, Calmly majestic as the forest, Plundering like fire, Immovable as the mountains', are identical, word for word, to part of a paragraph in Chapter 7 ('Manoeuvre') of Sun Tzu. When discussing business or personal strategy with intimate friends, East Asians will often refer to Sun Tzu's aphorisms. While Miyamoto Musashi's Book of Five Rings (written around 1645 and itself influenced by Sun Tzu) has become recommended reading for MBA students at leading business schools in the USA, Chinese language books on the application of Sun Tzu to business and management are among the best selling titles in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and mainland China.

Authorship

'Sun' is a family name and 'Tzu' is an ancient title of respect for a learned or virtuous man; Sun Tzu simply means venerable Mr. Sun and leaves open the question of Sun Tzu's identity. The primary meaning of 'ping ' is soldier or weapons, and 'fa' means method. Thus a literal translation of the title would be 'The Military Method of Venerable Mr. Sun". The use of the expression 'Art of War' probably owes much to Niccolo Machiavelli (who wrote The Art of War in 1520) and Clausewitz (who refers to the art of war in preference to the science of war).

The authorship of *Sun Tzu Ping Fa* has been a controversial question since at least the Sung Dynasty (960 to 1126 A.D., when the Seven Military Classics were codified) and remains unsettled to this day. According to the traditional view,

based on the Shih Chi (Historical Records, completed shortly after 100 B.C.) by the grand historian, Szuma Chien, Sun Tzu was Sun Wu who gained an audience with King Ho-lü of Wu on the strength of his book , who had the two leading concubines decapitated to demonstrate the principles of military discipline, and who went on to an illustrious career as a general. According to this account the thirteen chapters of the book would have been composed about 500 B.C., during the Spring and Autumn period. However, if the book was written by one single author, there are a number of serious anachronisms (Griffith, 1963) which strongly suggest that the book must have been written later, during the Warring States period, possibly between 400 and 320 B.C. These anachronisms include the emergence of the professional general, the use of the cross bow and the deployment of armoured troops.

It is also possible that the text was written by different people at different times. Szuma Chien's chapter dealing with Sun Wu is entitled 'The biographies of Sun Tzu and Wu Chi' and covers the life stories of three personalities: Sun Wu, Sun Pin (who was a descendant of Sun Wu and who lived more than a hundred years later) and Wu Chi. All three were brilliant generals and wrote military treatises. Furthermore the text that has come down to this day is referred to as '*Sun Tzu Ping Fa* as Commentated by the Eleven Authorities' ; the commentaries , consisting of explanations, further elaborations and examples drawn from later periods, follow each sentence or paragraph and exceed in length the original text. The prime commentator was Ts'ao Ts'ao (155-220 A.D.), famous prime minister and general during the period of the Three Kingdoms, and it appears (Griffith, 1963) that he not only commented on the text, but edited it to prune away redundancies. It is this text which has been preserved together with the

commentaries, and the influence of the book derives from both the text and the commentaries.

The Philosophy

Sun Tzu urged moderation and caution in relation to war. 'A sovereign should not start a war out of anger, nor should a general give battle out of rage. For while anger can revert to happiness and rage to delight, a nation that has been destroyed cannot be restored, nor can the dead be brought back to life.' (Chapter 12; all translations in this article are by the authors.). Indeed, the aim of war is not necessarily the destruction of the enemy's forces (as it is in Clausewitz's system). 'In war it is better to take a nation whole rather than broken, an army whole rather than broken .... For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy's forces without fighting is the summit of skill. The best approach is to attack the other side's strategy; next best is to attack his alliances; next best is to attack his soldiers; the worst is to attack cities.' (Chapter 3) Although preparations for war may take a long time, once war breaks out speed is of the essence. 'What is precious in war is victory, not prolonged operations .... Thus while one hears of blundering swiftness in war, one never sees skilfulness that is prolonged. For there never has been a case of prolonged war from which the nation profits.' (Chapter 2).

Strategy in the delimited sense of stratagems, ploys and deception are an integral part of war. 'War is based on the method of deception. Therefore when strong feign weakness, when using something appear not to use it, when near

appear far away, when far away appear near .' (Chapter 1) The principle of deception is intimately linked to that of surprise. 'Attack where and when he is unprepared, sally out where and when it is not expected.' (Chapter 1) This leads to another key principle, that of flexibility or adaptability. 'For the shape of an army is like that of water. The shape of water is to avoid heights and flow towards low places, the shape of the army is to avoid strength and to strike at weakness. Water flows in accordance with the ground, an army achieves victory in accordance with the enemy. Therefore the army has no constant shape just as water has no permanent form, it is an act of genius to achieve victory in accordance with changes in the enemy.' (Chapter 6).

These concepts should not detract from the importance of the positional aspects of strategy. 'In the old days the skilful generals first made themselves invincible and then waited for the enemy to become vulnerable. Invincibility depends on one's self, the possibility of victory depends on the enemy ...Therefore the skilful general stands on undefeatable ground and does not miss an opportunity to defeat his enemy.' (Chapter 4). Advantage in the battlefield does not depend on absolute numbers but on where, when and how one gives battle. To create a situation which assures victory is the ultimate responsibility of generalship. 'Generally the army that occupies the field of battle first and awaits the enemy is at ease; the side that arrives later to the battlefield and rushes into the fight is exhausted. Therefore the skilful warrior drives the other side and is not driven by him.' (Chapter 6) 'If I can ascertain my enemy's shape while I have no shape (that is known to him), then I can concentrate my forces while he must divide his ....thus I can outnumber him by ten to one...' (Chapter 6).

This puts a premium on intelligence. Sun Tzu is shockingly forthright on the use of spies. It is a duty to use spies. 'When an army of one hundred thousand goes on an expedition of a thousand miles, the cost to the people and to the public come to a thousand pieces of gold per day. There is internal and external commotion, exhaustion on the road, and seven hundred thousand families cannot pursue business as usual. Armies confront each other for years to fight for victory on a single day. If , out of miserliness for ranks, emoluments and a hundred pieces of gold, one does not know the enemy's conditions, this is the ultimate in unkindness. Such a man is not fit to be a general, a support to his king, a master of victory .... Advance knowledge cannot be gained from ghosts and spirits ... but must be obtained from people who know the enemy situation .....' (Chapter 13).

One must also know the climate and, above all, the terrain. Much of Chapters 8 (The Nine Variations), 9 (Marches), 10 (Terrain) and 11 (The Nine Types of Ground) are devoted to discussions of ground and terrain.

Evaluation

To understand the tree, know the roots. The tap root of management strategy is war: its practice and theory. Indeed the English word strategy originates from the Greek words *stratos* (army) and *agein* (to lead), combined in the word *strategos* meaning generalship. Strategy has become an unconscious and thus frozen metaphor; a word which has become so familiar or habitual that it is treated as a literal term and our awareness of its metaphorical nature is lost. The meanings

of unconscious metaphors tend to be discontinuously shifted rather than continuously developed. The reading of Sun Tzu and other classics can provide a way to breath life into ossified metaphors - they can remind us of the essentially metaphoric (and hence open) nature of many of the concepts which guide business thinking.

In approaching Sun Tzu's work and its relevance for contemporary management, it is useful and illuminating to contrast his work with that of the Prussian general von Clausewitz. The two generals' philosophies have quite different emphases. Von Clausewitz stressed the logical ideal, the abstract and absolute. The metaphor underpinning his work might be that of the machine - planned, built and then put into inexorable, pre-determined motion. His writings reflect the modernist enlightenment philosophies of mechanism, cause and effect, and the clear separation of thought and action. In contrast the *Sun Tzu Ping Fa* stresses the pragmatic, the contextual and the emergent. A key metaphor underpinning his work is that of water, therein resonating with the wider Chinese philosophy of Taoism.

These contrasting approaches are reflected in contemporary strategic management. The 'design school' of strategy (Andrews, 1971; Mintzberg, 1990) stresses rational conscious planning, explicitness and clarity, and the clear separation of formulation and implementation. Internal strengths and weaknesses, external opportunities and threats are assessed, a strategy (with its sub-components of goals and action plans) is formulated and then implemented. This approach echoes Clausewitz's philosophy and indeed the wider modernist axioms. In contrast the more recent 'process school' of strategy (e.g. Quinn, Mintzberg and

James, 1988) - part antithesis, part extension of the 'design school' - with its stress on process, learning, adaptability and contextuality, is closer in spirit to Sun Tzu.

However, attempts to pigeon hole Sun Tzu or Clausewitz are in many ways misleading. The much employed dichotomy between West and East is ephemeral. For example early Greek strategists such as Pericles have much in common with Sun Tzu, stressing the paradoxical nature of strategy and the need for the great strategist to combine nominally antithetical attributes. Moreover, Clausewitz explicitly cautioned about the inadequacy of prescriptive systems, stressing that theory cannot tell a person how to act but may help in developing judgement. The writings of both authors prefigured the shift in emphasis from 'planning' to 'thinking' that is occurring in strategic management today.

Three dangers are inherent in contemporary readings of ancient texts such as the *Sun Tzu Ping Fa*. First, there is the danger of projection. Ancient texts can take on the role of a Rorschach blot, with people finding meaning in the text which corresponds to strongly held views or ideas. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that Sun Tzu has been interpreted from a number of different perspectives and used to support disparate schools of strategic thought (e.g. Chen, 1994; Tung, 1994; Wee, Lee and Hidajat, 1991). Second, there is the issue of literalisation. It is interesting to note that in the East business is closely equated with war, a notion summarised in the saying "the market place is a battle field". The war metaphor is taken quite literally by many business people. Metaphors are more than simple analogies - they become ways of seeing and acting - they are enacted. Thus one must ask: is war an appropriate metaphor for strategic management in contemporary society? Any answer must be equivocal. Possibly, as intimated above, one primary

problem lies in the fact that we are not consciously aware of the metaphorical nature of the language often used to talk about business and strategy. Finally, there is the question of transferability. It is not difficult to collect cases and stories about business and management, to arrange them under headings borrowed from Sun Tzu and to call this the application of Sun Tzu to modern management. There are two problems with this 'application'. First is the question of the transferability or otherwise of concepts and principles to a different sphere (from war to management), to a different era and to different nations and cultures. Secondly, creative application requires the development of a new theoretical foundation on the basis of the old (just as Mao Tse-Tung articulated the theory of guerrilla warfare which contains many concepts from Sun Tzu but nevertheless offers new perspectives and insights appropriate to the conditions of the time and place.).

Conclusions and the Future

It is sometimes tempting to dismiss Sun Tzu as little more that 'common-sense' aphorisms. However, Liddell Hart wrote: ' ...in that one short book was embodied almost as much about the fundamentals of strategy and tactics as I had covered in more than twenty books.' (Foreword in Griffith, 1963). Yet as alluded to above the paths to wisdom are not smooth. Reification (simplistic codification or literalisation) of an ancient text is seductive but sterile. It diminishes the past and impoverishes the present: the form is preserved but the essence lost. Essence cannot be reduced to mere theories or frameworks, but can only be approached through insight and inspiration. A careful study of texts such as *Sun Tzu Ping Fa* might pay

dividends in providing the inspiration for the revisioning of contemporary strategic praxis.

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