

ON READING SUN-TZU: THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF APPROPRIATING A CHINESE CLASSIC IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS ETHICS

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It was one of those defining moments in the history of modern American business—or at least Hollywood’s version of it. Gordon Gekko, the fictional character in *Wall Street (1987)*, whose legendary success as a corporate raider was based on illegal insider trading, is mentoring his fresh recruit, Bud Fox, after a fierce game of handball in which Gekko has beaten Bud badly. “The most valuable commodity I know of is information. Wouldn’t you agree?” Buddy Boy has just informed Gekko of the loss he’s made trading on Gekko’s initial investment with him. Gekko’s anger prompts a lecture in which Bud is further instructed in Gekko’s way of doing business:

“I don’t throw darts at a board. I bet on sure things. Read Sun-tzu, *The Art of War*. Every battle is won before it is fought. Think about it. You’re not as smart as I thought you were, Buddy Boy. Wonder why fund managers can’t beat the S&P 500? Because they’re sheep and sheep get slaughtered....

Give me guys who are poor, smart, and hungry, with no feelings. You win a few and you lose a few, but you keep on fighting. And if you need a friend, get a dog. It’s trench warfare out there, pal....”

Later on in the movie, Bud puts together some information that enables Gekko to thwart his British rival, Sir Larry Wildman, in a greenmail operation worth millions. After helping Gekko finish off Wildman, Bud paraphrases the famous passage toward the end of the first chapter in *The Art of War*: “All warfare is based on deception...If your enemy is superior, evade him. If angry, irritate him. If equally matched, fight, and if not split and reevaluate.” A beaming Gekko gives his star pupil a friendly pat on the back, “Buddy Boy is learning....”

What Bud Fox appears to have learned from *The Art of War* is both more and less than what Sun-tzu’s classic actually teaches. As Robert Cantrell—a management consultant actively promoting Sun-tzu among American business people—observes, Gekko’s recommendation, coupled with a similar endorsement from Tony Soprano, virtually created the market for popular interpretations of *The Art of War*, particularly with reference to business strategy (Cantrell, n.d.). The purpose of this essay is to challenge the assumptions informing many of these interpretations. *The Art of War*, after all, is a classic of ancient Chinese literature, specifically focused on the conduct of military affairs. It was intended for the education of army generals and the kings or other civilian leaders who employed them. There is nothing in the text or the major commentaries that warrant its general application to human affairs, or particularly, its application to business management. Is it therefore strictly irrelevant to the project of constructing a model of “wise management” informed by such classics? No, but this classic—like all other ancient wisdom literature—must be handled

carefully. As I will argue in what follows, the metaphorical extension of warfare to cover all forms of competition, especially market competition, may not be as obvious as Gekko and his many disciples seem to assume.

Let us proceed, then, in this way. First, let me present an overview of *The Art of War*, with particular attention to what it says and doesn't say about warfare as such. The point will be to establish warfare as a deliberate suspension of the conventional expectations informing civil interaction or reciprocity. In Sun-tzu's perspective, under what circumstances is engaging in warfare morally legitimate, and how best is it conducted? Does Sun-tzu regard warfare as the normal human condition, and thus consider his own rules of engagement as generally applicable to all human interactions, or is warfare an exception, the extreme circumstance in which life or death hang in the balance? Second, let us test this overview by focusing specifically on Sun-tzu's remarks on the role of deception and the practice of espionage in the conduct of warfare. Does Sun-tzu recognize any moral limits to the practice of deception in warfare? Is there a moral difference between deception and lying? Should there be? Third, in the books promoting *The Art of War* as the best guide to strategic management, how is the analogy between warfare and market competition constructed? In order to approach this question usefully, I will investigate three different books, each representing a different way of adapting *The Art of War* to modern business practice. While each involves a different interpretive strategy, all seek to demonstrate the direct relevance of Sun-tzu's teachings to business, with varying degrees of effectiveness.

The thirteen chapters of *The Art of War* commonly attributed to Sun-tzu himself, begin with this sobering lesson: "War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied." (Sun Tzu, 1971) War is not a game, nor is it blood sports organized on a grand scale. Those involved in it during China's Warring States period (475-221 BCE), when Sun-tzu's work was composed, understood it as a struggle in which the very survival of the State was at risk. Social disorder was the rule, rather than the exception; and *The Art of War* was meant to instruct military officers in how to put a swift end to it.¹ The carnage, though apparently necessary, could be minimized, if the generals and the armies they led were to learn how to achieve their goal intelligently. While *The Art of War* is focused on State security, it emphasizes that protracted warfare is likely to be costly and counterproductive. This is the context in which the maxim prized by Gordon Gekko is given: "Every battle is won before it is fought."² Gekko is not wrong to recognize that information—or what Sun-tzu described as "foreknowledge"—is the key to success. Nor is Bud Fox off the mark in what he has picked up from Sun-tzu, "All warfare is based on deception...If your enemy is superior, evade him. If angry, irritate him. If equally matched, fight, and if not split and reevaluate."³ What should be clear from this series of maxims is that warfare is asymmetrical, and victory in warfare results from painstaking preparation for asymmetrical engagement. The successful commander is not so much ruthless as he is wise in the ways that such asymmetries can be managed to create overwhelming advantages for his army.

Victory in warfare, however, depends on cultivating a wisdom that goes well beyond managing access to information. The commander's moral character is one of the five "fundamental factors" involved in achieving success: "By command I mean the commander's qualities of wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, and strictness."⁴ The commander's wisdom thus cannot be confined to the kind of cunning that Gekko recommends to Bud Fox. The wise commander cannot be successful without being virtuous, morally as well as intellectually. This is why "moral influence" ("dao", 道)—or in Giles' translation, "Moral Law"—is the

first of the five factors to be assessed in determining success in warfare. Sun-tzu explains its importance: “By moral influence I mean that which causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders, so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear of mortal peril” (Sun Tzu, 1971). The wise commander’s credibility in following the *Dao* secures the loyalty of his troops, just as the ruler’s cultivation of virtue secures the loyalty of his subjects.

Sun-tzu’s specific remarks on the role of courage may help to illuminate the subtleties involved in cultivating the virtues specific to a wise commander. While courage is a prerequisite if the commander is to be sufficiently self-disciplined to understand the specific circumstances that the army must face, courage is not the primary object in training the troops. They need not be “*junzi*” to be victorious, so long as their commander is virtuous.⁵ As Sun-tzu teaches in chapter five on “Energy” (“*shih*”), “order or disorder depends on organization; courage or cowardice on circumstances; strength or weakness on dispositions” (Sun Tzu, 1971). As a later commentator, Li Ch’üan, observed: “Now when troops gain a favourable situation the coward is brave; if it be lost, the brave become cowards” (Sun Tzu, 1971). If the troops’ courage or cowardice is primarily a reflection of circumstances, then the wise commander must focus on managing these “*shih*” so that they work for him and his army and not against them. The energy in question is not some kind of emotional “will to win,” but the natural flow of circumstances whose momentum, once understood and accommodated, will carry the troops to victory. Moving an army to fight, in Sun-tzu’s perspective, is like getting logs to roll down a hillside:

“He who relies on the situation uses his men in fighting as one rolls logs or stones. Now the nature of logs and stones is that on stable ground they are static; on unstable ground, they move. If square, they stop; if round, they roll. Thus, the potential of troops skillfully commanded in battle may be compared to that of round boulders which roll down from mountain heights” (Sun Tzu, 1971).

The wise commander must become well-informed about all the factors involved in getting his troops to move like boulders rolling down a mountainside—first, “moral influence; the second, weather; the third, terrain; the fourth, command; and the fifth, doctrine” (Sun Tzu, 1971)—so that he can turn each of these to the army’s strategic advantage.

The courage that enables troops to fight to the death can only be achieved by removing the obstacles that impede its flow. Conversely, the cowardice that leads to defeat can be suppressed in one’s own troops and instilled in one’s enemies by managing these same flows. For example, Sun-tzu observes, “Do not thwart an enemy returning homewards. To a surrounded enemy you must leave a way of escape” (Sun Tzu, 1971). Conversely, when circumstances warrant, the wise commander will deliberately create a situation where there is no way out:

Throw the troops into a position from which there is no escape and even when faced with death they will not flee. For if prepared to die, what can they not achieve? Then officers and men together put forth their utmost efforts. In a desperate situation they fear nothing; when there is no way out they stand firm (Sun Tzu, 1971).

Just as rolling logs and tumbling boulders can be moved or deflected by wisely channeling the “*shih*” inherent in a given terrain, so troops can be rendered courageous or cowardly by the ways their commanders deploy them for battle.

The wise commander’s skillful management of the “*shih*,” however, requires a complete mastery of the art of “deception”—as Bud Fox eagerly informed his mentor. But what does Sun-tzu mean by “deception”? Obviously, there’s more to it than bold-faced lying. More like bluffing, successful deception describes an interaction between a deceiver and the one deceived. Deception occurs when the deceiver creates an illusion that is accepted as real by the one who is deceived. Unlike lying whose meaning narrowly hangs on the liar’s intent, deception is inherently relational. Deception does not occur unless someone is deceived. The centrality of deception in Sun-tzu’s teaching is a reflection of the commander’s need to manage his “*shih*” successfully. In order to render these advantageous for his army, he must keep the enemy continually off balance. He must hide his strengths and weaknesses, so that when they are deployed they come as a surprise to the enemy, like logs and boulders carried along in a flash flood.

By the same token, the wise commander also knows that the enemy is also likely to be practicing deception. The only way to maintain whatever advantages the “*shih*” in a given situation offer him is to gather “foreknowledge” by whatever means necessary—which requires engaging in espionage whenever possible. As Sun-tzu insists, “What is called ‘foreknowledge’ cannot be elicited from spirits, nor from gods, nor by analogy with past events, nor from calculations. It must be obtained from men who know the enemy situation” (Sun Tzu, 1971). The need for “foreknowledge” prompts Sun-tzu to devote the final chapter of *The Art of War* to a systematic exposition on the various types of spies, differentiated according to their function, with detailed advice on how to recruit them and retain their services. Indeed so crucial are spies to the commander’s prospects for victory that, in Sun-tzu’s view, the failure to use them marks the height of irresponsibility in a commander:

One who confronts his enemy for many years in order to struggle for victory in a decisive battle yet who, because he begrudges rank, honours and a few hundred pieces of gold, remains ignorant of his enemy’s situation, is completely devoid of humanity. Such a man is no general; no support to his sovereign; no master of victory (Sun Tzu, 1971).

Though recruiting and rewarding spies may be costly, costlier still is the carnage that will result if they are not used to gather useful information and render it as “foreknowledge.” However effective one’s own attempts at deception, failure to decipher those that the enemy is crafting will result in disaster. The wise commander understands that developing adequate “foreknowledge” means doing whatever is necessary to see through the deceptions of others.

The conduct of war thus requires engaging in practices that may be inappropriate for ruling the State, and vice-versa. The systematic deployment of spies is just one example of a practice that, while indispensable for the success of a wise commander, may be counter-productive or otherwise questionable when used by a ruler to manage civil relations with his subjects. Indeed, one major factor for determining success or failure in Sun-tzu’s estimation is confusion over the roles of ruler and commander. Protecting the State is different from presiding over it. In chapter three, on “Offensive Strategy,” Sun-tzu gives an extended argument for

distinguishing the commander's role from that of the ruler. While the ruler appoints the commander who remains ultimately accountable to him, the ruler should not interfere as the commander exercises his proper role in organizing and managing the army. As Sun-tzu observes, "there are three ways in which a ruler can bring misfortune upon his army." While all three cast light on the ways in which a ruler can sow confusion in the army, it is the second that raises questions about the virtues and dispositions specific to either the ruler or the commander.

At first, Sun-tzu's observation appears to be merely a warning against meddling rulers: "When ignorant of military affairs, to participate in their administration. This causes the officers to be perplexed" (Sun Tzu, 1971). Nevertheless, later commentators have suggested a deeper analysis of the problem:

Ts'ao Ts'ao:..."An army cannot be run according to rules of etiquette." Tu Mu: "As far as propriety, laws, and decrees are concerned, the army has its own code, which it ordinarily follows. If these are made identical with those used in governing a state the officers will be bewildered." Chang Yü: "Benevolence and righteousness may be used to govern a state but cannot be used to administer an army. Expediency and flexibility are used in administering an army, but cannot be used in governing a state" (Sun Tzu, 1971).

The invocation of "rules of etiquette," "propriety" and the qualities of "benevolence and righteousness" ought to alert us to the fact that expectations diverge regarding the ideal ruler and a wise commander. In chapter nine on "The Nine Variables" Sun-tzu goes still further: "there are occasions when the commands of the sovereign need not be obeyed" (Sun Tzu, 1971). The circumstances listed suggest that the commander in the field is in a better position to know how to manage the nine variables than is the ruler left behind in the capital. Nevertheless, one commentator adds a chilling description of the wise commander that highlights the conflict of values underlying these differences:

"[According to] Tu Mu: The Wei Liao Tzu says: 'Weapons are inauspicious instruments; strife contrary to virtue; the general, the Minister of Death, who is not responsible to the heavens above, to the earth beneath, to the enemy in his front, or to the sovereign in his rear' (Sun Tzu, 1971)."

Though the commander remains the ruler's minister, empowered to act on behalf of the head of State, he is as such "the Minister of Death." Unlike the ruler who is "responsible to the heavens above, to the earth beneath," the commander must possess a specific capacity for dealing Death to the enemies of the State, which he is appointed to protect. Tu Mu's reference to the heavens and earth resonates with Confucian traditions regarding the accountability of an ideal ruler. The virtues central to the ruler's relationship with his subjects, "benevolence and righteousness," may be counterproductive in the commander's management of specifically military affairs.⁶ But if there are limits to the ruler's competence, conversely there are limits to the commander's as well. Acknowledging such limits, arguably, is important for determining the relevance of Sun-tzu's teaching for business managers. Just how comfortable would even Gordon Gekko be in the role of "Minister of Death"?

In seeking to understand the Sun-tzu's relevance for business today, we should recall the rather skeptical view of business, evident in the wisdom that eventually was codified in Confucian tradition (McCann & Chun, 2003). Given that skepticism, it would not have occurred to Sun-tzu to equate commerce and warfare, or merchants and army commanders. Those who made their living by commerce—buying and selling in the marketplace—were generally held in low esteem. Since the activity of merchants was entirely focused on maximizing profits or accumulating advantages in the form of wealth, there was little expectation that merchants could cultivate the virtues characteristic of a “*junzi*.” Though Confucius did not go so far as to condemn moneymaking as such, he not only indicated his personal indifference to it, but also recognized a moral distinction between wealth obtained in ways consistent with the “*Dao*” and other ways that fell below the threshold of “benevolence and righteousness.” Throughout the history of China merchants were heavily regulated by the State, not simply in order to enrich the State and fund its activities, but also in order to make sure that what went on in the marketplace realized a common good for the whole of society.

As keen and cutthroat as competition among businesses may sometimes be, it is absurd to compare it to warfare, as Sun-tzu understood it. While both merchants and army commanders are zealously focused on realizing the advantages—that is, profits in the marketplace and victories on the battlefield—in the sets of “*shih*” that they manage, in the one contest is, literally, a struggle for survival, a matter of life and death, whereas in the other, at best the “life and death” struggle is metaphorical. Even in a bankruptcy or a business failure, no one gets killed—at least not in a modernized marketplace. Given the life and death character of warfare, it is not surprising that Sun-tzu characterizes the challenge of managing the asymmetrical “*shih*” in unmistakably “zero-sum” terms. In warfare, there is only victory and defeat. If one side wins, the other must lose. Commercial exchanges, by contrast, are typically described in “positive-sum” terms. Both buyer and seller expect to win, and when they do, at least in theory, there are no losers. One gives up something in order to get something else, and both are better off for having made the deal.

The “win-win” nature of typical business transactions in a modern marketplace should be sufficient to indicate the burden of proof involved in proposing *The Art of War* as a general introduction to business strategy. Indeed, the very legitimacy of business depends upon the demonstrably “win-win” character of the vast majority of commercial transactions. The marketplace is not a battlefield, but a civil forum, legally regulated by the State, established to promote the orderly conduct of economic exchanges. Business affairs are subject, at least in theory, to the rule of law. When for whatever reason business deals fail, disputes about them are settled through the courts, institutions designed to insure that “benevolence and righteousness” normally prevail. Warfare, by contrast, is a last resort—as Sun-tzu himself clearly teaches. It occurs in situations that are beyond the reach of the rule of law. Its necessity is specific to situations of social disorder, characterized by a rising violence that threatens the very existence of the State and its capacity for protecting the common good emergent in a civil society.

Strategies and tactics that, arguably, are not only appropriate but even mandatory in warfare, may be judged as inappropriate and forbidden in commerce. Given the specific purpose of commerce and the basic assumptions involved in legitimating the marketplace, any direct application to business of strategies and tactics tested in the crucible of warfare may seem like predatory behavior. A predator is one who plays the game according to his own set of rules, or no rules at all. For a modern CEO to fancy himself an army commander of the Warring States period is to harbor a self-serving illusion that eventually leads, not to moral clarity but to deep confusion. Acting out this fantasy predictably results in irresponsible and

counterproductive actions that will destroy not only the company he works for but also his own career. It is useful to remember that Gekko went to jail for twelve years, once the scale and scope of his predatory business practices were exposed.

Such arguments contesting the wisdom of applying *The Art of Warfare's* strategies and tactics directly to business have largely been ignored, at least in the business cultures that still admire the likes of Gordon Gekko and his many disciples. Since the release of Oliver Stone's movie, *Wall Street* (1987), there has been an explosion of business literature promoting Sun-tzu's *The Art of War* as the key to success in business. In this concluding section I will attend to three such books, that represent three different ways of arguing Sun-tzu's relevance: First, *Strategy Power Plays: Winning Business Ideas from the World's Greatest Strategic Minds* (Phillips & McCreadie, 2009); second, *The Art of War for Managers: 50 Strategic Rules* (Michaelson, 2009); and *Sun-tzu and the Art of Business: Six Strategic Principles for Managers* (McNeilly, 2011).

Phillips and McCreadie's *Strategy Power Plays* targets those busy, very busy business people who are hungry for ideas that can help them fulfill their ambitions, but who don't have the time to appreciate the nuances. What they have on offer is a sampler composed of exactly one hundred pithy sayings, culled from Sun-tzu, as well as Niccolo Machiavelli's classic of the Italian Renaissance, *The Prince* (1532), and Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* (1859), a Victorian best-seller that served in its day as a primer for becoming a self-made man. Phillips and McCreadie simply assume the relevance to business of the axioms they've derived from these sources, and provide little if any access to the diverging contexts from which they emerged. Significantly, Machiavelli is invoked more times than the other two authors combined; nevertheless, all three are subject to a fundamentalist mode of interpretation, in which it is assumed that the meaning of these texts in translation is self-evident. Read in the shadow of an arguably misunderstood Machiavelli, Sun-tzu becomes an early apologist for ruthlessness in business. What better way could there be to bankrupt the construction of a model of wise management based on the wisdom literature of the ancient past?

Instead of a hundred provocative ideas, Michaelson offers a mere fifty "strategic rules," derived exclusively from Sun-tzu. He also provides readers with a copy of Lionel Giles' first modern English translation of *The Art of War* (1910), so that they can begin to explore its meanings on their own. Michaelson's approach to Sun-tzu is clearly superior to that of Phillips and McCreadie, because he does make an effort to derive his "strategic rules" from the specifics of each of the thirteen chapters of *The Art of War*. The main ideas of each Sun-tzu's chapters are given first, followed by a number of stories from the business world of the past 25 years, that seemingly confirm the strategic lesson that Michaelson discovers in Sun-tzu. Sun-tzu is proposed as a guide to Western business managers because, in his travels to China and Japan, Michaelson has discovered that Chinese and Japanese business people, not to mention their military officers, are trained using *The Art of War*. Because the competition, allegedly, is doing it, Westerners should be doing it too. Beyond that, Michaelson appeals to the "timelessness" and "simplicity" of Sun-tzu's "principles." Business people can appropriate them because they are readily decontextualized from the situation in which they were first formulated:

"The Art of War is a classic not only of strategy but also of simplicity. There was nothing very complex about warfare in Sun Tzu's time. It involved land battles of large bodies of troops armed with personal weapons. And the very simplicity of The Art of War makes Sun Tzu's lessons readily transferable to

business strategy.... The fundamental principles of strategy are the same for all managers, all times, and all situations. Only the tactics change — and tactics are modified to the times” (Michaelson, 2009)

Skepticism may be the most appropriate response to Michaelson’s hermeneutic naivete. The analysis that I’ve offered, however preliminary, sketches just the tip of the iceberg lurking in failure to appreciate Sun-tzu’s worldview.⁷ The naïve assertion of a “timeless” universality to Sun-tzu’s strategic “principles” makes it all-too-easy to breeze past the problems involved in applying *The Art of Warfare* to business management.

Principles formulated at such a level of generality beg the question of whether business affairs are sufficiently like warfare to warrant the application of lessons learned in the one field to carry over to the other. One obvious example is the way in which Michaelson handles Sun-tzu’s final chapter on “The Employment of Secret Agents.” Where Sun-tzu is clear in recommending espionage conducted by any means necessary, Michaelson skirts the issue of the legality (as well as morality) of trading on inside information by focusing his remarks on market research. His closest approach to the problem created by applying Sun-tzu’s methods of espionage in business is this: “Only a gambler with inside information can rationally bet his or her whole stake on a single race. Good marketing research management puts you in the business of managing risks instead of taking risks” (Michaelson, 2009). To be sure, Michaelson’s rightly emphasizes the importance of “good marketing research.” But where would he draw the line on efficient “data collection” and the development of “accurate intelligence”? Has he never heard of Gekko, and his all-too-numerous imitators on Wall Street?

Finally, there is Mark R. McNeilly’s *Sun-tzu and the Art of Business* (2011). McNeilly, at least, has attempted to synthesize the wisdom to be gained from Sun-tzu into just six strategic principles for management. All six are well grounded in *The Art of Warfare*, and all six give evidence of genuine insight, not only into Sun-tzu’s teaching but also into the promise and perils of guiding one’s business by it. The problem created by Sun-tzu’s wholehearted endorsement of espionage, for example, is faced squarely by McNeilly (2011) in his discussion of the third principle, “Deception and Foreknowledge Maximizing the Power of Market Information”, McNeilly begins by translating Sun-tzu’s “foreknowledge” into terms appropriate to competitive markets. He asserts that just as defeating one’s competition does not require assassinating their executives, so “you do not need to resort to corporate espionage.” He confronts spying for commercial purposes, and clearly states the reasons why it is both immoral and illegal, as stipulated in “The Society of Competitive Professionals Code of Ethics” (McNeilly, 2011).

But being clear about the moral and legal prohibitions against corporate espionage does not render Sun-tzu’s teachings irrelevant to business. McNeilly goes on to show the necessity for good intelligence work in business, and the lessons to be learned from strategic failures and successes in this area. For example, he analyzes perceptively both the USA’s intelligence failure regarding the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and Sir Gordon White’s success at Hanson PLC in managing its 1986 acquisition of Smith Corona and its subsequent restructuring. In both cases, there are lessons to be learned, consistent with Sun-tzu’s wisdom, on how to develop “foreknowledge” without violating the moral and legal limits on corporate espionage. McNeilly shows how it is possible to follow Sun-tzu without going the way of Gordon Gekko and his imitators.

What then is the relevance of Sun-tzu's *The Art of War* to constructing a reasonable and relevant model of "wise management"? The preceding points suggest that, like other ancient classics that have been regarded as sacred sources of wisdom, *The Art of War* should be taken seriously but not literally. Applying its teachings to the conduct of today's business affairs requires, first of all, reading it with historical understanding. Its literal meaning must be re-contextualized in the specific exigencies of warfare—as understood by Sun-tzu—before it can be decontextualized through a process of metaphorical extension. If modern business sometimes seems like warfare, we must, if we are to be truly wise, also reckon with the ways in which it is unlike warfare, just as Sun-tzu recognized the difference between an ideal ruler and a wise commander. Learning from Sun-tzu's wisdom requires intellectual as well as moral self-discipline. The tendency to ignore the difficulties involved in rendering Sun-tzu relevant to business must be resisted, out of respect for the specific circumstances that inform not only for Sun-tzu's own wisdom, but also for the challenges that managers face in today's global marketplace.

Notes

- ¹ Chapter two of *The Art of War* makes this point clear: "For there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited" (Sun Tzu, 1971). Thus those unable to understand the dangers inherent in employing troops are equally unable to understand the advantageous ways of doing so.
- ² Gekko is actually paraphrasing Sun-tzu, most likely recalling the following from Chapter four, line fourteen: "Thus a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle; an army destined to defeat fights in the hope of winning" (Sun Tzu, 1971).
- ³ Bud, too, is paraphrasing Sun-tzu. Here is the original text as rendered in the Samuel B. Griffiths translation we are following primarily: "All warfare is based on deception. Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity. When near, make it appear that you are far away; when far away, that you are near. Offer the enemy a bait to lure him; feign disorder and strike him. When he concentrates, prepare against him; where he is strong, avoid him. Anger his general and confuse him. Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance. Keep him under a strain and wear him down. When he is united, divide him. Attack where he is unprepared; sally out when he does not expect you. These are the strategist's keys to victory. It is not possible to discuss them beforehand". To be victorious, one's strengths should be matched against weaknesses, and vice-versa. "Asymmetrical warfare," in short, is not an anomaly peculiar to counterinsurgency operations. In Sun-tzu's perspective, it is and ought to be the first rule of success, and not an expedient peculiar to guerilla warfare.
- ⁴ Arguably, the virtues listed for a wise commander are simply a variation on the list of those cultivated by all who aspire to become "*junzi*" or exemplary persons, by following the Confucian way. Confucian moral philosophy typically recognizes five virtues: "*Ren* (仁, Humaneness), *Yi* (義, Righteousness or Justice), *Li* (禮, Propriety or Etiquette), *Zhi* (智, Knowledge), *Xin* (信, Integrity)" (cf. "Confucianism". Retrieved on March 13, 2012, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucianism>). The commander's virtues of that Sun-tzu lists--wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, and strictness—differ primarily in emphasis, as these are tailored to the specific challenges of organizing an army and leading it to victory. In his 1910 translation of *The Art of War*, Lionel Giles comments on this difference: "Here 'wisdom' and 'sincerity' are put before 'humanity or benevolence,' and the two military virtues of 'courage' and 'strictness' substituted for 'uprightness of mind' and 'self-respect, self-control, or proper feeling.'" Sunzi (2009-10-04). *The Art of War* (p. 9). Adams Media.

Kindle Edition.

5. The asymmetry in the relationship between a commander and his troops is analogous to a father's relationship to his children: "Because such a general regards his men as infants they will march with him into the deepest valleys. He treats them as his own beloved sons and they will die with him". By the same token, a father lacking the proper parenting skills will bring disaster not only upon himself but upon the whole family: "If a general indulges his troops but is unable to employ them; if he loves them but cannot enforce his commands; if the troops are disorderly and he is unable to control them, they may be compared to spoiled children, and are useless" (Sun Tzu, 1971). Note that when the troops behave like spoiled children Sun-tzu blames the commander for failing to live up to the virtues specific to his role as commander.

6. The emphasis on "Benevolence" (仁, *Ren*), and "Righteousness" (義, *Yi*) should recall for us Confucianism's list of five basic virtues, characteristic of all "*junzi*" and pre-eminently so, the ideal Confucian ruler or emperor. Sun-tzu's later commentators, to be sure, interpreted *The Art of War* after China had been unified militarily and politically during the long series of imperial dynasties. Thus, we may want to avoid the anachronism of reading back into the original text meanings that were emergent only in later times, in conditions very different from those that obtained during the Warring States period. Nevertheless, the text gives evidence that Sun-tzu assumed the appropriateness of distinguishing civilian and military affairs and the appropriate ways ("*dao*") of conducting them. A ruler may be incompetent in military affairs precisely because of the same virtues that enable him to fulfill his own role as head of State and the embodiment of its civil society. Conversely, a commander whose character might be well suited to the ruler's role, or at least to significant participation in his court, might be regarded as weak and indecisive precisely because his mind and heart conform

7. Two studies have guided my own growing appreciation of the significance of Sun-tzu's worldview, his tacit acceptance of the Yin-Yang correlative cosmology, that he shares with the Yi Jing (The Book of Changes) and Laozi's Daodejing, namely, (1) Sun-Tzu: The Art of Warfare (The First English Translation Incorporating the Yin-Ch'ueh-Shan Texts). Translated, with an Introduction and Commentary, by Roger T. Ames. New York: Ballantine Books, 1993. (2) Francois Jullien, A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004. Ames' commentary shows how and why an "uncommon" understanding of the Yin-Yang correlative cosmology is relevant for interpreting Sun-tzu's seemingly simple assertions. Jullien's treatise resonates well with Ames' philosophical reconstruction of the classical Chinese worldview, and compares Sun-tzu in depth with Clausewitz's treatise On War (1832). Jullien's insightful probing of Chinese and Western ideas on how things get done suggests that Michaelson is incorrigibly wrong about the timeless universality of the basic principles of strategy. Giving these works the attention they deserve, alas, takes us far beyond the scope of this paper.

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