

# Understanding Sun Tzu

on the

# Art of War

**PREFACE AND INTRODUCTION**  
**CHAPTER 1: WINNING WHOLE**  
**CHAPTER 1: ART OF WAR**

The Oldest Military Treatise in the World

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# UNDERSTANDING SUN TZU ON THE ART OF WAR

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# UNDERSTANDING SUN TZU ON THE ART OF WAR

Dedicated to the soldiers

# Preface

2,500 years ago a Chinese warrior and philosopher named Sun Tzu became a grand master of strategy and captured the essence of his philosophies in a book called, by English speaking nations, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*. To this day, military strategists around the world have used Sun Tzu's philosophies to win wars and have made *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* a staple of their military education.

Those seeking to understand strategy in business, law, and life have also turned to *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* for the wisdom therein. For at the heart of Sun Tzu's philosophies are strategies for effective and efficient conflict resolution useful to all who wish to gain advantages over their opposition.

To read *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* is not to immediately understand it, however. Readers often find the text difficult to work with and Sun Tzu's philosophies counterintuitive to their day-to-day reality. This causes a dilemma for those who wish to teach and study Sun Tzu's philosophies. To simplify Sun Tzu's philosophies risks losing the subtlety of thought necessary to master *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*. To keep the subtlety risks losing the most basic insights to the complexity of the text.

Capturing the subtlety of Sun Tzu's philosophies in an understandable form is where *Understanding Sun Tzu on the Art of War* comes in. In this book, the author uses his many years of practical experience with Sun Tzu's

philosophies to clarify them without simplifying them. He does so by examining contemporary battlefields within the context of Sun Tzu's philosophies and by examining Sun Tzu's own Taoist philosophical sources, sources that have been heard in popular Western culture through voices such as Yoda's in the *Star Wars* movies. A lot goes on between the lines in *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, and that gives the book its power.

Author's notes:

1. The second half of this book contains a complete edited version of the original Lionel Giles translation of *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* that Luzac and Co. published in London and Shanghai in 1910. This edited version was designed to make the text clearer for modern readers than the dated original. Giles's translation, regardless, is still considered one of the best English translations available. Those with a more scholarly interest in Sun Tzu may also wish to read a copy of the Lionel Giles translation in its original form for which a number of sources exist both electronically and in hard copy.
2. This book uses masculine pronouns throughout the text. Such references pertain to both genders as applicable to a situation.
3. Any references that involve the commitment of bodily harm are intended to illustrate *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* for its originally intended purpose, war. Such illustrations are meant for use literally only by those government-sanctioned professionals authorized to undertake such activities as Sun Tzu described them, for example, military soldiers in the conduct of their duties. Those in other professions should take such references figuratively.
4. Excerpts from the *Tao Te Ching* are edited versions of a translation written by James Legge and published by Humphrey Milford in London in 1891. This editing is designed to make the text clearer for present day readers than the dated original.

Notes on the cover:

1. The cover art shows a spearhead that was hand forged in the ways characteristic of those used to create weapons throughout Asia and Europe in the pre-industrial ages.
2. The Chinese characters used on the cover appear on the original Lionel Giles publication of *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* from 1910. They translate literally to "Sun Tzu on military ways."

Sun Tzu said:

*The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road to safety or to ruin. Therefore, it is a subject that must be thoroughly studied.*

# Introduction

Picture the rapids of a great river. See its waters rush over and around giant boulders. Close your eyes and listen to its roar. Then feel its relentless power when it crashes over a precipice. Now picture that you remove a cup of water anywhere along this river and sense how that water loses its power and starts to dry up in the sun. Then empty the cup back into the river, and know that as a part of the whole river, that water wears rocks into sand and does not dry up. So a soldier and philosopher observing a river from its banks in this fashion might hypothesize that a great army kept whole can conquer nations and still stay whole, but an army divided or too small will face peril and death. Any review he might make of successful military campaigns in the past and in his present would confirm his hypothesis. Like a river on its journey to the sea, he could therefore conclude that the way of fighting involves fighting as a unified whole, an entire army acting as one, with one objective in mind, and with its own preservation as an army also kept in mind.

This philosopher records his idea in writing on the bamboo strips of his time. Later, readers of his work see that his idea rings true regardless of their profession. A powerful and universal principle comes to light called the principle of winning whole, meaning winning with your resources and your objective intact. It represents the first of six universal principles described by Sun Tzu that, when used together as one, present the most powerful strategic method yet recorded in any profession for winning conflicts.

In this book, you have an invitation to take a journey that will uncover the heart of Sun Tzu's strategic method and how to apply it. This journey could change how you approach the many challenges you will face throughout the rest of your life. You will read about a martial art of the mind, a way to outthink and outfight those who oppose your needs and desires. Ideally, you will also gain an appreciation of the many ways opponents may direct force against you so you can position yourself accordingly to preclude harm.

### THREE STEPS BACK

On this journey, we will take three steps back from the present day to review Sun Tzu's original work and representations of Sun Tzu's own source material. This material includes:

1. The philosophies of *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* as they apply to war.
2. Taoist philosophies, described best by the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu in the *Tao Te Ching*, that form the apparent root of Sun Tzu's own philosophies and a core of traditional Chinese philosophical thought.
3. The Ways of life, drawn from the natural world, that form the apparent root of the Taoist philosophies described by both Lao Tzu and Sun Tzu.

We will use this material to uncover the meaning behind and the practical application of all six Sun Tzu principles that include:

1. Winning Whole - How to succeed with your resources and your objective intact
2. Leading to Advantage - How to prepare and position your soldiers for victory
3. Deception - How to keep your intentions secret from opponents
4. Energy - How to apply force effectively and efficiently
5. Strengths and Weaknesses - How to find the best path to the goal
6. Initiative - How to take and keep the advantage in a conflict

Our journey will conclude by combining these six principles into a powerful and unified philosophy that affords the means to plan, act, and succeed with the effectiveness and efficiency of one of Sun Tzu's own students. In so doing, we will discuss how Sun Tzu's strategic method applies to any profession, with illustrations drawn from business, law, medicine, sports, and personal relations. Enter first, however, into the world of the soldier that Sun Tzu knew.

## THE SOLDIER

The soldier is the army and the army is the soldier. He wins by outthinking and outfighting his opponent with the best tools at his disposal. A thousand years ago, horses and armor, swords, shields, and lances represented the best tools for fighting at anyone's disposal. With them, men clashed in battle, outthought and outfought each other as individuals and as armies, and decided the fates of many great cultures.

Fast forward to the present day and these tools of war have long passed into history, replaced by weapons faster, more precise, and infinitely more destructive. Still, history can surprise us with the resiliency of the old. America's first major battle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century featured high tech Special Forces soldiers riding horses into battle with their Afghan allies much like the days of old – albeit supported by pilots in the likes of F-16s and F-18s instead of archers.

Regardless of the time or the place, the warrior within a man stays the same. He learns strategies that follow the principles of the ages. And no one, East or West, has better captured the essence of strategy than did Sun Tzu – 2,500 years ago.

## DISSEMINATION

2,500 years ago, Sun Tzu's recorded words on military strategy proved so insightful that the Chinese nobility preserved them intact, and they, and many others who have read them to this day, would put those ideas to work. Translations of Sun Tzu's text spread throughout Asia. The ideas became a staple of Japanese military philosophy as firm as China's own and no doubt influenced battle plans to include the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. A reading of *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* also reveals many direct paraphrases from Sun Tzu that Chinese, North Korean, and Vietnamese forces used militarily against the West and each other throughout the second half of the twentieth century. No doubt all these nations will continue to use Sun Tzu's ideas to gain military, political, and economic advantages appropriate to their national interests in the present day.

The use of Sun Tzu's philosophies in the West has a shorter and sketchier history. Some military historians suggest that Napoleon applied Sun Tzu's philosophies in his military planning and even carried a copy of Sun Tzu's book with him on his campaigns. He certainly could have had in his possession a French translation available in his time, and his methods of maneuver show a marked similarity to those described by Sun Tzu.

Historians also debate where and when the first deliberate application of Sun Tzu's philosophies by an English speaking commander took place. It may have been on the battlefields of Arabia in 1917. Here, T. E. Lawrence,

a British officer leading an Arab army in a revolt against the Turkish army, used methods of maneuver warfare for which there is little doubt that Sun Tzu at least would have approved. Like Sun Tzu, Lawrence's use of maneuver warfare has been studied by military students the world over, and his actions serve to illustrate principles of effective warfare Sun Tzu described.

### T. E. LAWRENCE

At the height of World War I, the Turkish army occupied the port city of Akaba on the Sinai Peninsula. This occupation posed a threat to British control of the Suez Canal further to the west.

At first glance, Akaba seemed invulnerable to British attack. From the sea, the British navy faced huge guns the Turkish army had installed on the cliffs that overlooked the city. These guns could sink any ship that dared sail too close. Behind Akaba, the British Army faced an expansive desert, considered uncrossable because of its punishing heat and absence of water.

Upon further reflection on Akaba, Lawrence apparently decided that Turkish commanders had allowed the strength of their position to also become its weakness. Since the Turkish army expected no threat from the desert, all their large guns faced the sea and could not be turned around. So in the summer of 1917, T. E. Lawrence led a contingent of men across the uncrossable desert. This contingent of men formed the core of an Arab army that attacked and captured Akaba from the desert side instead of the sea. Lawrence's attack surprised and defeated the Turkish garrison at Akaba. The great guns that only faced the sea proved useless to the Turkish defense. In the aftermath, most of the Turkish garrison was captured instead of killed. Lawrence's Arab army suffered few casualties of its own. Akaba itself remained intact.

In 1910, seven years before Lawrence's attack on Akaba, Dr. Lionel Giles, a staff member of the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts at the British Museum in London, introduced the English-speaking world to an effective translation of Sun Tzu's writings. Lionel Giles published his translation through Luzac and Co. in London and Shanghai under the title, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*. Lawrence, an avid reader with a keen interest in military strategy, had a seven-year span in which to discover and study *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* before his own military endeavors began.

Though we can at best only hypothesize that Lawrence studied *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, we do know his method of attack on Akaba exemplified Sun Tzu philosophies: Lawrence attacked his enemy's weaknesses and won the battle whole. If Lawrence did in fact study *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, then he fell into a minority. Though available since 1910, the study of *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* did not gain prominence in English speaking militaries until Vietnamese military leaders, to include Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, used

principles characteristic of Sun Tzu to defeat American forces in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s. Gen. Giap, known to have studied T. E. Lawrence and his military methods, was also known to have studied Sun Tzu.

### PRESENT DAY USE

The study of *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* became an American military education staple after the Vietnam War. As a case in point, the U.S. Marine Corps book of strategy, *Warfighting*, builds upon ideas about maneuver warfare taken directly from *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*. Recently, business and law schools worldwide added *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* to their course of study. Why? The use of a weapon of the mind – which *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* fundamentally is – does not require the physical manifestation of the sword.

To read Sun Tzu's words, however, is not to immediately understand them. That would be equivalent to picking up a sword for the first time and expecting to fight well with it. To understand Sun Tzu's words means to put them into practice within the context of the Taoist philosophies from which he wrote them. These Taoist philosophies formed the cornerstone of philosophical thought for Sun Tzu's audience. They fill in the detail between the lines of Sun Tzu's own words. Sun Tzu described a lot more in his book than meets the eye. We will therefore take the next step of our exploration into China where history tells us an enlightened philosopher named Lao Tzu wrote a book called the *Tao Te Ching*.

### THE TAO TE CHING AS A REPRESENTATION OF SUN TZU'S PHILISOPHICAL SOURCE

*Tao Te Ching* means "the Way of life." The philosophies described within the *Tao Te Ching* provide the foundation of the Taoist religion and the Taoist philosophy prominent in China during Sun Tzu's time. These philosophies continue to have such worldwide appeal today that only the Christian *Bible* is printed in a wider variety of languages.

Like *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, scholars estimate the *Tao Te Ching* to be about 2,500 years old. Though a short book of only 81 verses, the *Tao Te Ching* influences Eastern views of the world similarly to the way the *Bible* influences Western worldviews. Most Western people, for example, regardless of their personal religious affiliations, understand the meaning behind the biblical philosophy, "turn the other cheek." Within these four simple words, you can communicate an important idea about conflict resolution that scholars have written about for centuries.

Philosophies from the *Tao Te Ching* similarly imbed themselves into Eastern culture. "Water seeks its own level," for example, communicates the inherent and often permanent good and bad of a person's nature, an idea

much larger than the apparent sum of its five words. The phrase “the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” commonly used in both the East and West, is also from the *Tao Te Ching*. It communicates the humble origins of even the greatest endeavors. By using such understood ideas as his foundation, Sun Tzu succeeded in packing a lot of information into a very small text, particularly for those who have a foundation in Taoist ideas.

## RECONCILING THE *TAO TE CHING* WITH WAR

Like the *Bible*, the *Tao Te Ching* acknowledges that a state’s leadership cannot always avoid war. Lao Tzu therefore believed a military triumph should be treated as a funeral simply because war proved necessary at all. Sun Tzu, like any soldier trying to reconcile his religion with war, would have grappled with Lao Tzu’s words against war. Lao Tzu said:

*Arms, however beautiful, are instruments of ill omen, hateful to all creatures.*

*Those who know the way of life do not wish to employ them.*

*The superior man prefers his higher nature, but in time of war, will call upon his lower nature.*

*Weapons are an instrument of ill omen, and not the instruments of the superior man, until he has no choice but to employ them.*

*Peace is what he prizes; victory through forces of arms is to him undesirable.*

*To consider armed victory desirable would be to delight in killing men, and he who delights in killing men will not prevail on the world.*

*To celebrate when man’s higher nature comes forth is the prized position; when his lower nature comes forth is time for mourning.*

*The commander’s second has his place in man’s higher nature; the commanding general has his place assigned to man’s lower nature; his place assigned to him as if to a funeral.*

*He who has killed multitudes of men should weep for them; and the victor in battle has his place accorded as in a funeral.*

So you also have from Sun Tzu, in his third chapter, a philosophy that can reconcile the way to fight a war with the Way of life. Sun Tzu said:

*In the practice of the art of war, it is best to take the enemy's country whole and intact. To shatter and destroy his country is inferior to this way. So, too, it is better to capture an army intact than to destroy it, better to capture a regiment, a detachment or a company intact than to destroy them. Hence to fight and win in all your battles is not the foremost excellence; to break the enemy's resistance without fighting is the foremost excellence.*

Throughout *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, Sun Tzu advocated winning without actual fighting. The pursuit of that ideal, though not always possible, allows a warrior to reconcile military service with the *Tao Te Ching*. It also served a very practical purpose for Sun Tzu and his followers. In a world that contained many warring states, a victor who depleted his own resources to destroy an enemy could expect a third state to take advantage of his weakened condition. To win wars yet stay strong was essential to survival in China 2,500 years ago. Winning wars and staying strong carries equal importance today. And so we will begin our effort to understand Sun Tzu by exploring the first of six core principles discussed in this book – the principle of winning whole.

# Six Principles of Sun Tzu

# 1 - Winning Whole

To win whole means to win with your resources and your objective intact. Any other result means you have at least partly failed at your mission. When you fight, you fight for something of value, and should you destroy yourself or that something of value while fighting to obtain it, then you have lost your real purpose for fighting.

The list below serves as a guide for winning whole. This chapter and the chapters that follow will develop this list.

---

## How to Win Whole

- 1. Remove your enemy's hope for victory**
  - 2. Use all your advantages**
  - 3. Exploit your enemy's weaknesses**
  - 4. Attack along an unexpected line**
- 

If you deny your enemy any hope for victory, you diminish his will to fight, and defeating him will prove easier than otherwise. If you use all your advantages, you leave nothing on the table that might prevent undue loss. By attacking your enemy's weaknesses, the energy you must spend to succeed decreases. When you attack along an unexpected line, you can apply force against your enemy where he has not prepared for you. All these measures

enhance your probability of winning with your resources intact and your objective intact. The Cold War, fought by the United States and its allies against the Soviet Union and its allies, illustrates these points.

### THE COLD WAR

From 1945 to 1990, the United States and its allies fought a Cold War against the Soviet Union and its allies. This war threatened to become the most devastating Hot War imaginable.

The United States and its allies won the Cold War with little bloodshed, particularly when compared to the preceding global conflict, World War II. The United States and its allies maintained a sufficiently strong conventional military force to deter Soviet aggression and supplemented that force with nuclear weapons. The victors indirectly won the Cold War economically. The Soviet Union collapsed on itself without a direct military attack by the United States or its allies. Economies under Soviet-style communism could not afford to pay for the enormous militaries arrayed against the West. Bottom line: the Cold War ended and the world stayed whole.

### THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

In contrast, America's Civil War of 1861-1865, though it succeeded in holding the union of American states together, demonstrated a progression into all the war-fighting methods Sun Tzu said to avoid. Sun Tzu said:

*Thus the highest form of generalship is  
to defeat the enemy's plans;*

In 1861, Abraham Lincoln, the newly elected President of the United States, could not find a way to peacefully defeat the secessionist plans of Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederate States of America. When Confederate forces shelled Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, they sealed Lincoln's failure.

*...the next best is to keep the enemy's  
forces divided;*

From 1861 through 1863, Lincoln attempted to divide the Confederacy by taking control of the Mississippi River. At the same time, he made no fewer than three attempts to march on the Confederate Capital in Richmond, Virginia. Lincoln failed in part because Confederate officers, like Gen. Robert E. Lee, outclassed their Union counterparts on the battlefield.

*...the next best is to attack the enemy's  
army in the field;*

In 1864, Lincoln assigned Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, a general who had earlier succeeded in capturing the key control city on the Mississippi, Vicksburg, to target Lee's Army of Northern Virginia itself instead of Richmond. Grant sent Gen. William T. Sherman down through the west to continue with the plan to divide the Confederacy. To Gen. George G. Meade of the Army of the Potomac, who Grant sent to destroy Lee's army in Virginia, Grant commanded: "Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also."

*...and the worst policy is to besiege walled cities.*

After a bloody series of battles that failed to destroy Lee's army, Grant laid siege to Lee's army in the fortified city of Petersburg from the summer of 1864 to the spring of 1865. His need to lay siege meant adding 10 months to an effort that was taking some 200,000 casualties to whittle Lee's army from 60,000 soldiers at the beginning of 1864 to fewer than 10,000 by its surrender in 1865. Sherman's advances in the meantime destroyed vital Confederate cities south of Richmond and Petersburg, plus much of the region's railways and infrastructure. Though the war reunited the nation, the south arguably required more than one hundred years to recover from the method.

#### THE WAY OF LIFE

The American Civil War ended with America intact but with the south in ruin. It became a precursor of total wars to come that would see the devastation of fighting escalate sharply. World War I became the devastation of armies, and World War II became a total devastation of great cities and populations as well. Militarily, the great nations of Europe, both the winners and the losers, became a shadow of their former selves on the world stage and so relinquished the title of world superpowers to the United States and the Soviet Union. Errors on both sides – Allied weakness that allowed Axis forces to conquer Europe and the Asian Pacific with little loss to themselves, and Axis miscalculations regarding their ability to hold their gains for the long term – resulted in more death and destruction by war than the world has yet seen. This final result was not in accord with the Way of life and therefore not in accord with the principles of Sun Tzu.

But what exactly is this "Way of life?" Men have pondered this question for years. George Lucas borrowed the idea of the Way for a Western audience when he created the philosophies of Yoda in the *Star Wars* movies. On the Way, which Lucas called "the Force," Yoda said:

*Size does not matter. Look at me. Judge me by my size do you? And where you should not. For my ally is the Force,*

*and a powerful ally it is. Life creates it,  
makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us  
and binds us....*

The Way, as attributed to Taoist philosophy, does not allow its masters to move stones with their mind like Lucas's Jedi Warriors, but it does purport to describe an energy that binds all things. Life, which energy sustains and destroys, creates conflict. The Way of conflict in the natural world sustains growth in the whole system. Predator and prey live in balance with each other to the benefit of the whole system. Winning whole also ascribes to the Way of life because you succeed at resolving conflicts productively and without destroying yourself and the objective. Fighting in accord with the Way of life, when you cannot avoid fighting, allows you to win whole with your army and your objective intact because you take measures, which we will discuss, that ensure this result. On the Way, in the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu said:

*Before Heaven and Earth, there was  
something undefined yet complete,  
formless, alone, constant, everywhere  
and untiring, the mother of all things.  
I know not its name so I name it "the  
Way of life." I should prevail to call it  
great, for it is in constant flow, becoming  
remote yet returning in a circle.  
Therefore the Way is great; Heaven is  
great; Earth is great; and a wise man is  
also great.  
In the universe, these are the four great  
things.  
Man takes his law from the Earth; the  
Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven  
takes its law from the Way; the law of  
the Way being what it is.*

A proper assessment of a situation is a critical part of Sun Tzu's overall philosophy that ensures an army engages in battles it can win. Engaging in battles you cannot win is a waste of time and resources and not in accord with the Way of life. In the first chapter of *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, therefore, Sun Tzu described five constant factors a military leader must assess to afford a view of the whole situation before a battle. These constant factors correspond to the four great things of the universe we just read from the *Tao Te Ching*. The first constant factor corresponds to the Way of life. The second corresponds to heaven. The third corresponds to earth. The fourth and fifth correspond to man. Sun Tzu said:

*Five constant factors govern the art of war, to be assessed when determining the conditions in the field. These constant factors are: 1) The Way 2) Heaven 3) Earth 4) The Commander 5) Method and discipline.*

The Way, which Lionel Giles translated into English as “Moral Law” for Western readers, proves the most important assessment of Sun Tzu’s five constant factors prior to a military conflict and also the assessment easiest to miscalculate or ignore. The Way – Moral Law – determines whether one army can defeat another army without completely destroying it. Sun Tzu said:

*Moral law causes people to be in complete accord with their ruler and to follow him regardless of any danger to their lives.*

The people of England had the moral law during the Battle of Britain in World War II where Winston Churchill said:

*Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, this was their finest hour.*

An army prepared to defend its beloved homeland from capture, or an army cornered and fighting for its life, when compared to an army fighting without due cause, will find its soldiers’ commitment to a fight more in line with the Way of life. Such an army may prove impossible to defeat in battle short of total annihilation.

An army imbued with the moral law is simply more willing to fight on and fight to the death than one without the moral law. To defeat an enemy with high morale while staying whole means to kill him, capture him, or break his morale; before soldiers meet in combat. Leave him hope and you invite disaster upon yourself. Winston Churchill said of the challenge that faced his enemies:

*We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!*

## MORALE

Morale has four conditions that determine whether you or an enemy will fight or will quit. A key objective when fighting is to keep your morale high and your enemy's morale low. Of course, your enemy will seek the same against you.

---

### Four Conditions of Morale

1. **The soldier fights – Because he has hope**
  2. **The soldier quits – Because he can quit instead of fighting and still live**
  3. **The soldier fights – Because he has no choice but to fight or die**
  4. **The soldier quits – Because he loses his will to fight**
- 

To foster high morale, keep in mind that soldiers fight because they have hope or because they have no choice but to fight or die. Also note that both of these reasons to fight can transcend a soldier's own self to include the hope or desperation of other people or an ideal, or both. This ability to transcend self allows a soldier to fight to his own death to save others when he might otherwise have surrendered and saved himself.

On the other side of morale, soldiers quit because quitting seems a better option than fighting, even if quitting means certain death. This too can transcend a soldier's own self if fighting for other people or an ideal loses its purpose.

To win whole, you find the means to keep your morale high and the morale of your charges high while you destroy your enemy's morale and make it easy for him to quit or impossible to escape destruction. You and any other military leader must also desire that your soldiers fight for the hope of some betterment to themselves or those for whom they care, but Sun Tzu knew a commander might have to leverage the hand of peril to succeed at the critical moment of battle. For this, he advocated that a commander leave no route for his own soldiers to return, and, therefore, no easy way for his own troops to quit. Sun Tzu said:

*On the day they are ordered out to battle, your soldiers may weep, those sitting up crying into their garments, and those lying down letting the tears run down their cheeks. But let them once be in a*

*situation where they cannot take refuge,  
and they will display the courage of a  
Chu or a Kuei.*

At the heart of this statement may lay the resolve shown by Allied soldiers that landed on the Normandy beaches on D-Day on June 6, 1944. To get off the beach, they had no where else to go but forward. Allied commanders surely knew the implications of that fact before the attack began.

On the other side of morale again, history presents many cases where opposing commanders have made it difficult for their opposition to quit and have not destroyed their opposition's will to fight to compensate for this. Their policies served to put enemy soldiers in a place where they could not take refuge with the result that they fought harder than they might have otherwise. Russian soldiers, for example, would not surrender to the German SS during World War II. Surrender meant their certain execution, while fighting, no matter how desperate, at least afforded them a chance to live. In turn, the Russians would not take German SS soldiers as prisoners. Both sides suffered high casualties and high levels of brutality as a result. At a time when many Russians initially viewed German invaders as liberators over an oppressive Stalinist regime, military theorists must consider how World War II might have turned out if German forces had acted as liberators instead of proving an even greater evil.

In contrast, making it easy for an enemy to quit has helped America reduce casualties in most of its battles, particularly when by other means America had destroyed its opponents' will to fight. Take note of the mass Iraqi surrender during the Gulf War in 1991, after those Iraqi units had been subjected to the relentless American bombing campaign on their positions. Prisoners of the American military often received – and still receive – better treatment than what they received from their own armies. The underlying idea provides another way to win whole that Sun Tzu acknowledged when he said:

*When you surround an army, leave an  
outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe  
too hard.*

A desperate foe will fight back when you would prefer that he surrender. The general idea carries over into other aspects of life as well. It is a reason, for example, to find a way to “save face” in Asia so that an opponent can accept a loss without further conflict or disgrace.

## MORALE TRAP

Of course high morale alone does not win wars when it leads to overconfidence. You may remember this excerpt from a certain famous poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

*Half a league, half a league,  
Half a league onward,  
All in the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  
“Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!” he said:  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.*

You could argue that the soldiers of the British Light Brigade, about whom Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote these lines in 1870, had plenty of morale to stand on when the Cossacks and the Russians cut them down. Over 600 cavalry soldiers under Maj. Gen. the Earl of Cardigan followed orders to charge heavily defended Russian artillery positions over a mile distant from their starting point. The bravery displayed by these soldiers inspired Tennyson whose poem made them famous the world over. But despite the fame, Tennyson’s poem describes a military fiasco. Perhaps 200 of those who set out on the charge returned alive with nothing to show for their effort. The Light Brigade never had a chance to succeed.

High morale, perhaps, and almost certainly overconfidence on the part of the commander, affected the two hundred and sixty troops belonging to U.S. Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer when they fought Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors to the death at Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876. A commander must bear in mind certain other practical issues aside from morale before engaging in battle.

Consider Custer’s defeat in context with Sun Tzu’s other four assessments. Though heaven likely did not favor either Custer’s cavalry or the Native American warriors in June of 1876, the conditions of earth would normally have favored the mobility of Custer’s cavalry since the Native American warriors had also to protect their families and Custer’s cavalymen were not so encumbered. However, Custer’s arrival in Montana, ahead of a supporting brigade-sized force, and Custer’s subsequent decision to engage Native American warriors before the rest of that force arrived, gave Native American warriors an advantage of earth at a decisive point in time.

We do not know whether Custer underrated the Sioux Chief Sitting Bull’s ability as a commander or underrated the method and discipline of his warriors. We do have evidence Custer discounted reports from his scouts

that indicated Sitting Bull had assembled a large warrior force, a total that would number more than 2,000. This evidence is supported further by Custer's decision to proceed deeper into the valley which led to the hill where he fought his last stand despite losing contact with two flanking elements of his force.

In the end, the results of the battle show Custer had miscalculated the threat facing his men. Only one of Custer's troop, a horse named Comanche, survived when the Battle of Little Bighorn ended – though thirty men from one of his flanking detachments, not directly involved in Custer's fight, did return from the field. The final outcome for Custer proved the polar opposite of Sun Tzu's principle to win whole.

To avoid the morale trap, therefore, you must ensure you are not operating in accord with one of three conditions shown below. Think about this closely. The propensity to deceive ourselves on these matters is a major and unfortunate part of the human condition.

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### **The Morale Trap**

- 1. You believe you have hope when there is no hope**
  - 2. You believe you fight to the death when you have other acceptable options**
  - 3. You allow pride to override good judgment**
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If you believe you have hope when you do not, you may take ill adventures where you should not. If you believe you fight or die when you do not really face such dire conditions, you may needlessly continue a fight for no gain. If you allow pride to override your good judgment, you may fight even when you know you should not, regardless of the consequences.

With the above in mind, Custer's failure at the Battle of Little Bighorn prompts us to examine the second of the six Sun Tzu principles we will explore, leading to advantage. If you can avoid the morale trap, leading to advantage becomes a key part of winning whole.

**Next Chapter: Leading to Advantage**

# Sun Tzu

on the

# Art of War

Translated by Lionel Giles in 1910

Edited Version by Robert Cantrell in 2003

# I - Laying Plans

1. Sun Tzu said: The art of war is of vital importance to the State.
2. It is a matter of life and death, a road to safety or to ruin. Therefore, it is a subject that must be thoroughly studied.
3. Five constant factors govern the art of war, to be assessed when determining the conditions in the field.
4. These constant factors are:
  - (1) The Moral Law
  - (2) Heaven
  - (3) Earth
  - (4) The Commander
  - (5) Method and discipline
- 5, 6. *The Moral Law* causes people to be in complete accord with their ruler and to follow him regardless of any danger to their lives.
7. *Heaven* signifies night and day, cold and heat, times and seasons.

8. *Earth* comprises near and far distances; dangerous and secure positions; open ground and narrow passes; the chances of life and death.

9. *The Commander* stands for virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness.

10. *Method and discipline* describes the disposition of the army, its subdivisions, the gradation and deployments of its officers, the maintenance of roads that carry supplies to the army, and the management of military expenditure.

11. These five constant factors should be familiar to every general. He who knows them will be victorious; he who does not know them will fail.

12. Therefore, when making your assessment to determine which of two sides has the advantage, ask:

13. (1) Which of the two sovereigns commands the Moral law?
- (2) Which of the two generals has the most ability?
- (3) To whom lie the advantages derived from Heaven and Earth?
- (4) On which side is discipline most rigorously enforced?
- (5) Which army is stronger?
- (6) Which side has the most highly trained officers and men?
- (7) Which army serves rewards and punishments most consistently?

14. By means of these assessments I can forecast victory or defeat.

15. The general that heeds my counsel and makes these assessments will achieve victory. Let this general be retained in command! The general that does not heed my counsel and makes few assessments will suffer defeat. Let this general be dismissed!

16. While heeding the merit of my counsel, avail yourself also to any helpful circumstances that give you advantages beyond the ordinary conditions.

17. When such favorable circumstances arise, modify your plans accordingly.

18. All warfare is based on deception.

19. Hence, when able to attack, seem as if unable to attack; when using forces actively, seem inactive; when nearby, make the enemy believe you are far away; when far away, make the enemy believe you are nearby.

20. Hold out baits to entice the enemy to act. Feign disorder, and strike him when he seeks to take advantage.

21. If your enemy is secure at all points, prepare for his attack. If he has superior strength, evade him.
22. If your enemy bares a short temper, seek to irritate him. Pretend to be weak, so he becomes arrogant.
23. If your enemy takes his ease, give him no rest. If his forces unite, separate them.
24. Attack your enemy where he is unprepared, appear where he does not expect you.
25. These military deceptions that bring victory must not be revealed as deceptions before they succeed.
26. Now the general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his headquarters before he fights a battle. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations beforehand. Thus do many calculations lead to victory and few calculations to defeat. What need be said of no calculation at all? It is by observing the points of these calculations that I can foresee who is likely to win or lose in battle.

### **12 Chapters Follow**