The Art of War

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SUN-TZU

Modern scholars dispute Sun-Tzu's existence, but classical historians place him during the Spring and Autumn period, around the sixth century BC. Even his given name creates suspicions, as Wu translates as "warrior." In an era of continual conflict between rival nations striving for total control of the empire, desperate rulers paid well for skilled generals. According to ancient historian Sima Qian (c. 145 to 85 B.C.), Sun was contracted by King He Lu of the Qi state after reading *The Art of War*. The historian narrates Sun's interview process, during which he has two of the king's unruly concubines beheaded, though many commenters doubt the accuracy of this account. Yet, Sun is absent in other influential historical accounts from the period, leaving much about his life, work, and death unknown. Nevertheless, his military treatise has been connected with his name—Sun-Tzu, an honorific meaning simply Master Sun—since antiquity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Spring and Autumn period, and the Warring States period—when Sun-Tzu is believed to have lived, fought, and written—were characterized by a continual struggle for domination among the largest Chinese states of the time. Centuries of conflict led to military progress and innovation, such as the crossbow, but also fundamental social instability. These times of turmoil saw many philosophers and teachers travel from state to state, offering their wisdom and counsel. Among them, Confucius was arguably the most prominent, and his regimented doctrine of civilized society remains influential in China to this day. Taoism, a creed that promotes seeking harmony with all things, also emerged in this period and still offers an important philosophical perspective in modern-day China.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sun-Tzu's approach to warfare bears similarities to Taoism's belief in the possibility of achieving perfection in and harmony with all aspects of life, as well as its distaste for unnecessary bloodshed. Taoism is often dated back to Laozi's seminal script *The Way and its Power*, which guides the true gentleman along the path to moral righteousness. Sun-Tzu is also mentioned by name in *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian (c. 145 to 85 BC), although even ancient historians doubt the accuracy of his portrayal. Nevertheless, the records offer insight into contemporary names, places, and events, as well as a significant chunk of history both before and after the author's time.

Purportedly a descendent, Sun Bin's *Art of War* (c. 380-316 BC) was rediscovered in the 1970s and draws from his ancestor's military classic. Later texts that similarly discuss military strategy include Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz's widely influential *On War*, written in the mid 19th-century following the Napoleonic wars; and English soldier B. H. Liddell Hart's 1954 *Strategy*, often deemed a companion piece to Sun-Tzu and Clausewitz's work.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Art of War
- **When Written:** Possibly late Spring and Autumn period (c. 722–481 BC) or Warring States period (c. 481–221 BC).
- **Where Written:** Qi state (modern-day Shandong province), China
- **Genre:** Military treatise, handbook
- **Antagonist:** The enemy army
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Sun Bin. A documented historical figure, Sun Bin is believed to be a descendent of Sun-Tzu. "Bin" means to be amputated at the knee, a fate Sun Bin was subjected to by arch-nemesis Pang Juan. He also has a military treatise to his name, which was unearthed in Shandong province, China, in 1972.

Bamboo strips. Early Chinese writers wrote their thoughts and sayings onto bamboo strips, which were then bound together into rolls. The earliest manuscripts of *The Art of War* are such rolls, leading scholars to debate the original order of the work.

PLOT SUMMARY

According to Master Sun, there are five fundamentals the wartime general must assess: the Way, heaven, earth, command, and discipline. Only by perceiving and understanding the lessons and forms of each, Sun says, can the general emerge victorious in battle. Winning is about taking advantage of opportunity as well as confusing and outwitting the enemy. Though victory depends greatly on preparation, it also comes down to a general's ability to respond to ever-changing circumstances and make decisions on the spot.

Sun further notes that, because war is a costly and complicated affair that drains the nation's finances and morale, conflicts should be resolved as soon as possible. To that end, war should be fought only for victory, not out of bloodthirstiness. The

general should act proportionately and compassionately, without overreaching or pushing his men too far; there is no sense in pointless killing when an enemy city can be taken whole. In fact, winning without fighting at all is the most desirable outcome.

The general is responsible not only for the army but also the nation's strength as a whole. The general must know how to lead his troops and make his own decisions. He must know the enemy as well as his own forces. Most of all, a general must strategize well. Just as **water** crashes down a gorge, so too can the army overwhelm its enemy with a well-considered strategy. And though sheer numbers must be considered when strategizing, proper organization means that having fewer troops is not a problem.

All war, Sun says, is essentially about direct and indirect action—about understanding and working with, rather than against, the flow of the situation and the opportunities arising as the conflict unfolds. Regardless of the men's ability, if the general reacts appropriately to changing situational dynamics, his men will crush the enemy, like logs rolling down a hill.

Sun further emphasizes the importance of confusing and weakening the enemy. By keeping his own plans a mystery, the general forces the enemy to split his troops to defend many points, as the opposing general does not know where the attack will come from. With enemy troops now thinned out, the general can better concentrate his attack. Forcing the enemy to prepare against an unknown attack thus weakens him. Of course, the general must not allow himself to be cornered in this same way; if the general does not know where the strike will come, his own troops will be thinned out and divided. Therefore, the general must know the enemy's plan, his motivations, his weaknesses, while still disguising his own.

To be sure, each victory is individual; there is no go-to formula. Victories are won by responding to myriad potential situations, as the world is constantly changing. Thus, just as water flows downhill, an army must always seek the easiest path to victory and attack the enemy's weakest point.

The fray, Sun continues, isn't to be entered into lightly. Throwing the army into battle could mean losing both men and equipment, and as such the general must first be sure of the lay of the land. Different terrains determine the method of attack, while mountains, rivers, salt marshes, and level ground all require different strategies to cross. There are roads and armies to avoid altogether, Sun notes. Meanwhile, gongs, drums, banners, flags and torches keep the army orderly and of one mind. The wise general gauges his men's morale as well as the enemy's, and only attacks at the opportune time. He remains prudent despite temptations, and doesn't fall into traps. Recklessness, cowardice, anger, arrogance, and misplaced compassion are all faults in a general, and if an army fails, it is likely the general was guilty of one of these five vices.

Beyond knowing the lay of the land, the general must read the land for signs of the enemy's movements: if the enemy is not moving, it means he has found advantageous terrain. If, on the other hand, the enemy is baiting the general, then the enemy is leading him into disadvantageous terrain. The general also must watch the enemy's men to see the true state of his army: are they tired, thirsty, hungry, despondent, disorderly? Is the enemy general changeable, tyrannical, incompetent? Numbers alone do not win a battle—wisdom, understanding, and loyalty do, and the men's state and ability is the general's responsibility.

Even so, the general should keep his strategies even from his men, who must trust him implicitly. The general alone is the commander, and so great is his responsibility that he can even ignore the ruler's orders when the general—who is closer to the battle arena—knows better.

Turning to more practicalities, Sun notes that seizing something the enemy holds dear will bend him to the general's will. Speed is also essential in war once decisions have been made, and plunder from the enemy is an efficient means to resupply the troops. Additionally, there are five things to target in a fire attack: men, supplies, equipment, warehouses, and lines of communication. The general must have the materials ready and know the best conditions to use these methods of attack, such as the right season. He must not be hasty but instead remain wise, as calamity cannot be undone. Being cautious can maintain peace.

Wars are expensive and hurt the whole nation, especially common people, so investing in a solid spy network is good financial planning. Spies should also be well-paid to ensure their loyalty. Double agents are a way to finding more spies, and so should be treated especially well. No one is closer to the general than his spies; with their information, he can know his enemy and attack his weakest points. Only the wisest general knows how to use them best.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) – The writer/narrator of *The Art of War*, Master Sun shares his wisdom and experience with the reader over the course of thirteen chapters. Not only does he provide theoretic guidance on matters of strategy, he also offers specific advice, for example suggesting the best way to move troops through various types of terrain. Given the range and depth of his insights, Master Sun appears to be a vastly experienced warrior, general, strategist, and schemer. He values careful preparation and considered action, while warning against fits of rage or the temptations of arrogance. While he does not see war as a lifestyle or a desirable endeavor, he does not shy away from the brutal reality of what is required to emerge victorious. Each chapter opens with the line "Master

Sun said:" which is commonly understood to suggest his sayings were written down and compiled by his disciples.

The General – In *The Art of War*, Master Sun primarily discusses the values, skills, and characteristics to which a wise general ought to aspire. In Master Sun's day, such a general would invariably have been a man. The general has the nation's destiny in his hands—its life or death, survival or extinction depends on his ability to lead the officers and the men to victory against the enemy. It is his perception and understanding that determines his success. The general makes all the key decisions and is answerable to no one, not even the state's ruler. He has the right to defy the sovereign as long as his decisions lead to victory. But it is not simply a matter of marshalling troops on the battlefield; the general must also consider the army's supply lines and communications, the men's morale, and the enemy's movements and strategies. Thus while he has all the authority on the field of war, the general also has all of the responsibility. He also goes by other names, such as the skillful warrior.

The Enemy – The antagonist in *The Art of War*, the faceless enemy is (according to the principle of Yin and Yang) the counterbalancing force to the general. The leaders of the opposing armies are locked in a battle of wills and wisdom, as the two seek to outwit and outmaneuver each other in a desperate bid to emerge victorious. Master Sun advises knowing the enemy as well as one knows oneself, in order to identify their weaknesses and devise a successful strategy to defeat them. Of course, the enemy is most probably doing the same, which is where spies come in handy.

Spies – A whole chapter of *The Art of War* is dedicated to spies, who, aside from the general, have the most important role when it comes to warfare, according to Master Sun. If not for spies, the general would be hard pressed to glean information about the enemy's position, disposition, and temperament. There are many forms of spies: "Local, Internal, Double, Dead, and Live." Each has their particular benefits when it comes to outwitting the enemy, as well as downsides for the spies themselves. Master Sun advises rewarding spies highly for their services, the better to earn their loyalty. They should also be the general's closest confidante.

The Officers – Comprising varying layers of authority between the general and the men, the officers lead the men into battle and execute the general's orders. The general has direct responsibility for their ability and morale—Master Sun states that any flaw, physical or psychological, in the officers comes from the general's inability to properly lead them. Well-trained and loyal officers are brave but not hotheaded, and consistent in their orders to and temperament with the men.

The Men – The state of the men in the army—that is, the regular soldiers and peripheral support—are a gauge of the general's ability to lead. If the general is strong, wise and steady, the men will be loyal, courageous, and hardworking, with good morale. If they are lazy, weak, or cowardly, the general is at fault for not training and commanding them effectively. Master Sun also offers various tactics to ensure the men do not flee in battle, something that seems to be a particular issue in his era.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Ruler – The ruler of the state hires a general and expects his total loyalty. While the general must serve his ruler, he does not always have to listen to his orders. The ruler must be morally outstanding to deserve the general's loyalty.

The People – In war, regular people suffer much hardship, and so the general should bring conflict to a speedy conclusion.

TERMS

The Way – The Way is intrinsic to **Master Sun**'s worldview, approach to warfare, and moral code. For Master Sun, all aspects of life and the cosmos have their own particular Way—that is, "path," "road," or, more loosely, "doctrine" or "principle," from translations of the Chinese word "Tao." For example, there is a Way to writing calligraphy, a Way to leading a nation, and a Way to waging war. This notion that perfection exists, and is even achievable, is based on the concept of an ordered world regulated by unbreakable laws. The Way is in a sense the order of the universe, which human beings must seek. The simplest examples include physics or math—there is a correct and provable answer to every problem. But the Way also encapsulates more subjective concepts, such as morale or morals. Sun draws on this perspective in much of his advice in *The Art of War*. If the **enemy** is prone to pride, for instance, Sun says to inflate his ego further to prompt him into making a rash or arrogant decision. If the **men** are likely to flee at the first sign of danger, **the general** should put them somewhere they cannot escape, and they will fight for their lives.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

YIN AND YANG

The traditional Chinese concepts of Yin and Yang were central to Sun-Tzu's perception of the world, As such, Yin and Yang also characterize the approach in his famed guidebook to waging war, written roughly around 500 B.C. Yin and Yang represent the natural

balance that can be found in all things—for example, dark and light, weak and strong, or uphill and downhill. There are infinite potential variations within each of these paired polarities that inform every moment, interaction, and situation. Sun argues that by correctly assessing and measuring the balance of the endless permutations of Yin and Yang in war, generals can not only successfully prepare themselves against their enemy, but also influence the situation to their advantage. Victory can be assured by accurately perceiving, analyzing, and acting in accordance with the balance of the forces at play in the world.

From the opening lines of the treatise, Sun shows that for each outcome there is an opposite outcome, and for every advantage a disadvantage. In fact, he emphasizes the importance of war by stating its binary outcomes: "It is a place / Of life and death, / A road / To survival and extinction." Not only does this signify that one's destiny will be either victory or defeat—never both—but also that for every winner there is a loser; again, war is about balance.

While victory and defeat are somewhat intangible concepts, Sun also alludes to the physical significance of Yin and Yang in doing battle. He describes "Heaven" as "Yin and Yang, / Cold and hot, / The cycle of seasons." This refers to the natural laws governing the universe and its physics—those laws that lead to the rising and setting of the sun, the changing climate, and so on. All of these can be measured and, crucially, forecast. Thus, Yin and Yang's physical varieties are critical when it comes to strategizing how best to engage in conflict—such as attacking downhill, or not fighting in the depths of winter.

Sun also emphasizes that there are innumerable variations within each interdependent pair of forces. This would seem to create an image of the world as total chaos, a swirl of energies battling it out; yet each circumstance is governed by the central Yin and Yang law of balance, meaning the overall flow of battle is, to a certain extent, measurable (even if it is endlessly changing). Gauging this sense of balance gives a general with insight and wisdom the keys to understanding and defeating the opponent. He can grasp how to best respond to his enemy's actions, and also predict how his enemy will respond to his own actions in any given situation.

Indeed, Master Sun says: "Victorious campaigns / Are unrepeatable. / They take form in response / To the infinite varieties / Of circumstance." The key word here is "response," as Sun does not, indeed cannot, offer a formula to *ensure* conquest in any and *all* situations. Each battle is unique in its blend of countless influences, such as weather, terrain, and troop morale. A good general, however, can sense these influences in the moment and react to whatever situation in which the army finds itself—that is, he can essentially balance these influences through his own actions. This means that while preparation is highly important in warfare, when it comes to the decisive blow, the one who has taken better stock of and can better respond to the current balance of forces will prevail.

More specifically, if able to perceive and react to such changes, a skilled general can take advantage of weaknesses that inevitably arise in the enemy's ranks: "Supreme military skill lies / In deriving victory / From the changing circumstances / Of the enemy." Because every aspect of battle remains in flux throughout the encounter, the most flexible, adaptable leader will win by working in tandem with the unfolding flow and changing balance of the situation, especially the enemy's movements.

If war is governed by the concepts of Yin and Yang, and related ever-changing forces can be perceived and measured, it is important to have better information and insight than the opponent, the better to outwit them. Thus not only should the general know the enemy's situation, a wise leader also knows how to *confuse* the adversary: "War / Is founded / On deception; / Movement is determined / By advantage; / Division and unity / Are its elements / Of Change." Here Sun describes the battlefield as similar to a chessboard, with the moving pieces (the men) being indication of the other player's strategy. The changing, complementary elements of "division and unity" refer to the merging and separating of battalions, all with the intention of hiding one's true strategy from the enemy.

Sun refers to this approach on several occasions as making "the crooked" straight. In essence, this means using deception to bemuse the enemy. For example, *appearing* to take a winding path through tough terrain could actually be a sure route to success: this deception causes the enemy to make inaccurate assumptions about one's own situation, and the enemy could, in turn, move rashly in an attempt to take advantage of a *perceived* disadvantage that does not actually exist—thus leaving itself exposed.

For Sun, Yin and Yang are guiding laws in warfare, just as they are in all other aspects of life. The changing dynamic of the battlefield creates an ever-shifting flux of advantage and disadvantage, opportunity and threat for the wise general to assess and overcome. Sun's approach to warfare, which prizes strategy and insight, reveals his classical Chinese view of the chaotic order of the world—each moment only happens once as the result of infinite possibilities, yet the ordered laws that govern the creation of that moment can be understood and used to one's own advantage. Herein lies the art of war.

TAKING THE PATH OF LEAST RESISTANCE

In Chinese sage Sun-Tzu's ancient treatise on warfare, the surest way to victory is a strategy based on taking advantage of the dynamic of the battlefield—for example, the lay of the land or the temperament of the enemy's general. Taking the path of least resistance across terrain or to overcome an enemy ensures a holistic victory—that is, victory in which the enemy is defeated (by

targeting their weakest points), the homeland is protected (e.g. from the financial fallout of unnecessarily prolonged warfare), and the men return home safe to their families (to continue working and so producing wealth for the nation). Sun's focus on total victory by avoiding overexertion—such as by not slaughtering an already-defeated enemy, to avoid losing any men or resources—reflects his view of war as a complex web of interdependent actions, reactions, and counteractions, in which choosing the path of least resistance is the surest way to navigate safely through the world's ordered chaos.

On numerous occasions, Master Sun draws parallels between military forces and **water**. Both are governed by natural laws—they can become immensely powerful when concentrated yet can withstand any blow when settled. Under the influence of such natural laws as gravity, water can become a powerful force simply because of its own weight. According to Sun, so too can an army: "A victorious army / Is like / Pent-up water / Crashing / A thousand fathoms / Into a gorge." Conquest can be assured simply by the dynamic of the situation, in which the army's own advantageous momentum—perhaps from overwhelming physical strength or formidable morale—drives it to victory.

"Military dispositions / Take form like water. / Water shuns the high / And hastens to the low. / War shuns the strong / And attacks the weak." Here, Sun advocates taking the path of least resistance, just as water does. Water flows downhill, just as an army ought to take the high ground and attack downhill. Moreover, armies should attack an opponent's weakest area, just as water will flow through a gap in a rock before it pushes through the obstruction. As such, brute force is not the art of war—understanding and taking advantage of the dynamic of the situation wins the battle.

While physical realities—such as difficulties moving across different types of terrain—apply to military regiments as much as they do water, Sun also sees the enemy's dynamic as an active force on the battlefield that must be understood and overcome. The best way to do so is to take the path of least resistance, by targeting their weak points: "Water shapes its current / From the lie of the land. / The warrior shapes his victory / From the dynamic of the enemy." By being flexible and reactive to the opportunities the enemy's movements and decisions open up, the victorious general's army flows toward the opponent's weakest points, either physical or psychological.

Yet just as water has no constant shape, there is no one formula for victory: "War has no / Constant dynamic; / Water has no / Constant form." Rather, it is important to understand the enemy, and to understand the laws that govern the world to ensure a clear, efficient route to success. Ultimately, the wise, flexible, and reactive general that better perceives the opponent's weaknesses wins the day. Not only will the general defeat the enemy, but the fallout of war can be minimized—for example, by reducing the number of casualties or the hit to the nation's treasury.

Sun details the immense financial cost of war, as well as the wider fallout on the homeland and its people: "It is therefore callous / To begrudge the expense of / A hundred taels / Of silver / For knowledge / Of the enemy's situation." He advocates investment in espionage to shorten the campaign, and so reduce the financial and human cost the homeland must bear during war. To find the path of least resistance, one must find the enemy's weakest points via spies' advice, and the quicker victory lessens the kingdom's collateral losses.

The advantages of seeking an efficient, holistic victory are obvious: "… a nation destroyed / Cannot be / Put back together again; / A dead man / Cannot be / Brought back to life." These words can apply to disaster at home or the benefit of conquering a rival nation without destroying it. Sending the entire army to triumph over a neighboring nation could lead to another enemy attacking the home nation in the general's absence—certainly not an all-round victory. Also, it is more efficient to take an enemy nation whole, along with its workers, which can then pay taxes or tribute. Victory is multifaceted, then; it is not simply the *destruction* of the enemy but also the *protection* of the home nation.

Just as water moves by taking the path of least resistance, so should an army—targeting the enemy's weakest points, never fighting uphill, and reacting to the dynamic of the situation to take the smoothest path to total victory. In this way, Sun shows success comes from measuring, understanding and moving according to the universe's natural laws. As such, military success comes from finding the best strategy, not from brute force.

WAR AS A MEANS TO PROTECT PEACE

Sun-Tzu is commonly believed to have lived either during China's Spring and Autumn (722-481 BC) or Warring States (403-221 AD) period, in which numerous smaller states battled for ultimate control of the empire. Yet Master Sun does not describe war as a way of life, but rather the last resort when it comes to defeating one's enemies and protecting the home nation and its people. A general's ultimate aim should be to secure victory and to ensure the army's safe return. This is achieved by conquering one's rivals, but not necessarily on the battlefield. It is the undoing of the opponent's plans and the cessation of hostilities that wins the war, not a massacre. With his focus on victory and general distaste for the horrors of warfare itself, Master Sun's treatise reveals the longing for peace that characterized the turbulent times in which he lived.

In perhaps one of the best-known arguments in *The Art of War*, Master Sun asserts that the greatest, most efficient kind of victory is when there is no battle at all. But even where battle is unavoidable, there is no need for slaughter. Fittingly, for Sun

winning a war is all about strategy, not brute force. As such, "Ultimate excellence lies / Not in winning / Every battle / But in defeating the enemy / Without ever fighting." By outmaneuvering one's rivals, they can be defeated without the matter coming to blows—for example by undermining the opponent's alliances, leaving their forces depleted and forcing their withdrawal from the battlefield. Thus, violence is not key to warfare. Instead, wisdom wins out.

Where combat *is* necessary, Sun advocates only taking proportionate measures: "In War, / Better take / A state / Intact / Than destroy it." Razing enemy kingdoms to the ground is not victory in and of itself. In fact, keeping the state as a vassal and taking taxes or tributes could create more wealth for the homeland—a greater victory longer term.

Where battle is required, Sun further advises making (reasonable) haste and avoiding delay in order to reduce the harm and cost of war. In his view, conflict is a messy and inconvenient matter that is best concluded as soon as possible. He states, "No nation has ever benefited / From a protracted war." The financial and human costs of war are monumental, and so campaigns are better won quickly to keep the collateral damage to a minimum. This could be seen as a humanitarian approach, but his primary focus here is on how to secure a holistic victory.

Master Sun goes on to add, "In War, / Prize victory, / Not a protracted campaign." In other words, generals should keep their eyes on the prize, as there is no benefit to dragging out the conflict. Warfare itself is not the goal—victory is. Battle, in turn, is just one route to victory, which is the ultimate objective, and the general that does not focus on that goal cannot win.

Bloodthirsty or foolish warriors that rush headlong into battle are thus destined for defeat: "The victorious army / Is victorious first / And seeks battle later; / The defeated army / Does battle first / And seeks victory later." When violence is sought for its own sake, victory is not a priority and therefore becomes harder to achieve. This advice also indicates that strategy and wisdom succeed on the battlefield, not mindless bravado. Throwing oneself into battle does not ensure the win, no matter how courageously the army fights.

Sun argues the general should be so focused on victory alone that no other concerns should influence the army's movements: "Never move / Except for gain; / Never deploy / Except for victory; / Never fight / Except in a crisis." Decisions must be focused on defeating the enemy and ensuring success, or at least survival. Indeed, fighting at all is only an option in the direst of circumstances, showing it is not glorious or desirable in its own right

While victory is the ultimate goal, the central point is to protect peace. It is peace, not war, that motivates the wise general, Sun argues. Victory is a means to *bring* peace, while defeat brings destruction: "The wise general / Is a Lord of Destiny; / He holds the nation's / Peace or peril / In his hands." Thus, the aim of success in warfare is not domination, or the outcome of a bloodthirsty campaign for enjoying in its own right—the central purpose is to protect the home country's peace.

Indeed, Sun stresses that the ruler and the general should be devoted to prolonging and ensuring peace as their primary endeavor: "So the enlightened ruler / Is prudent; / The effective general / Is cautious. / This is the Way / To keep a nation / At peace / And an army / Intact." Unnecessary deaths and murderous intent have no place in Sun's art of war.

While Sun's treatise does not shy away from the brutal realities of conflict, he has no time for mindless savagery. War is not an end in itself: it is a complicated affair with terrible consequences for all those involved, both directly and indirectly. Wise leaders seek only victory, which should be won as quickly as possible. As such, war is simply a means to an end, and that end is invariably peace. Living in a time where rulers were in constant battle for supremacy, the writer's longing for peace informs his considered, measured approach to warfare.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF AUTHORITY

In Sun's treatise on war, the general has total authority and responsibility for the army's strategy and the outcome of battle. Because the general is fully autonomous, he bears the whole weight of victory or defeat. A wise and skilled general earns his authority by his moral rectitude—that is, by focusing on his responsibilities, not personal glory. By invoking what he terms "the Way," Sun shows that true and honorable leadership arises from such moral integrity and selfless service. Sun's perspective represents the prevailing philosophies of the time, which accepted the total authority of a single figure, albeit with the proviso that leader was virtuous.

According to Sun, in war, ultimate authority rests with the general, who is accountable to no one and has no obligation to explain his plans or schemes. The general should answer only to himself: "Have a capable general, / Unhampered by his sovereign." While the general serves the ruler, it is the former—and experienced warrior—who knows the battlefield and its complexities best, and as such he should be given full control of the situation. Sun adds, "There are ruler's orders/ Not to obey," meaning it is perfectly acceptable for a wise general to disregard orders sent from a distant court, which most likely has outdated information anyway.

Not only can the general ignore advice from a sovereign, he also has no obligation to share his strategies with his men: "He pursues / His own secret designs, / Overawing his enemies." Sun primarily refers to deceiving the enemy here, yet that can only be ensured by keeping his plans wholly secret, in case a spy informs the enemy of his intentions.

In fact, there is no for the general need to explain anything at all

to the men, who ought to serve their leader unquestioningly: "Deal with a whole army / As if it were a single man. / Apply them to their task / Without words of explanation." It is for the general to know; it is for the men to carry out orders. In this way, Sun reflects a traditional Chinese acceptance of hierarchy, with those at the top in total authority.

Yet, those in authority are not permitted to be tyrants. Balancing the general's complete control is his ultimate responsibility for all matters concerning the army and the wider nation. Even the men's loyalty is the general's own responsibility: "Consistent and effective orders / Inspire obedience; / Inconsistent and ineffective orders / Provoke disobedience." His own ability to marshal and inspire the men determines the general's authority in the first place, revealing the interdependent nature of authority and responsibility.

Meanwhile, life and death rests in the general's hands, as his decisions decide the fate of the men and the nation itself: "The wise general / Is a Lord of Destiny; / He holds the nation's / Peace or peril / In his hands." The success or failure of a general's strategies determine the outcome of war, that is, "survival or extinction."

This is not only true on the battlefield. The nation's entire strength—which could influence another nation's decision to engage it in war in the first place—rests on the general's military aptitude and moral standing: "The general is the prop / Of the nation. / When the prop is solid, / The nation is strong. / When the prop is flawed, / The nation is weak." Because of the great power vested in the general, he is the foundation for the nation's entire strength. The general must accept this ultimate responsibility when accepting authority, but also the sovereign must choose a general wisely.

When the general is single-mindedly focused on serving the state and its people, and the men unswervingly serve their leader, this creates a unity he refers to as "the Way"—that is, the perfected way of doing something, in this case leading men and a nation. Sun refers to this ideal leader/lead relationship as "the Way," which "Causes men / To be of one mind / With their rulers, / To live or die with them, / And never to waver." This is built on trust—that the leader is effective and has the men's and the nation's best interests at heart. By invoking the higher concept of the Way—i.e. the perfect, heaven-decreed approach—Sun echoes the acceptance of various levels of authority present in all areas of social and government life in his era.

In serving the men and the nation, the general's focus is to preserve peace, another concept Sun represents as of higher, divine importance: "So the enlightened ruler / Is prudent; / The effective general / Is cautious. / This is the Way / To keep a nation / At peace / And an army / Intact." The righteous leader acts with these goals at the forefront of his mind, not for glory or for selfish gain. Only by taking a cautious, considered approach can he maintain the Way and achieve victory.

According to Sun, ultimate authority and ultimate responsibility are inseparable. Not only does securing total autonomy come at the price of bearing total liability, the general is also wholly at fault if he is unable to bring his men into line. In detailing these interdependent notions, Sun shows not only that unquestioned authority was accepted in his society, but also it was seen as the most effective structure. With authority and responsibility held in one pair of hands, decisions are taken quickly, and blame is easily laid on the correct culprit. That he refers to this approach in philosophical terms, i.e. the Way, demonstrates the strength of this conviction.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WATER

In *The Art of War*, Master Sun uses water as an example of how armies should move: fluidly, based on the terrain and the obstacles they encounter, and always taking the path of least resistance. As such, water represents the importance of efficiency in war—that is, of conserving and then later powerfully unleashing one's energy at the enemy's weakest points. This approach reflects Sun's understanding of the world as ordered by natural laws, despite it seeming chaotic. If a general can understand the world's ordered chaos and move his men through its turbulence fluidly, as water does, he can achieve a flawless victory. These natural laws that define the Way of the world are primarily the laws of physics, but also extend to more psychological concepts such as morale. For example, it is easier to attack downhill, with gravity on your side, just as water flows downhill and not up: "A victorious army / Is like / Pent-up water / Crashing / A thousand fathoms / Into a gorge." By acting like water, the army uses its strength to the maximum effect, making victory all the more likely. Sun writes, "A rushing torrent / Carries boulders / On its flood;/ Such is the energy / Of its momentum"—and when the army follows the example of water and attacks in the most efficient way, nothing can withstand its might.

ANIMALS

Master Sun uses imagery that draws on animals' innate nature or instinctive behaviors to illustrate his approach to military strategy. Animals, to Sun, are useful in that they represent the importance of leaning into natural strengths. In assigning certain characteristics to certain creatures, Sun argues the importance of a general understanding his own, his men's, and his enemies' nature and behaviors. For example, hares are "swift," and therefore have

the element of surprise in attack, or can flee with ease. Armies can adopt the same characteristics—for example by having more chariots than heavy infantry—to achieve the resulting benefits. The general must prepare for surprise attacks, or trap his enemy where he cannot retreat, if the opposing army is quicker. Elsewhere, Sun notes, "The Skillful Warrior / Deploys his troops / Like the *shuairan* snake." Famed for its rapid retaliation against any strike, the snake is feared and respected—as should an army be. Also, a falcon's precise timing "Breaks the back / Of its prey"—another vivid and clearly applicable image for an army seeking to defeat an enemy. Animals thus further represent a sort of harmony between one's actions and innate nature.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Art of War* published in 2002.

Chapter 1 Quotes

War is
A grave affair of state;
It is a place
Of life and death,
A road
To survival and extinction,
A matter
To be pondered carefully.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The People, The General, The Ruler

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of *The Art of War*, the narrator, Master Sun, impresses upon the reader the weight of the topic at hand. War is not a way of life, nor a form of entertainment for lords. Instead, war decides the fates of hundreds of thousands of people, and it dramatically changes the course of history. As an "affair of state," conflict is something for the rulers to lead, something that happens on a national scale. As such, readers see that Sun is not talking about mere feuds between noble families or about taming rebels. He is discussing total war that determines the destiny of entire nations.

The Way of War is
A Way of Deception.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

After offering his services as an advisor to the reader, Sun captures the central principle of war in one couplet. Ultimately, war is a battle of wills between the generals of opposing armies. The real battle is not fought on the field. It is fought in the mind games played out with layer upon layer of scheming, as each general seeks to confuse and outwit his foe. Generals can achieve a perfect victory, according to the traditional concept of the Way. Sun's use of this term is similar to the Taoist (or Daoist) notion that, because of the inherent order of the world, there is a certain Way to every endeavor that perfectly harmonizes with the natural laws of heaven and earth (in other words, physics). Thus, there is a Way to war, and the best generals use deception.

Chapter 2 Quotes

In War,
Victory should be
Swift.
If victory is slow,
Men tire,
Morale sags.
Sieges
Exhaust strength;
Protracted campaigns
Strain the public treasury.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Men, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9-10

Explanation and Analysis

Generals and men do not fight war for war's sake—they seek victory and the safe return home to their families. Thus, the quicker a war can be won, the better it is for the army itself. It is also more beneficial for the home nation to win quickly, as it lessens the burden on the government's

finances. The longer the fighting continues, the harder it is to win, as the men's morale fades over time. Sun picks out sieges in particular as an exhausting enterprise, underscoring that it is one best not attempted at all. As such, Sun keeps the focus on victory, and an efficient, timely one in particular. Whether this is possible, depends on the general's strategy.

I have heard that in war
Haste can be
Folly
But have never seen
Delay that was
Wise.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The People, The Men, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Sun shows while there is always a balance in deciding when to strike, hesitation is always the worst option. He shows at various points how a general rushing his men into battle when unprepared can bring disaster upon the army. However, delay has wider-reaching implications than haste. Delay in war causes greater suffering among the men, as their morale recedes with every subsequent day away from home, making each fight harder than the last. Additionally, the common people back home also suffer, as they must continue to work without their strongest male family member, and support other families as well. Not to mention, the public treasury dwindles with each passing day of conflict. It is much better to conclude war swiftly.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Ultimate excellence lies
Not in winning
Every battle
But in defeating the enemy
Without ever fighting.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The General, The Enemy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

Perhaps one of the most well-known quotes from *The Art of War*, here Sun describes a general that demonstrates the epitome of the Way of war. Generals do not win or lose based on raw physical might. As warfare is a battle of wills, the general may never face his enemy on the physical battlefield. Instead, by perfecting the art of deception and misguidance, the general outmaneuvers his enemy strategically. One example could be undermining the enemy's alliance with a key neighboring state—without the ally's army to back him up, the enemy might back down altogether. This is the ultimate victory, as the general has defeated the enemy without spilling a drop of blood or spending a single silver tael. Even if he did have to bribe his new ally, most likely it would cost less than a protracted conflict.

So it is said:
"Know the enemy,
Know yourself,
And victory
Is never in doubt,
Not in a hundred battles."

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

This line is repeated in Chapter 10, reflecting the importance this assertion holds within the logic of the treatise as a whole. Knowledge and wisdom supersede all other factors when it comes to war, including physical might. The skilled general knows his army's ability and temperament, his equipment, the terrain, and the enemy in minute detail. Only by knowing everything can the general be sure of victory. These lines were famously quoted by Communist Party of China leader Mao Zedong.

Chapter 4 Quotes

A victorious army
Is like
Pent-up water
Crashing
A thousand fathoms
Into a gorge.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Men, The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Sun uses this image to illustrate his point that victory is all about understanding, which he breaks down into measuring, estimating, calculating, and comparing. Essentially, he argues that the general who perceives the inner nature of things can predict what will come next. This is because the world's apparent chaos is governed by rigid laws, as represented by Yin and Yang. For example, water sitting in a wide pool will not suddenly move with any great force. But, when the landscape creates a path for it, and with a helping hand from gravity (especially if concentrated by a narrow gorge), that same water can become a surging flood, crushing everything in its path. This is about finding the path of least resistance, just as water will always flow downhill. In the same manner, the general should marshal his men in such a way as to unleash their inherent nature.

Chapter 5 Quotes

In the dynamics of War,
There are but these two-
Indirect
And direct-
And yet their permutations
Are inexhaustible.
They give rise to each other
In a never-ending,
Inexhaustible circle.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Sun has previously described that despite there only being five basic musical notes, flavors, and colors, their varieties and permutations are countless. So it is with warfare, but the two factors are direct and indirect action. Direct action would be lining up an army in opposition to the enemy forces, or laying siege to a city. Meanwhile, the general should also be planning indirect actions. This could include staging a fake retreat to lure the enemy forces to advance beyond the city walls, or to give away a strong position on the battlefield. The general might have sent spies to capture a key hostage, while distracting the enemy on the battlefield. Just as every moment happens once, and there are infinite possibilities, so are there limitless options open to the inventive general.

A rushing torrent
Carries boulders
On its flood;
Such is the energy
Of its momentum.

A swooping falcon
Breaks the back
Of its prey;
Such is the precision
Of its timing.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Men, The General

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Expanding on his point about the general unleashing the inherent characteristics of his men, Sun gives further examples of how understanding the world can inform the general's strategy. The rushing torrent represents a furious charge in battle. If the general can understand the forces at play to bring about this momentum, much as still water needs only space and gravity to move in such a way, he can spur his men to unleash destructive might.

It is the same for the falcon image. While the bird is strong, it can only deploy that strength with fatal effect because of its precise timing. The general must understand the principles that create success and employ them in war.

His energy is like
A drawn crossbow,
His timing like
The release of a trigger.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Providing further examples on his point that principles from nature that can be applied in warfare, Sun moves away from natural imagery and instead employs what modern readers know as physics. The string of a crossbow could not kill a man by itself. It is by the genius design of the device that the string is placed under immense tension, a force that can be transplanted into an arrow, and thereafter into the target. The general must employ the same principle in war—releasing great power at the opportune time and at the right angle can have destructive effect, by using seemingly simple materials.

Skillfully deployed soldiers
Are like round boulders
Rolling down
A mighty mountainside.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Men, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

In the concluding lines of his chapter on "potential energy," Sun uses this image to summarize his argument. By themselves, on flat terrain, boulders lie still. Yet, with no change to their nature, but simply placed in a different location, those same boulders will charge downhill with immense power. It is not the boulders themselves that produce such power, but the forces at play in the circumstances. In the same way, the general should place his men in an advantageous position that strengthens them with its inherent potential energy. The simplest and most direct example would be to take the high ground in battle, so the men are not fighting against gravity as well as the opponent. Another might be to choose open ground as a battle field if the army has a high proportion of chariots. Or, the general could take and block a narrow passage if the enemy outnumbers his own own force, so the opposing army cannot attack all at once and use their greater numbers to their advantage.

Chapter 6 Quotes

The Skillful Warrior attacks
So that the enemy
Cannot defend;
He defends
So that the enemy
Cannot attack.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), Spies, The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

The general devises a pinpoint strategy that the enemy cannot withstand. Sun does not simply advise hitting the enemy so hard that it has to hurt. Instead, he argues that the general must deftly outwit his opponent so that the latter cannot avoid the attack. The general moves in secret, so the enemy does not know where he will attack, and thus cannot defend himself appropriately. Also, in saying the general defends so that the enemy cannot attack him, Sun does not simply refer to high walls. Instead, the general can employ counterattacks to unsettle the enemy. For example, the general might learn through his spies that the enemy plans an attack in the morning, so he sends a small team to light a fire in the enemy camp, thus distracting and delaying the enemy's plan, or even destroying them altogether.

His form is visible,
But I am
Formless;
I am concentrated,
He is divided.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Sun talks from his experience as a seasoned general about misguiding the enemy, while being aware of all his plans. War is a battle of wills, and the greatest resource is knowledge. The general must keep his plans and strategies secret, while uncovering the enemy's movements and plots. Only in this way can the general outmaneuver the enemy. If the general successfully keeps his own plans secret, the enemy must defend many points. In contrast, the general will only attack a few. So, the general's forces will encounter a weakened and divided enemy. The enemy cannot perceive or guess at the general's movements—he is essentially formless.

Victorious campaigns
Are unrepeatable.
They take form in response
To the infinite varieties
Of circumstance.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator highlights how every moment only happens once. There are so many variables in the complex web of reality that every exact moment is unrepeatable. War is no exception. As such, there is no one formula to ensure victory. In every second of every battle, and also off the battlefield, there are "infinite varieties / Of circumstance" that the general must perceive and interpret, in order to respond to the continuously unfolding and changing present moment. As such, Sun's military treatise offers universally applicable wisdom and principles, but not a play-by-play strategy for victory.

Military dispositions
Take form like water.
Water shuns the high
And hastens to the low.
War shuns the strong
And attacks the weak.
Water shapes its current
From the lie of the land.
The warrior shapes his victory
From the dynamic of the enemy.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Men, The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37-38

Explanation and Analysis

Natural principles affect armies in the same way they affect water. Men tire when advancing uphill—it is much more efficient to move with the force of gravity, as water does. Water will also move through the landscape through its weakest points, carving a route through the softest soil or rock. So too should the general devise his strategy according to the enemy's weakest points. In doing so, he will get the highest results from his men's energy, and better harness their natural characteristics. By understanding the natural laws that govern the world, the general can pick out the path of least resistance to ensure a swift victory.

War has no
Constant dynamic;
Water has no
Constant form.
Supreme military skill lies
In deriving victory
From the changing circumstances
Of the enemy.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In referring to this approach as "Supreme," Sun invokes the traditional idea of the Way, which sees the world as inherently ordered, meaning perfection can be attained. Thus, according to Sun, the objectively best way to form military strategy is to respond to the enemy's "changing circumstances." Only by knowing the enemy's capabilities, plans, position and temperament, can the general plan his own attack or defense. Also, note the emphasis on "changing." The world is not static. The general must be constantly aware of his enemy, and look for opportunities as they arise. Sun argues this is the natural way of the world, just as water can be still in a serene lake or can surge fatally when blown in a storm.

Chapter 7 Quotes

The difficulty of the fray
Lies in making
The crooked
Straight
And in making
An advantage
Of misfortune.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

In battle, the general must take every opportunity or challenge that arises and bend it to his will in order to create an advantage. When faced with a disadvantage, or even disaster, the skilled and wise general must find a way to make the crooked straight. Sun uses the example of the general setting off to battle after the enemy. The narrator has stated previously that arriving at the battlefield first is crucial, so the general must find a way to make this crooked situation straight. He could simply travel faster, but this could tire the men. A better option could be to find a way to delay the enemy—perhaps by arranging an ally to attack another position to distract him in another direction.

Be rushing as a wind;
Be stately as a forest;
Be ravaging as a fire;
Be still as a mountain.
Be inscrutable as night;
Be swift as thunder or lightning.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

These lines follow Sun's discussion of movement, and dividing and uniting the troops. When in motion, the army should be fast-paced but orderly. Wind, thunder, and lightning—all weather-related images—provide examples of swift, efficient motion. A "stately" forest refers to dignified order, which indeed can withstand wind as the trees cling together. A "ravaging" fire refers to an army's destructive advance, leaving nothing remaining in its path, both due to plundering and combat. At other time, the general can call on mountains as inspiration—when he does not wish to move, nothing should be able to move him. The general's plans should be as mysterious as the night, even to his own army, to ensure he can outmaneuver his foes.

Chapter 10 Quotes

He regards his troops
As his children,
And they will go with him
Into the deepest ravine.
He regards them
As his loved ones,
And they will stand by him
Unto death.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Men, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

The general has total authority in the army, because he assumes total responsibility for his men. While this might seem transactional, Sun suggests that it is as natural as a

father/son relationship. If the general leads competently and with appropriate compassion, the men will respect and trust him. Such a bond will see both general and his men face death together, side by side. This relationship bears similarities to the ideas of Confucius, one of Sun's contemporaries. Also an advisor to rulers, although opposed to war in all forms, Confucius saw such hierarchical relationships as crucial for social harmony.

> Know Heaven,
> Know Earth,
> And your victory
> Is complete.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout his military treatise, Sun emphasizes the central role that knowledge plays in war. It is strategy that wins, not unbridled physical might. The only way the general can outwit the enemy is to have better information than him, yet such information can only be employed successfully by a wise general. This is Sun's meaning by knowing heaven and earth. Understanding how the world works is in essence an applied form of knowledge—that is, wisdom—which then informs all other learning. The victorious general knows the natural laws of heaven and earth more deeply than his foe, and this is how he secures victory.

Chapter 11 Quotes

> To the question
> "How should we confront
> An enemy,
> Numerous and well arrayed,
> Poised to attack?"
> My reply is
> "Seize something
> He cherishes,
> And he will do your will."

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72-73

Explanation and Analysis

This advice returns to Sun's earlier idea of direct and indirect. Taking on the enemy directly in this situation—that is, in battle—would spell disaster for the general, whose forces would crumple beneath the might of a stronger opponent. Instead, Sun argues, the general should take an indirect approach. By taking a hostage, or by seizing another strategic position or asset, the general can distract and disarm the enemy, so that the original confrontation is no longer an issue. Indeed, the general now has the upper hand, despite having a physically weaker army. This is how Sun can say the best victories come from not doing battle at all. Although, there still remains the battle of wills that rages between the opposing generals.

> It is the business of the general
> To be still
> And inscrutable,
> To be upright
> And impartial.
> He must be able
> To keep his own troops
> In ignorance,
> To deceive their eyes
> And their ears.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Men, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator emphasizes that it is the general's responsibility to lead—he is not a tyrant but a fair and honest leader. It is because he is morally upstanding that he earns the right to keep secrets from his men. Furthermore, he only keeps secrets for the men's own benefit. Revealing his plans too early could lead to that information finding its way to the enemy, thus endangering the entire army. Or, by burdening the men with a full disclosure of the potential dangers ahead, the general could

cause his army to lose morale and fail, even though they would naturally rise to the challenge had they suddenly had to fight for their lives.

Success in war
Lies in
Scrutinizing
Enemy intentions.
And going with them.
Focus on the enemy,
And from hundreds of miles
You can kill their general.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Reaffirming arguments he makes previously, Sun advocates basing military strategy on the enemy's changing plans and circumstances. The general must be deeply familiar with his enemy's situation, even his thoughts, and devise appropriate schemes. Specifically, by following the enemy's lead, the general can extend relatively less effort to capture the enemy in his own web, as compared to creating an entirely new set of circumstances from scratch. By focusing his attention and strategy on the enemy, the general can pinpoint his attack so precisely that his target is achieved from a great distance, such is the power of his command.

At first,
Be like a maiden;
When the enemy opens the door,
Be swift as a hare;
Your enemy will not
Withstand you.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, The General

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Outwitting the enemy provides the surest route to victory. So, deception is the name of the game. The general should cause the enemy to underestimate his ability, appearing as harmless and naïve as a maiden. In response, the enemy will drop his guard, creating an opportunity for the general to strike. Once the general gains that advantage, he must strike the enemy's weakest point as swiftly as a hare, before the enemy realizes his mistake.

Using simple, universally understood imagery, Sun demonstrates in this passage how perceiving natural characteristics and behavior can inform the general's strategy. The general can also use such common assumptions to deceive and misguide the enemy.

Chapter 13 Quotes

It is therefore callous
To begrudge the expense of
A hundred taels
Of silver
For knowledge
Of the enemy's situation.

Related Characters: Master Sun (Sun-Tzu) (speaker), The Enemy, Spies, The General

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Sun describes the immense cost of war, which he calculates at 1,000 taels per day. Then, once human suffering is worked into the equation, the cost is incalculable. Given that the information from spies helps to quicken the conclusion of war, only a cruel and ignorant general would not take this opportunity. After all, the purpose of war is not simply to fight, but to defend the interests of the home nation and ultimately protect peace. Dragging out war directly contradicts that goal, due to the loss of lives, economic productivity, and wealth. As knowledge is crucial to creating a winning strategy, Sun argues spies are well worth their cost.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Master Sun says that war is a very serious business for a nation. It is a matter of life and death, survival and extinction, and is something to be carefully considered. There are five fundamental aspects to be considered when preparing for war: the Way, heaven, earth, command, and discipline. The Way leads to unity between the general and the men, heaven refers to Yin and Yang, earth means terrain and life or death, command is about the general's temperament and ability, and discipline is the organization of the army. Every commander that can grasp these ideas can win, but he who fails to grasp them loses.

The author and narrator, Sun, does not revel in warfare. Instead, it is a solemn matter of deadly significance that not only involves people but also heaven itself. From the opening lines, Sun makes clear that bloodthirstiness or barbarity of any sort are not suitable approaches to conflict. War is about survival, and by extension, ultimately about protecting peace. He uses pairs of opposing concepts to outline the sometimes devastating consequences of the leaders' decisions and actions, reflecting the binary nature of the forces at play in war, and indeed the whole world, as represented by Yin and Yang.

In preparing for war, the general must look at which ruler has the Way, which general is able, which army has heaven and earth, which has more discipline, which is stronger, and which is better trained and more organized. One can work out who will win and lose from these alone. The reader that learns the lessons that Master Sun has to offer will win, while those who do not take the lesson to heart will lose. Choose the best plan—prepare it and then execute it. Take advantage of opportunities.

To a certain extent, Sun argues, the side that will be victorious can be calculated in advance based on the state leaders' integrity, ability, and wisdom. The most morally upstanding ruler will have heaven on his side. The general that best understands the art of war will lead his side to triumph, as he determines the entire army's proficiency. Based on these aspects, it is more important to plan well than to charge into battle and hope for the best. Better to take stock of your position in advance, and avoid engaging the enemy if the most likely outcome is defeat. As an experienced general, Sun's advice can lead the way to victory, but ignoring his lesson will allow folly to prevail. This characterizes him as a general for hire, as many battle-scarred warriors were in his day. However, the implication could simply be rhetorical—exhorting the reader to employ his advice.

War is all about deception, so an able person should seem incapable, a moving army should seem stationary and should appear to be far when it is near, and vice versa. Draw out the enemy with bait and hit him with chaos. If the enemy is full then be prepared, and if he is strong avoid him altogether. If he is furious then upset him, if he is weak then fan his pride. If he is at ease, then fluster him. If his men are united, divide them. Attack him where he doesn't see it coming and show up when least expected.

Everything has an opposite—all emotions, actions, and abilities. The wisest generals perceive the subtle balance of Yin and Yang in the world around them, and use that knowledge to their advantage, while also deceiving the enemy general to obscure his perception. Appearing incapable will cause the enemy to underestimate the general, while the latter fully understands his enemy's true weaknesses. This gives him the upper hand in the fray. By understanding the enemy's weakness, the general can specifically target those points to win a quicker, smoother victory. For example, if the enemy general is prone to anger, find a way to insult him personally, and he will make a rash decision, to his peril. This could save many lives in the general's army, rather than pitting them against well-prepared opponents.

Victory cannot be planned out in advance, but the side that prepares the most beforehand will win the day. The side with the least effective planning in the temple meetings will lose. Having more (generally) will lead to victory, having less makes for uncertainty, while having none will lead to defeat. This is Master Sun's view, which shows him who will be the victor.

Preparation wins most of the battle for a general—the side that has considered and planned the matter more thoroughly will prevail. However, that does not mean one can plan for every detail. In the chaos of the real world, nothing stays exactly according to plan. But based on the leaders' wisdom, insight, and contingency planning, the outcome can still be predicted in advance.

CHAPTER 2

Master Sun says that for an army with 1,000 chariots pulled by four horses, with 1,000 wagons armored with hide, 100,000 men with mail armor, and supplies for 400 miles, as well as costs back home and at the frontline, such as diplomacy, materials and repairs, the daily cost of war is 100,000 silver taels or more.

Sun is not discussing minor skirmishes. His military treatise covers total war—states taking on states in a life-and-death battle. The whole nation's labor and finances, even lives, are dedicated to the venture. This is a costly, potentially fatal affair.

Winning a war should be done quickly. If it takes a long time, the men get tired and disheartened. Sieges take a lot of energy and effort, and drawn-out campaigns stretch the nation's finances. If both men and treasury are exhausted, the enemy will use the opportunity to attack. No wisdom can see an army through that situation. In war, rushing can be inadvisable, but delaying is never the option. No state has ever benefited from drawn out conflict. Without understanding the impact that war can have, one cannot understand how to lead a war properly.

War is best won as soon as possible to keep costs—financial and human—to a minimum. The enemy will pounce on any weakness perceived, be it a lack of resources or morale. The only escape from that fate is to avoid it altogether—strike hard and fast before you weaken. This is all dependent on the leaders making the right decisions early on, planning well, and executing the attack effectively, to draw the matter to a quick conclusion. After all, war itself is not the goal—it is a burden.

The skilled general never hires reinforcements, or ships supplies around repeatedly. He carries equipment from the home base, but plunders from the enemy so his men do not hunger. Supplying the army from home stretches the nation's finances and creates poverty back home. When an army is nearby the prices go up, meaning the common people struggle to make ends meet, and find it harder to pay their taxes.

War must be dealt with efficiently—prior planning and plundering when in enemy territory should rule out the need to train new men or any wasting of resources. This makes for an all-round victory, as the home state is not overburdened or weakened by supporting the war effort for an extended time. The common people feel the pinch the hardest, and if they struggle, not only will their output decrease, they are also likely to resent their leaders.

The army's and the people's strength is worn-out. The common people lose 70% of their wealth, and the treasury 60%, with the men, equipment, and **animals** all exhausted. So, the wise general plunders from the enemy, as supplies taken in enemy territory are worth twenty times as much as that hauled from home.

Sun reasserts the wise efficiency of plundering from the enemy—that is, taking food and other resources from enemy territory. In the effort saved for the men and cart-pulling animals, food or supplies taken from the enemy are worth considerably more than those dragged from home.

Killing an enemy comes from anger and plundering comes from seeking reward. In chariot warfare, if more than ten enemy chariots are taken, the man who took the first should be rewarded. The captured enemy chariots should be mixed in with the army's own. Treat prisoners of war well. Use your victory to improve your own strength. Prize victory, not drawn out war. The nation's survival or extinction rests on the general.

The general should lead fairly—rewarding the men for daring accomplishments. He should also lead efficiently—not massacring men or destroying equipment wantonly. Instead, these can be put to good use, even merged into the general's own forces. War itself is not the aim, Sun reminds the reader. It is all about victory, and ultimately, securing peace. This is the general's basic responsibility. It is also a matter of efficiency—why destroy chariots when you can make direct use of them?

CHAPTER 3

Master Sun says it's better to conquer a state and keep it whole than raze it to the ground. It is also better to keep the enemy's men alive. True greatness comes from winning wars without even fighting. The greatest form of fighting is to attack strategy, and second best is to attack alliances. Third best is to attack armies. The worst type of war is attacking cities. Sieges should only be fought if totally necessary.

The fact Sun argues the best-fought wars are those without battles highlights the central goals of warfare—victory and peace. There is no need for bloodshed or ransacking enemy positions. Destroying the enemy's position politically can achieve the desired effect, and more efficiently at that. Sun lists forms of attack in the order of most efficient, in terms of financial and human cost, indicating the best approach to war is to reduce fallout as much as possible, for an all-round victory.

In sieges, it takes three months to create the defenses and equipment, another three months to build mud ramps. An angry general sends one in three men to their deaths fighting sieges. The men die like **ants** yet the enemy's city is not taken. This is the disaster that is siege warfare.

Sieges should be a last resort because of their disastrous cost in effort and lives. Sun characterizes this as a great waste, one that is most likely because of poor leadership from the general. The image of a general sending men out to their deaths as insects indicates his responsibility for their survival—such callous treatment of their mortality is a betrayal of the authority vested in him.

The most skilled general takes the enemy without even fighting, takes the city without a siege, and defeats the enemy nation without a long drawn-out conflict. He aims for a total victory under heaven without loss, with his men and equipment whole.

In contrast, an experienced general knows how to undermine the enemy's position without the need to fight at all. His victory is total—not just defeating the enemy, but ensuring his men return home, and that there is a home to return to.

This is how to attack. If your forces outnumber the enemy ten to one, surround them. At five to one, attack. At two to one, divide the enemy forces. If your numbers are evenly matched, then fight head to head. If the enemy outnumbers you, hide. If the enemy is much stronger, find a way out. Stubbornly taking on a larger army will end in capture.

Sun often gives very specific advice in his treatise. Here, he deals with the dynamics of size—numbers can matter in battle. Although planning and ingenuity play a larger role in securing victory, pitting an army in direct battle against a force ten times its size is never wise.

The general is the pillar of the whole state. If he is strong, the state is strong. If he is weak, the nation is too. The state's ruler can bring misfortune in any of three ways. Making bad decisions about moving the troops is called hobbling an army. Disrupting military decisions despite a lack of knowledge confuses the officers and the men, as does interfering in the promotions process. If such confusion arises it gives the enemy an opportunity, creating chaos and defeat.

Leaders have direct responsibility for the health and even survival of the nation. This is not only because they make decisions that directly determine such outcomes, but also because this is the counterbalancing force to their total authority. Rulers must know to trust the general's decisions, and the general must serve the ruler and nation with their best interests at heart.

To win a war, there are five essentials. Knowing when to fight and when to not, knowing how to deploy an army of any size, having united officers and men, being prepared for surprises, and having a general who can make his own decisions without a ruler interfering. These five things bring about victory. From this comes the saying, knowing the enemy and oneself brings undoubted victory in 100 battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, or vice versa, victory is not assured. He who knows neither the enemy nor himself will lose every battle.

Note that none of these five mention being physically stronger than the opponent, having better equipment, or even having more men. It's all about strategy—moving the men into the best position at the best time, ensuring the men are mentally prepared and of one mind with their superior officers, having plans for all eventualities, and having total autonomy. Thus, victory is assured by the strength of the general's command.

CHAPTER 4

Master Sun says the skilled general of old first ensures his own strength, then waits for the enemy's weakness. His strength is his responsibility and the enemy's weakness is the enemy's responsibility, never the other way around. This is why it is said it is possible to know victory but not achieve it.

A general cannot create a weakness in the enemy out of thin air. Instead, he exploits any and every opportunity that presents itself, and actively intensifies any weakness he can spy in the enemy ranks. So, if no weakness presents itself, the general must fall back on his own strength to see him through.

Invulnerability is about defense, while vulnerability is about attack. The first suggests a lack, while the latter suggests plenty. A good defender knows how to move as though he is under the earth, while the skilful attacker comes as though he advanced above heaven. This is how they protect themselves and win.

Vulnerable/invulnerable, defense/attack, lack/plenty, under the earth/above the heavens—Sun describes his approach to war in terms of opposing forces that complement and give rise to each other, meaning Yin and Yang. In creating a strong defense, the general makes himself invulnerable. In attacking the enemy, the general causes his foe to be vulnerable. Skilled in defense, he hides so well it is like he is underground (perhaps in reality under the cover of forest), while he attacks so swiftly it is like he flew on the clouds like the heroes of old.

Common people can see an ordinary victory. To be recognized as a victor does not show true skill. Lifting autumn fur doesn't show strength. Seeing the sun and the moon doesn't mean you are perceptive. Hearing thunder doesn't reveal a good sense of hearing. The heroes of old won easy victories.

The subtleties of war are beyond what the layperson can see. Sun gives poetic examples of stating the obvious. Generals must be a cut above such perceptive prowess. They must see into the nature of things before they even happen, with wisdom that will outmaneuver the enemy.

A skillful general's victories do not win him fame or honor. His victories are flawless, because they are inevitable. He beats an already defeated enemy. He takes strong ground and pounces on every opportunity. Victorious armies don't seek out battles first, but seek first victory. The opposite is true for defeated armies. The general who is skilled in strategy keeps the Way and the law, so he is master of victory and defeat.

The wise general's battles are won offstage. If the perfect victory is won without ever doing battle, it is less likely to make its way into the history books. The common people love grand tales of battlefield heroism, but the true leader wins quick, decisive conflicts that might not even make it to the battlefield at all. Meanwhile, those who seek out glory and renown are more likely to fail, as they pursue the wrong goals. In referring to the Way as connected with being skilled in strategy, Sun invokes the traditional idea that an honorable leader earns his total authority.

There are five steps to war: measuring, estimating, calculating, comparing, and then victory. Earth leads to measurement, which in turn leads to estimating, then to calculating, comparison, and victory. The army that wins is like a heavy weight crushing a single grain. The opposite is true for a defeated army. The victors are like **water** smashing through a gorge. It is all about forms and dispositions.

Studying, understanding, and scheming are the keys to victory. By knowing the enemy, terrain, and all other aspects of the upcoming battle in minute detail, the general can throw his men into the fray with certainty of success. Sun asserts this is a natural law, as obvious as crushing a tiny grain with a large stone. If the general understands the nature of his men, their "Forms and / Dispositions," he can engineer the situation to release their innate power like a waterfall, crushing the enemy army. For example, if his army is mostly made up of chariots, he would seek a battleground with clear and even terrain, so their full fury could be unleashed.

CHAPTER 5

Master Sun says leading many men is the same as leading a few. It is about how you divide them. This is also true for fighting. Use gongs and banners to organize and identify them.

Leadership always involves the same qualities, according to Sun. A general is essentially a manager, and one of his main tasks is organization. A well-ordered army would only need to receive one order for hundreds of thousands of men to mobilize in unison.

Different combinations of direct and indirect action can hold off the enemy. By understanding strength and weakness an army can crush an enemy like a stone crushing an egg. In war, attacking is direct but ensure success via indirect actions too. The general who can master this is infinite like heaven and earth; endless like the oceans; he never stops, like the cycles of the sun and moon; he is reborn like each season.

Within the single (Yin and Yang) pair of direct and indirect are limitless variations. The general harnesses his wisdom to position his strategy on the best point on that infinite scale, with disastrous effect for the enemy. Existing on that infinite plain, the general transcends regular warriors. Direct action would be engaging the enemy in battle, while indirect actions could be feigning retreat to draw the opponent into more advantageous terrain for the general's army, or distracting the enemy with the battle while a crack team burns his abandoned camp.

There are only five notes, five colors, and five flavors, yet there are more varieties of their combinations than can ever be heard, seen, or tasted. In war, there is only direct and indirect, but the variety of their combinations are also endless. They call on each other in an infinite cycle.

Sun emphasizes the significance of this single pair—direct and direct. In traditional Chinese thought, there are five musical notes (gong, shang, jue, zhi, and yu), five base colors (qing—meaning blue and green—yellow, red, white, and black), and five flavors (sour, spicy, salt, sweet, and bitter).

Surging **water** can carry massive stones because of the force of its movement. A diving **falcon** breaks its prey's back because of its pinpoint timing. The skilled general's momentum is destructive and his timing perfect. He is like a stretched crossbow string, and his timing is like pulling the trigger.

By understanding the laws of nature, the general can decide on the best course of action to achieve the desired results. By concentrating his forces, he can create massive power that pushes through the enemy, or by taking the right action at the right time, can destroy his foe in one fell swoop. Sun refers to this as potential energy—harnessing the advantages of the situation to create overwhelming energy.

In the chaos of battle, everything might seem disordered, but victory is assured. Disorder, terror and weakness are all based on their opposites. Creating order from disorder is about good organization. Being valiant amid fear is about harnessing the potential energy of the moment. Creating strength from weakness is about working with the men's temperament and ability.

According to the principle of Yin and Yang, opposite forces give rise to each other, just as the sun rises and falls. Thus, from weakness can be found strength. For example, pretending to be confused about one's next step could draw out the enemy, who finds himself unexpectedly in battle against a well-positioned army.

Give the enemy a target and they will take the bait. Draw out the enemy and then hit him hard. The general takes advantage of the situation and does not blame the men. He uses them to the best of their ability, but it is about reacting to the circumstances.

The general plans the attack and must take responsibility for the outcome—it is his plan that succeeds or fails, not the men. Victory comes entirely from his correct interpretation of and response to the unfolding situation, and his manipulation of the enemy accordingly.

By understanding the situation, the general sends his men out like logs or stones rolling down a hill. They do not roll by their own energy, but that of the circumstances. On flat ground they lie, on hills they roll. If they are square they do not move, but if they are round they roll. It is all about potential energy.

By themselves, the men could not defeat the enemy, but the general knows the situation to put them in that will harness their natural characteristics. In this sense, the men can be neither praised nor blamed for their success nor defeat, as it is the general marshalling their movement.

CHAPTER 6

Master Sun says getting to the battlefield first means you fight fresh. The one who arrives later will fight tired. Skillful generals move when they want to, and are not forced to move. But they lure out the enemy and block his movement.

The general ensures his strength against the enemy's weakness. He is prompt, and fights a harried opponent. These characterizations are placed in direct opposition to one another, according to Yin and Yang. By occupying the Yang position of strength, he leaves open the Yin weakness for his enemy. Ensuring he arrives first makes for an easier, more efficient win.

Tire a strong army, starve a well-supplied one, and unsettle an army that is settled. Move where he must follow you and where he least expects. By taking paths that avoid the enemy, you can march 100 miles without tiring. Attacking an undefended place ensures victory. Defend the unattacked.

A good general forces his foe into the Yin position of weakness, undermining any aspect of strength. This helps create a smoother path to victory. By being unpredictable, the general makes the enemy's job all the harder, and his own job all the easier.

The enemy cannot withstand a skillful general's attack, or attack that which he defends. It is a matter of formless subtlety and silent mystery. The general is the master of his enemy's fate. His advances cannot be withstood. He retreats so swiftly he cannot be caught.

With his deep knowledge of the ways of the world, the general can not only command his own forces, he can also force the enemy's hand to the extent that the general essentially determines his opponent's ability and success himself. In this way he creates a perfect attack and a faultless withdrawal.

If the general wants to engage the enemy in battle, he cannot be avoided, no matter their defenses. The general attacks what the enemy has to defend. If he doesn't want to engage in battle, he could defend himself simply by drawing a line in the sand—he distracts the enemy elsewhere.

The general leads the war from both fronts, as he renders the enemy general powerless by the complexities of his own strategy. The enemy cannot attack nor defend against what he cannot see or understand. He can only react after the general has already moved.

The general can see the enemy but the enemy cannot know him. The general is concentrated but the enemy is spread out. The enemy is divided into ten but the general attacks with his full force. Attack fewer men with a larger force, and so the enemy is weak.

The general makes the enemy divide his troops as he doesn't know the general's plan. By thinning out his troops, the enemy is vulnerable against the general's full-force attack.

The enemy must not know where the general intends to hit. He has to defend many places but the general attacks only a few. By reinforcing his front, he weakens his rear, and vice versa. It is the same with his right and left. By defending every part, he weakens every part.

Sun makes his point very clear—by dividing the enemy troops, the general weakens their whole opposing army. By drawing forces away from any area, the enemy weakens it. The further spread out the general can force the enemy's troops, the weaker the foe will be.

Having to defend creates weakness, whereas making the enemy have to defend creates strength. If the general knows the time and place of attack, even after marching hundreds of miles the army will be prepared. But if he does not know, no part of the army can help another. It is worse if the troops are separated.

By creating weakness in the enemy army, the general makes his own troops stronger. It is because of his knowledge and perception that he can be strong—he can be prepared despite any hardships. But if he is not wise, he leaves himself exposed to the enemy's manipulations, which could divide and weaken his own troops.

If the troops of Yue have many men but that will not help them in the battle, then victory is still possible. Study and know the enemy—know his plans and their weaknesses. Know what makes him move and know what is life and death matters to him. Know his strengths and weaknesses. Be formless—do not allow spies or enemies to know your plans. But know the enemy's form to win victory. The common people can see how a battle is won but not the strategies that won it.

If the battle will take place in a narrow ravine, for example, the opposing army's greater numbers will not help them. So, it is important to know the enemy thoroughly to make such judgments. The general must know every aspect of the enemy to be certain of success. On the other hand, the general must ensure he is invisible to the enemy, so the latter cannot make plans or prepare against the general's attacks. All this takes place out of the public eye.

Victories are unrepeatable. They happen only once ever from the specific circumstances of that moment. Armies are like **water**—they shun the high and seek the low. Avoid a strong army, engage a weak one. Water travels according to the lay of the land. Armies act according to the enemy's circumstances. Both war and water have no constant form or energy. The greatest warriors create victory from the opportunities created by the enemy. There is no constant leader among the five elements. The seasons always change. The days lengthen and shorten, the moon comes and goes.

Every moment only happens once, yet the world moves in predictable ways. As such, there is no one formula to certain victory. Instead, the general must learn the natural laws that govern the world and everything in it. From this knowledge he can thoroughly understand his enemy and the terrain on which they will meet. He can base his movements on his enemy's, reacting to each opportunity to create an advantage. The general takes the path of least resistance—hitting the enemy where he is weakest and choosing the most efficient strategies for an all-round and certain victory.

CHAPTER 7

Master Sun says the ruler gives orders to the general, who assembles the men and an army. He makes camp opposite the enemy. The real work comes with the battle itself. The difficulty is in making the crooked straight, or making an advantage out of disadvantage. Take a winding route to bait the enemy and win. Leave after the enemy but arrive first. This is mastering the crooked and the straight.

The general serves the ruler's interests—sharing the same enemy. When it comes to the actual fighting, it is all about strategy. The general must use every opportunity available and create an advantage. Sun refers to this as making the crooked straight, which is similar to making the best of a bad situation, but in a way that ensures victory.

The battle can bring success or peril. You might throw your entire force into the fray but lose. If you abandon the camp you might lose the equipment. Forced marches over 30 miles lead to losing the officers—this will separate the weak from the strong and only one in ten will arrive. Over 15 miles you'll lose half the men. For ten miles, two in three will arrive.

There is everything to win or lose in battle. Sun seems to discuss morale in minute detail, but more likely the numbers could be considered symbolic. In essence, his point is that there is always a balance between pushing the men too hard and getting to the battle first.

Without equipment, provisions, and stores, the army is lost. Without knowing your enemy's plans you cannot form alliances. If you don't know the terrain you cannot march. Without local advice you cannot know the terrain and exploit it. War is about deception. Move when it is advantageous. Division and unity are the elements of change in war.

Sun impresses the fact that there are many aspects to consider in war, and oversight in any of these could make the army vulnerable. Instead, the general must be all-knowing, while keeping a veil over his enemy's eyes. The general must confuse and deceive the enemy general to ensure he alone has the upper hand.

Be like a "rushing" wind, a "stately" forest, "ravaging" fire, a "still" mountain, the "impenetrable" night, and "swift" lightning or thunder. Take booty from the countryside and share what is found. Be sure before you move. He who can master the crooked and the straight will win. This is the art of doing battle.

Sun uses powerful natural imagery to emphasize the importance of understanding natural laws—by understanding what makes fire so destructive, the general can lead his army with the same devastating consequences, and so on. Sun also repeats the wisdom of plundering the enemy territory, for the sake of efficiency. The general that can understand how to make the most of all circumstances will win the battle.

When you cannot hear or see, use gongs, drums, flags and banners. They are the army's eyes and ears. When the army is organized it moves together. This is how you manage many. When it is nighttime, use torches and drums. Banners and flags can be used in daytime.

The general must marshal his men effectively. There are tried and tested ways of doing this. By using such methods, the general can lead the men even if he cannot see them himself.

The whole army can be disheartened. The general can lose his cool. The men are sharpest in the morning, slower by noon, and miss home in the evening. The skillful general avoids the sharpest, and attacks the slow and homesick. This is mastering the spirit. Meeting chaos with discipline and calm is mastery of mind.

The psychological aspects of warfare are just as important as the physical. Men's ability is dictated just as much by their thoughts as by their physical strength. The general must also consider these aspects when timing battle. He must also remain dignified no matter the circumstances, and keep his cool to lead the men.

Counter distance, exhaustion and hunger with closeness, ease and plenty. This is mastering strength. Do not engage an army with ordered banners or perfect formation. This is mastering change. The axioms of war are to not attack uphill nor an enemy with a hill to his back. Do not fall for a fake retreat. Do not attack sharp troops. Do not fall for bait, nor obstruct a retreating army. Leave a path for a besieged army. Do not harass an enemy that is at bay. This is the art of war.

The general must find ways to avoid these weaknesses, while enforcing them on the enemy, and seeking the opposing strengths. He should avoid a strong army, or one that is well-positioned. The general must watch out for the enemy's tricks, and know the enemy's true circumstances. He should not overextend his army to punish an already defeated enemy, which could endanger his men or waste his resources.

CHAPTER 8

Master Sun says the ruler gives orders to the general, who assembles the men and an army. Do not make camp on intractable terrain. Meet up with allies on crossroad terrain. Do not tarry on dire terrain. Use strategy on closed terrain. Engage in battle on death terrain.

Sun sets up the chapter with a brief summary of what has already been covered. Now, he has come to the matter of terrain. Sun offers specific advice on how to deal with each type of earthly barrier the general might face, in order to move through these places with the least effort and loss.

Some roads should be avoided, as should some enemies. Some towns should not be besieged, and some types of terrain should not be fought for. There are also orders from a ruler that one should not obey. The general that understands the nine changes knows war. Even if he knows the lay of the land, but is ignorant of the nine changes, he cannot put that knowledge to use. Even if he knows the five gains but not the nine changes, he cannot get the most from his men.

Some battles just aren't worth fighting. Sometimes, the general will know better than his lord, and should act accordingly. But it is important that the general has truly deep perception and wisdom to apply the knowledge he has gained. Without such deeper insight, he cannot transform knowledge into success, and the men will not reach their potential.

When making decisions, the wise general considers both gain and harm. By not focusing on gain alone, he can be successful. By not focusing on harm, he can avoid disaster. He causes his enemy to surrender by harming him. The general keeps him busy to tire him. He distracts his enemy with thoughts of gain. The skillful general does not hope the enemy does not attack, but trusts his own preparations and defense.

The general must focus on all outcomes and eventualities, not blur his own perception with undue fear or arrogance. Instead, he distracts his enemy with such thoughts. The general does not hope the enemy will act in one way or another, as he keeps the enemy busy with his own devious schemes, and ensures his own invulnerability.

There are five ways a general can fail. Recklessness leads to annihilation. Cowardice leads to being caught. Anger leads to being easily baited. An overly sensitive sense of honor leads to embarrassment. Misplaced compassion for his men leads to trouble. These five excesses are not conducive to war. If an army is defeated and the general is killed, it is probably because of one of these pitfalls. Consider them above all.

The general's own strength of mind and moral rectitude are hugely influential in war. His ability to lead rests on his own temperament as much as his military aptitude. It is not the men's ability that determines victory, but the general's presence of mind. In this case, it is key that a ruler picks a worthy general, and that the general keeps his own mind in mind.

CHAPTER 9

Master Sun says, when choosing positions and taking on the enemy, stay close to valleys when crossing mountains. Set up camp high and face the open. Never fight uphill. Keep your distance when crossing rivers. Do not fight an enemy in a river, but let half of his troops cross first. Occupy high ground, face the open and do not go close to the river. Do not attack against the flow of the **water**.

For every terrain there is a Way to cross it. For example, having the high ground in battle is considered a Yang position of strength. Yet, the valleys have water and more resources, so while the general should fight downhill, he does not want to cut himself off on the mountain peaks. Every position comes with such considerations, and the various approaches are labeled according to Yin and Yang. This helps to find the path of least resistance. For example, attacking against the flow of water will cause the men to tire quickly—positioning them upstream to fight an enemy downstream harnesses the potential energy of the situation to the general's advantage.

Cross salt marshes rapidly. Never tarry. Stay near trees and grasses if you must fight here. On level ground, take easy terrain. Keep high ground behind you and to the right. Keep death in front and life behind you. By following these rules, the Yellow Emperor defeated the Four Emperors.

Sun gives specific advice for each type of terrain—displaying his deep experience of warfare. Indeed, these rules are long-held, well-proven methods, as suggested by the reference to the mythological Yellow Emperor. He is often referred to in ancient texts as a teacher who conferred various knowledge to ancestral Chinese leaders.

Armies love high ground (Yang) and avoid the low (Yin). To survive and thrive, take the high ground, and you will win. Use the lie of the land to your benefit. If a river is swollen with rain water, let it subside before you cross. If you come to hellish terrain, get out as quickly as you can. Keep away and do not enter. Let the enemy go there and have them at his rear. If you must march through hard to pass terrain, know them well because it is a good place for an ambush.

By learning the Way of warfare, according to the rules of Yin and Yang, the general can secure victory. If he knows how to turn the terrain to his advantage, he can pass it effectively, but also trap the enemy in a disadvantageous position. If the general has no choice but to pass through difficult terrain, knowledge of their every nook and cranny is essential to avoid an ambush.

If an enemy is near but does not attack, he has strong ground. If he is far and baits you to attack, he has good ground and is ready to fight. If the trees move, he is advancing. If there are screens in the grass, he is trying to confuse you. **Birds** suddenly flying up are signs of an ambush, as are scared beasts. High clouds of dust suggest chariots are moving. Low dust suggests infantry are coming. Scattered dust indicates firewood is being collected. Pockets of dust suggest a camp.

If deception is key to war, the enemy is surely seeking to hoodwink the general. He must be able to see through these ruses. By seeing and understanding the clues that give away the enemy's true position and situation, the general can avoid being duped. Sun gives specific examples of how to read the signs of an enemy's true circumstances, and as ever, perceiving nature is key to this.

Words of humility but camp preparations suggest an attack will come soon. Aggression could herald a retreat. Chariots arriving first on the sides indicate a formation. Offers of peace but no terms indicates deception. A lot of activity indicates expectation. Some men advancing and others retreating indicate they are laying bait.

The general should not read the enemy's situation by how it appears on the surface. He should know about every movement the enemy makes, so he can read between the lines of his approach to diplomacy. A show of weakness could actually indicate strength, and vice versa.

Soldiers bent over their spears are hungry. If the **water** bearers are drinking first, the army is thirsty. If the enemy does not take an opportunity, they are exhausted. The ground is empty if **birds** are gathering. Shouts in the night reveal fear in the enemy camp. If the men are confused, it suggests the enemy general is not respected. Banners and flags moving around indicate disorganization.

Natural signs give away the enemy's circumstances. The general must have eyes and ears in place to see the realities of the enemy camp so he can assess their strength or weakness. Sun offers examples of behaviors signaling weakness, such as a lack of resources or respect.

If the officers are often angry, the men tire. If they are feeding meat to the men and grain to the horses, if they do not keep an orderly camp, they are at bay. Men whispering in groups is sign of dissatisfaction. Overly rewarding the men reveals desperation, and excessively punishing them indicates exhaustion.

Changes in behavior or routine belie the enemy's weaknesses. If the men are eating the cart-pulling animals, or resorting to hunting, they are very hungry. If the cart animals are being fed the men's bread grain, the enemy is encamped on disadvantageous terrain, with no vegetation. Such odd behavior can inform the general of an opportune time to strike.

If the general swings from being tyrannical to being in terror of his men, he is incompetent. Envoys with words of peace want to end hostilities. Ongoing, fierce warfare must be treated with vigilance. Numbers do not matter in war. It is all about concentrating your energy, knowing the enemy and earning the loyalty of the men. Underestimate the enemy and you will be captured.

Sun offers more analyses of specific situations and how to interpret them. An inconsistent general is incompetent. The general must be able to read into both diplomacy and fierce conflict. He must know the forms of war, the enemy's position, and lead well—these three aspects determine his success rather than any physical aspects. Underestimating the enemy ensures failure.

If you discipline the men before they are loyal, they will be hard to manage, but if you don't discipline loyal troops, they will be completely useless. Command with civility and manage with discipline, and you will earn their confidence. Sensible and consistent orders create loyalty and mutual trust, while the opposite breeds disloyalty.

The general is responsible for the ability and behavior of the men. It is almost like raising them as his own children—not spoiling them, but not disciplining them so harshly they resent him. Given how often Sun refers elsewhere to ensuring the men do not flee the battlefield, earning the men's loyalty is a significant strength when taking on the enemy.

CHAPTER 10

Master Sun says there are different forms of terrain: accessible, entangling, deadlock, enclosed, precipitous, and distant. Accessible is open to all—he who has the high ground and sure supplies has the advantage. Entangling means advancing is an option but retreating is hard. If the enemy is unprepared, attack, but it will be hard to retreat if necessary.

Returning to discussing the forms of terrain, Sun offers advice on the proper approach to warfare in each type of situation and landform. The general must learn the best strategies to employ in every circumstance, often in advance, because once he makes a decision, he might not be able to return.

On deadlock terrain there is no advantage for either side. Do not fall for the enemy's bait or move, but retreat to draw him out. When half of his men are out, strike. Enclosed terrain calls for getting there first. Block it and wait for the enemy, but if he does so, do not follow him. But if he does not block it, follow.

Strategy is key on difficult terrain. The general must mislead the enemy to force him to make a mistake, which can then be turned to the general's advantage. The general must watch his step closely, and not fall for any traps himself.

On precipitous terrain, if you arrive first, take the high ground. If the enemy gets the high ground, lure him out by retreating. If strengths are equal on distant terrain, it is hard to engage and there is no advantage. The general must study these terrains and their Ways.

High ground is a necessity in warfare, as Sun mentions this central strategy numerous times. Yet, even without the high ground the general has options available to him. He must know these well, so that he is never exposed and unsure of how to act.

The general, not nature, is at fault for the following calamities: flight, impotence, decay, collapse, chaos, rout. If the overall strengths of two armies are matched but one is much larger, the result is flight. When officers are weak although the men are strong, this leads to impotence. If officers are strong but the men weak, this is decay. If the officers are headstrong and charge into battle before the general orders it, the outcome is collapse.

Sun details the real-life consequences of character faults in the general. These examples emphasize Sun's view that any failure in the army is ultimately the general's fault. His men's weaknesses stem only from the general's inability to lead or strategize. As such, these examples are warnings.

If the general is weak and inconsistent, the result is chaos. If the general underestimates the enemy and pits a smaller force against a larger one, there will be rout. These are the six ways of defeat. The general must learn them well. Terrain can be an ally. The best generals assess the enemy, the terrain, and the difficulties involved. The one that understands and practices this will win. Those who do not know will lose.

In all, Sun outlines six main ways the general's inability can lead to disaster. He details each so the general can avoid such catastrophe. Instead, the general should learn the proper approaches to each terrain to use the land to his advantage. This is the best way to secure victory—taking the path of least resistance through tough terrain and striking the enemy where he is weakest. This is only possible with understanding, insight, and wisdom.

Even if a ruler says not to fight, if victory is certain, then fight. The same is also true if the rule says to fight but defeat is certain. The general who makes decisions without seeking fame or fearing blame will protect the people, serve his lord, and be called the jewel of the realm. The good general sees his men as his children. They will go with him wherever and face death beside him. If he is generous and affectionate but cannot command or give orders, or if he is chaotic, then the men will be like spoiled children.

While the general serves the ruler, he can ignore orders from the court if he knows he can secure victory. Because he takes on this authority, he therefore takes all the responsibility too. It is his job to protect the ruler, the state, and its people, and so he cannot think of selfish ends, or seek glory in war. When the general sees his role in this way, his men will be loyal and follow him to any end. Again, Sun describes the relationship between the general and the men as a father/son relationship, similarly to how leading contemporary philosopher Confucius talked about all social roles as relating to this dynamic—leader/lead, husband/wife, parent/child, master/servant. This, Confucius argued, was the best way to maintain social harmony.

If the general knows his own men can advance but does not see that the enemy is not vulnerable, victory is uncertain. If the enemy is vulnerable but the general's men are unprepared, victory is not assured. If he knows the enemy and his own troops but not the terrain, he cannot be sure of victory. The wise general is never confused when he moves. He always knows his plan. So, if you know the enemy and know yourself, you can have no doubt of victory in a hundred battles. Knowing heaven and earth leads to complete victory.

Success depends on knowing all aspects of the battle. The general cannot trust to his men's strength alone. He must know the enemy's plans and circumstances as well as he knows his own. Yet he must not assume he knows his own men well—he must also stay on top of his own circumstances. Victory is only assured when the general can perceive and control the whole battlefield. But when he does, he can be certain of victory in every battle he fights.

CHAPTER 11

Master Sun says there are nine kinds of ground. Enemies fighting on the home turf is scattering ground. Entering enemy land but not deeply is light. Strategic is when either side could gain advantage. Open ground is where both sides can come and go freely. Crossroad ground is where there is an opportunity to defeat multiple states. Heavy ground is where the army is in enemy territory and holds multiple towns. Intractable ground is tough natural terrain. Enclosed ground is narrow and twisting terrain. Death ground is where one must struggle for survival.

The ground in this chapter is not exactly the same idea as the terrain that Sun talks about earlier in the treatise. Here, he discusses the dynamics of the situations in which the army finds itself, rather than the shape of the land itself. For the most part, the types of ground reflect how deeply the general's army has penetrated the enemy's territory. The relevance is not only physical—for example in terms of logistics—but also psychological. The general must consider all of these aspects when deciding when and how to attack.

Don't fight on scattering ground, don't halt on light ground, don't attack on strategic ground, and don't block open ground. Form alliances on crossroads. Plunder when on heavy ground. Keeping moving on intractable ground. Focus on strategy on enclosed ground. Fight on death ground.

Sun offers precise advice for generals on each of these kinds of ground. For example, on crossroad ground, where any one state could take over many others at the same time, diplomacy is the most important factor. Making key alliances is more important than having more men, and so the matter might never even come to all-out battle.

The skillful general divides the enemy army, and stops their men from supporting each other. When they are separated, it is hard to regroup. Move when there is gain, halt when there is none. How should you confront a well-assembled enemy? Take something dear to him and he will do as you command. Speed is key in war. Catch the enemy unaware and unprepared, take a route he doesn't expect you to.

The general must think tactically. For instance, he can manipulate the enemy's forces for his own advantage. He must always focus on victory—every move should bring him closer to his goal, or at least not take him further away from it. Even if he finds himself pitted against a tougher enemy, there is always a strategy he can employ to undermine their position. He can attack an undefended position, or capture a hostage. He can outmaneuver the enemy to a better position, or come from an angle the enemy would never have imagined. In all these things, it is the general's wisdom and ingenuity that will pull him through.

When invading, penetrate deeply to bring cohesion among the men, and the enemy will lose. Plunder to feed the men. Conserve your energy. Do not reveal your plans, but put the men in places where they must fight for their lives, and they will die before they flee. Men facing death can do anything—both officers and men will give their all.

When far from the home territory, the men in the invading army will draw closer together for protection and support. So if the general plans to invade, he should advance quickly, so the men do not dream of home close to the border and run back to their families. The best course of action in such times is to take food from the enemy's territory—the army can move quicker when it doesn't have to carry so much from back home. The general shouldn't give the men prior warning of a tough battle, in case they lose heart and run away. Instead, he should keep such plans private and throw the men into a life-or-death struggle, because in immediate fear of death, they will fight for their lives.

When men are desperate, they know no fear. They stand their ground when they cannot escape. They keep going when they're in deep. If there is no hope, they will fight. They will be alert without being made to be. They will act without needing instruction. They don't need to be rewarded. Their loyalty doesn't require orders.

It is human nature to want to survive. If the men fear death and can flee, they will flee. If they must fight through the enemy to survive, they will. In the latter scenario, they will follow the general's every command with no hesitation, they will work harder with no need for coercion, because their only concern is to survive this fight. That Sun recommends treating the men in this way shows the strength of his trust in the general's leadership. The general has the men's lives under his command—a terrible responsibility.

Do not allow the men to consult omens. Remove all doubts and they will follow you to their deaths. They have no abundance, but prize wealth. They expect to die, but cling to life. When battle orders are given, they lie down and weep, wetting their clothes and cheeks. But put them where they cannot escape and they will fight with historic valor.

Underlining this approach to leadership, Sun asserts that the men should have no distractions from the general's orders. Yet if those orders are given too early—for example, if the men learn in the morning they will fight a tough battle in the evening—the men's morale will crumble under the weight of their terror. It is better to keep such things from them, and put them in the very heart of the battle, where their courage will naturally rise in the heat of battle.

The skillful general sends out his men like the shuairan **snake** that defends each part of its body with another, thrashing about. Armies can be like that. Even enemy forces, if stuck together on a boat in a storm, will help each other to survive. Tether horses and bury chariot wheels, but there must also be united courage. This is the best way to manage an army.

The type of snake Sun refers to will aggressively defend itself against any attack. He focuses on the image of the different parts of the snake's long body defending other parts that are attacked. By equating this to an army, he argues that when under attack, men will naturally draw together, even if they are from opposing factions yet find themselves in common peril. So, placing the army in such a position can create unity.

Both strong and weak can serve based on the principle of ground. The skillful general leads an army like it is one man. There is no choice but to obey. The general must be morally outstanding. He must keep his plans from his men. He must also change his methods so the enemy cannot know him. He moves around to confuse them.

By knowing the principles of warfare, in this case the dynamic of different battle scenarios, the general can lead many men with no difficulty. His leadership is unquestioned, but this is only possible because his ability and integrity are untarnished. To get the best from his men, he keeps his plans from them. To ensure victory over his enemy, he keeps his plans from him too, actively confusing the opponent to stay ahead of the game.

The general leads the men into battle, taking away any escape routes before releasing the trigger. He is like a shepherd and no one knows where he is taking his sheep. He amasses an army and throws the men into peril. It is his business. The general must study the types of ground, maneuvering, and the principles of human nature.

Sun adds to the list of leader/lead, father/son metaphors with shepherd/sheep. The men follow the general willingly yet blindly, with no understanding of his plans. The shepherd is responsible for his flock, who could never lead as he does as they do not have his deep understanding of warfare.

The men draw together when invading deep into enemy territory, but they scatter in shallow territory. It is dire terrain across the enemy border. When you have lines of communication on all sides, that is crossroad terrain. Heavy terrain is deeply penetrating enemy territory, and light terrain is a shallow invasion. Forts ahead and hard passes behind makes for enclosed ground. It is death ground when there is no escape.

Sun returns to depicting each type of ground and the relating advantages and disadvantages. Offering insights on how to act in each situation, the master strategist repeatedly emphasizes the importance of understanding the nature of landscapes, people and relationships in war. A solid strategy relies on insight into all these matters, and taking the appropriate actions to find the best route to victory.

On scattering ground, unite the men. On light ground, connect them. Bring up the rear on strategic ground. Man the defenses on open ground. Strengthen alliances on open ground. Ensure supplies will keep coming on heavy ground. Keep moving on intractable ground. Block the passes on enclosed ground. Death ground is for desperation. When surrounded, soldiers resist. They persist and listen to orders when in danger.

Sun shows how there are a multitude of aspects to keep in mind during war: supply logistics, the men's morale, the state's relationship with its neighbors, military strategy when it comes to choosing positions, and the chain of command. The skilled general must consider all these at the same time while taking into account the dynamic of the situation when confronting the army. His knowledge must be exhaustive on all these matters.

You can't make alliances if you do not know the enemy's plans. If you do not know the terrain you cannot move. With no local guides you cannot know the terrain. Ignorance on any of these does not befit a general of a strong ruler. When such an army attacks an enemy, he overwhelms them and destroys their alliances. The general does not seek alliances but follows his own secret plans. In this way he can overwhelm them.

Knowledge is everything when it comes to war, and there is a lot the general needs to know. He cannot represent his ruler if he is ignorant on any single matter. Instead, he must be an uncontrollable force with strategies that cannot be fathomed. He does not rely on others, but trusts in his own plan and power.

Reward the men and give orders fairly. Treat the army as one man and do not give explanations. Tell them the opportunity but do not reveal the dangers. Throw them into death ground and they will live—this is how to turn defeat into victory.

The general must know how to treat and manage the men. He should give them only as much information as they need to know—early warning could destroy their morale. Revealing the danger at the right time will spur them to greater courage. Sun repeatedly refers to this approach not only to assert the general's authority, but also to show the importance of understanding the men's nature. It is by perceiving these intrinsic characteristics that the general can secure victory.

Being successful hinges on knowing and reacting to the enemy's movements. You can kill the enemy general from a great distance if focused. It is about cunning. Be decisive when it comes to the final strike. When the enemy presents an opportunity, strike. Take something precious to him to force him to engage. Ignore the rules and focus on the enemy to get to the conclusion. At first be like a maiden, but then strike as quickly as a **hare**.

The general cannot win by focusing on his own gain or rigidly sticking to one plan. He must remain entirely focused on defeating the enemy, taking every opportunity available and being flexible to the changing winds. If the general can read the situation correctly, he can strike at the most opportune time with pinpoint precision. The most important thing is to secure victory.

CHAPTER 12

Master Sun says when attacking by fire, there are five ways to do it, burning men, supplies, equipment, warehouses, and lines of communication. You must have the means and the material. Certain seasons and days are best for lighting fires. Ideally, strike when it is hot and dry. The best days are when the moon is in Sagittarius, Pegasus, Crater, and Corvus. They are the four constellations of rising wind.

Sun describes the Way of warfare by fire. First the general must have the material, then he can pick the target. He must pay close attention to the climate and conditions, ensuring that the fire will continue to burn and ravage the enemy position. There are certain times of year that are most favorable for fire—that is, when it is hot and windy.

The are five changes to adapt to. If an enemy camp breaks out with fire, attack immediately. If the enemy remains calm, do not attack, but watch how the fire spreads and strike if an opportunity arises. If you can start a fire in the enemy camp, do it when the time is right. Always be upwind when starting a fire. Winds that start in the day last a long time. Night winds die out quickly. Know these changes and be vigilant.

Fire moves quickly. So must the general if he is to make the most of the opportunity. He must stay alert and move when there is an advantage, while ensuring his own men will be safe. Sun advises a day attack, as the winds are favorable and will help to maximize damage in the enemy camp.

Fire is a massive help in war. **Water** can be a big help too. It isolates but does not kill entirely. Not following through on an opportunity is a great waste. Thus it is said, good rulers think deeply, good generals follow through. Only move for gain or victory, and fight only in a crisis. Rulers must never mobilize out of anger, and generals must not fight out of spite. Move for gain; halt if there is none.

Fire is more destructive than water, but the latter can be a strategic asset too. An efficient general makes the most of every opportunity and uses it to its full advantage. He should be focused on victory, and only act to draw closer to that goal. Fighting is a last resort, as it drains resources and has great potential for harm. Both the ruler and the general must order battle only when it is truly necessary.

Anger and spite can subside to joy, but once a nation or men are destroyed, they cannot be rebuilt. Rulers must be prudent and generals cautious. This is the Way to preserve peace and keep men whole.

If the ruler or general act rashly in an emotional rage, the damage they cause cannot be undone. Instead, they should be wise and patient, choosing the best course of action for their nation.

CHAPTER 13

Master Sun says waging large-scale war with 100,000 men costs the people and the nation 1,000 silver taels a day. It causes chaos everywhere and leaves men miserable. It keeps 700,000 families from their work. In war, armies might battle it out over years with no end in sight. How then can a general begrudge the smaller cost of paying for knowledge of his enemy? Such a general is no friend to his men or ruler, and cannot master victory.

Sun quotes a vast sum of money, which is most likely symbolic, to emphasize the great financial cost of war. But he goes on to show the social and human impact war can have. War is a great evil and must only be fought when truly necessary. For each man that joins the war effort, seven families must pull together to support his family, who have most likely lost their strongest laborer. Given the great misery felt across the nation during war, it is economical to pay spies well to end the conflict sooner and return the men to their families. This should be the general's top concern—to draw war to a speedy conclusion.

Having information early allows rulers and generals to advance and triumph. It brings them uncommon success. This type of knowledge cannot be gained from omens. It can only be gained from men who know the enemy. There are five types of spies: local, internal, double, dead, and live. All of these are mysterious. Local spies are from the enemy state. Internal spies are officials in the enemy's government. Double agents are enemy spies turned to the general's side. Dead spies pass on false information to the enemy. Live spies come back with information.

Both rulers and generals can and should hire spies, because accurate knowledge of the enemy and terrain is the most important asset in warfare. Throughout his treatise, Sun has asserted the overwhelming power that comes from gaining knowledge. Now, he explains how to acquire it. He describes in detail each kind of spy, and the type of knowledge that spy has to offer. Most come from the enemy's camp, so come with varying levels of danger.

No one should be closer to the general than his spies, nor better paid or treated. Wisdom is necessary to managing spies, as are humanity and justice. Without genius and subtlety, the general cannot know their accuracy or truth. Spies have many uses. If the spy tells someone else his information before the general, both spy and listener must be executed.

Hiring and managing spies is no easy task—they are by nature suspicious characters. Yet, the general must keep them as his closest advisor—if they tell anyone their secrets before the general, then they cannot be trusted. The general must be wise and perceptive to know whether to trust their information, and whether it is accurate. That is, he must be wise to gain knowledge in the first place.

When attacking a city or killing someone, the general must know the names of the enemy's general, servants, and staff. The spies must know to collect all this information in detail. Enemy spies in the general's camp must be turned and paid well for it, to become double agents. From the double agent can be won local and internal spies. He can also send misinformation to the enemy, and shows the general how to best use live spies.

Sun, who seems to be talking from experience, advises the general to learn every minute detail about the enemy camp, and to be clear in his orders to his spies on this point. The general must know his enemy as well as he knows himself. To ensure this, his spies must be well paid for the information they provide. Compared to the great cost of total war, it is economical to reward spies well—protecting the state coffers in this way creates victory on every front.

The ruler should know all these kinds of spies. He relies on the double agent, so he must be paid and treated well. In the old stories, the Yin dynasty rose because of Yi Zhi, who had first served the Xia. The rise of the Zhou dynasty was thanks to Lyu Ya, who was won over from the Yin. Only worthy rulers and generals can use spies to good effect. Spies are vital in war, and the army's every move depends on their information.

Sun suggests a diversity of spies is best, yet to locate many types of spies the ruler requires the double agent. This seems a weak point, as he is the least trustworthy spy. Only the exceptionally wise ruler or general can unmask and turn a double agent. Sun gives examples of famous double agents that brought down dynasties—perhaps a warning as much as encouragement as to the usefulness of spies. He suggests that only the virtuous can use spies effectively, referring to the Way, which confers political success on the morally righteous, a commonly held view at the time. Ending on a weighty statement with real-life applications, Sun's final point stresses the ultimate importance of knowledge in warfare. Without knowledge, the general cannot move his army, cannot plan an attack, and certainly cannot achieve victory.

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