Introduction

The touchstone of the present work is a cluster of fundamental substantive questions pertaining to the *Sunzi bingfa* ("Military Methods of Master Sun," commonly rendered as "The Art of War"), an ancient Chinese text widely regarded in both China and the West as one of the most insightful strategy writings of all time.

Sun Tzu had many timeless insights about strategy and warfare, providing incisive angles on how to achieve success in conflict, especially if one has no scruples. Yet he did not have all the smart ideas. Which ones did he have? Which ones not? Do the ideas he had fit together in a coherent larger pattern? If so, what is that pattern? In what kinds of conflict does Sun Tzu's way of war work especially well? In what other kinds might it fall short?

In the background of these questions stand two further ones having a distinctly practical aspect. In fifteen words, the first is: "*What did Master Sun know that we still don't (or have yet to absorb adequately)?*" – knowledge that, if put into practice by an alert, aggressive foe (perhaps a state actor, perhaps not), holds seeds of adverse outcomes for the United States and its allies, if not on the battlefield then in a strategic competition outside of any shooting war. Such a question invites particular twenty-first-century scrutiny because Sun Tzu can stake a credible claim to be the world's first information warfare theorist.

Complementing this first question is a second one, equally important if one ever faces a Sun Tzu–inspired adversary: "*What are Sun Tzu's limitations or blind spots?*"

Shedding useful light on the twin questions just posed calls for a carefully crafted analytical approach. The Sun Tzu text has long enjoyed iconic status as one of a small canon of classics of strategy that have emerged from several civilizations, worldwide – in fact, in the eyes of many knowledgeable observers, the leading exemplar of that canon. That towering reputation shows no sign of diminishing. Indeed it may be gathering momentum. Sun Tzu's reputation has benefits for the advancement of Sun Tzu studies, ensuring a continuing flow of attention from influential thinkers and practitioners spanning many professions. Yet it is also a double-edged sword. Attention garnered for reputational reasons is commonly superficial. Sun Tzu's treatise is all too often reduced to capsule summaries, belying the more nuanced treatment that Sun Tzu's ideas merit. Against this backdrop, the present study is the product of a careful reading of the Sun Tzu text, developing an approach anchored in "three faces of Sun Tzu" (or "three Sun Tzus," for short):

Sun Tzu (1), the Warring States Chinese military text, likely the work of multiple hands, geared to achieving success in the warfare of that era;
Sun Tzu (2), the theorist of the military art of war in many times and places;
Sun Tzu (3), the far-reaching strategist and conflict theorist whose insights span grand strategy, cyber conflict, other high-tech conflict, and more.

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This tripartition into three Sun Tzus provides much-needed basic orientation for tackling the twin questions posed above. Such a structured approach – which is also a tool for demystifying Sun Tzu – is still in strikingly scarce supply given Sun Tzu's intellectual reputation and influence. It is the type of reading that a major classic of applied philosophy should get.

To that end, the present analysis aims to find and navigate a middle way between text and ideas in the Sun Tzu work. The text is central; equally, so too is its intellectual level.

Without adequate textual grounding, there is a real risk that analyses inspired by Sun Tzu will drift away like helium balloons – conceivably revealing intriguing vistas but not ones that can lay valid claim to Sun Tzu's intellectual mantle and its insights tested in the cauldron of the bitter existential warfare of Warring States China and later over some twenty-five centuries of East Asian history. Without adequate attention to Sun Tzu's substantive content – an idea level of strategic thought comparable to that found in the writings of Clausewitz or Thomas Schelling or Andrew Marshall (to cite some leading Western examples of the genre) – there is a risk that study of the Sun Tzu text will become enmired in a multitude of specific, highly technical, and possibly insoluble philological and historical puzzles.

To navigate these competing imperatives, a systematic, notably straightforward approach to a thorough reading of Sun Tzu will be implemented here. An important point that does not seem to have received its due in the Sun Tzu literature (possibly because the utility of distinguishing among the three Sun Tzus has itself not been clarified and developed) is that many bones of contention among translators and commentators, while certainly significant on a Sun Tzu (1) level, actually have little impact on our understanding of the enduring military or strategic substance of the Sun Tzu text – i.e., on Sun Tzu (2) or (3) levels. That observation makes it possible to encapsulate, albeit not eliminate, many Sun Tzu textual and interpretive puzzles, thereby sidestepping a wide range of longstanding, refractory scholarly debates and muddles.

The approach of the present study centers on identifying and clarifying, always with textual anchoring, a set of fourteen basic Sun Tzu substantive themes around which, as Alfred Thayer Mahan put it so well, "considerations of detail group themselves."[1] Fourteen such themes are identified. Analysis developing them is a way of rising, in Sun Tzu context, to one of the most fundamental and recurring challenges in all military and strategic theory: overcoming the tendency of strategy, certainly outside of game theory areas (which have their own major limitations born of extreme simplification), to be an amorphous domain of thought.

As pioneering cognitive scientist Jerome Bruner warned: "Knowledge one has acquired without sufficient structure to tie it together is knowledge that is likely to be forgotten."[2]

[1] Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Naval Strategy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1911), p. 118. In more extended form, the quotation from Mahan reads: "The search for and establishment of leading principles – always few – around which considerations of detail group themselves, will tend to reduce confusion of impression to simplicity and directness of thought, with consequent facility of comprehension."

[2] Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 31.

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Although strategy is the primary focus in the present study, many of these same fourteen themes also operate, commonly in simpler ways, on a tactical level.[3] Importantly, while each of the fourteen themes has its own analytical identity and textual anchoring, they interweave with one another in a way that creates a coherent larger intellectual tapestry. Modern applications of that tapestry can and do vary greatly in how, and with what tools and technology, they combine the fourteen elements of the package, highlighting some, possibly muting others. But for achieving greatest traction on the practical applications of Sun Tzu's thinking, including twenty-first-century ones, there is great value to be had in engaging with this package of fourteen themes as a whole, if only to decide which parts of it to play up or play down in building on Sun Tzu's ideas.[4]

Three Faces of Sun Tzu

It is clear from even an initial encounter with the Sun Tzu text that extracting much, perhaps most, of its value-added calls for an active yet disciplined analogical imagination. The immediate focus of the text is overwhelmingly geared toward conventional warfare between state actors (and land warfare specifically; there is not even a hint of blue water naval warfare in it), with important further attention to what is now often called grand strategy and, additionally, to espionage. The specifics of the conventional warfare known to Sun Tzu are, of course, antiquarian today. That conventional warfare focus does not directly reach the many other contexts (often largely or entirely non-military, certainly in any traditional sense) where potential for applications of Sun Tzu's thinking has elicited keen twentieth- and twenty-first-century interest, worldwide. Figure 1 offers a bird's-eye view of some of the possibilities.

Analogical thinking, indeed often of more than one type, takes center stage here. By virtue of the text's emphasis on warfare's information level, its important use of water and other imageries, and overall abstractness, such thinking is integral to Sun Tzu in a way that has few parallels in most other military theory, ancient or modern. Analogies come in many shapes and sizes and, like trademarks in the law, are by no means all of equal strength. All have their limits that need to be spotted, navigated, and in some cases exploited for additional insight. With an eye on developing the rich potential of Sun Tzu's thinking for being applied in a creative analogical spirit – which is one of its most basic and appealing characteristics – the distinction among three Sun Tzus is now set forth more systematically:

> *Sun Tzu (1) or "Sun Tzu proper,"* focusing as rigorously as possible on what "Sun Tzu said" (a stylized phrase with which each of the text's thirteen chapters begins) in a context of war as Sun Tzu knew it (i.e., situations faced by Warring States Chinese generals and rulers).

[3] Notably, the Sun Tzu text itself does not embrace a strategy/tactics distinction (see pp. 47–48 below), though such a distinction, as applied by a modern analyst, remains useful in clarifying different levels of application of Sun Tzu's thinking.

[4] Drawing on a terminology used by Harrison White in a 1970 paper on the small-world phenomenon, the fourteen themes can also be envisioned as fourteen "probes" into Sun Tzu's thought. For the concept of probes as a tool of strategic analysis see p. 99 of Scott A. Boorman, "Fundamentals of strategy: the legacy of Henry Eccles," *Naval War College Review*, Spring 2009, 62(2), 91–115.

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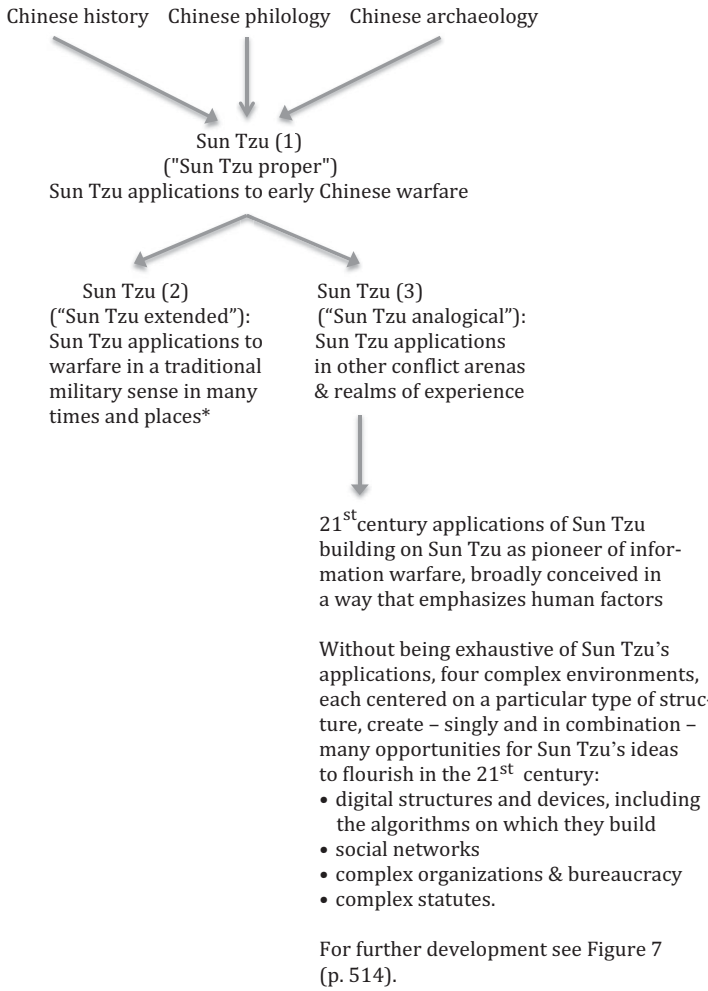

Figure 1. Overview of Sun Tzu (1), Sun Tzu (2), and Sun Tzu (3) perspectives.

*In keeping with the focus of the Sun Tzu text, a natural Sun Tzu (2) emphasis is on land warfare, though Sun Tzu's ideas also have relevance to naval or air warfare cases (as regards the latter, Sun Tzu himself in Griffith verse V.14 – see p. 300 and Passage #9.3 on pp. 314–15 – makes a relevant observation, using the image of a raptor and its prey).

While Sun Tzu (1) is typically the least analogically demanding of Sun Tzu's three "personae," even here an important niche for analogical thinking exists. For example, some Sun Tzu passages have a natural battlefield focus but also have broader implications that repay exploration on each of (a) strategic, (b) operational (in a military sense), and (c) tactical levels of war.

Sun Tzu (2) or "Sun Tzu *extended*," applying Sun Tzu's thinking to contexts involving warfare in a traditional military sense in times and places other than Sun Tzu's own – among them, post–Warring States eras of

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Chinese history down to modern times, where the political–military conditions have often differed greatly from those prevalent in Sun Tzu's world (not least because asymmetric warfare commonly took center stage in clashes between Chinese and Central or Inner Asian military forces).

At the root of many Sun Tzu (2) analytical opportunities is an underlying similarity of problems faced by land warfare commanders in all ages of war, many emanating from the crucial dependence of all conventional armies on their logistics. At the same time, in exploring applications of Sun Tzu outside of a specifically Warring States context, an element of analogy is always present.

Sun Tzu (3) or "Sun Tzu analogical," extrapolating Sun Tzu's thinking in ways that call for more venturesome acts of analogical imagination, e.g., applications to purely political warfare in times other than Warring States China; or to conflicts unfolding in other realms, possibly involving non-state actors; or ones rooted in contemporary technological milieux such as cyber environments or twenty-first-century biological capabilities.[5]

More than with Sun Tzu (1) and Sun Tzu (2), Sun Tzu (3) insight is often holistic, not readily or fully anchored in any single specific passage in the text. What matters here is credible continuity with Sun Tzu's principles and ways of thinking, albeit sometimes dressed in unfamiliar garb (e.g., cyber environments). In helping to evaluate when such continuity exists, the intellectual discipline of the fourteen themes analytical framework provides a basic resource.

Sun Tzu (3) explorations should be noted as by no means solely a creature of modern engagements with the text. Already in the Warring States period there is reason to believe that Sun Tzu's treatise was widely known among literate civilians.[6] Sun Tzu's thought has certainly been a source of inspiration to countless thinkers and doers over the long course of Chinese history, many of them having interests far afield from the military.[7] Some of Sun Tzu's influential traditional commentators were civilians, poets among them.[8] Nor was that influence limited to China alone. For example, though beyond the scope of the present study, Sun Tzu's ideas have also had a lengthy and vibrant impact in Japan spanning many centuries.[9]

[5] For example, see Table 3 on pp. 151–52 below.

[6] See #4 footnote 6 for comments of Han Feizi; separately, of Warring States businessman Bai Gui.

[7] For context, it should be noted that Sun Tzu's text had a somewhat offline, even faintly "underground" status in Confucian China. As Paul Goldin has observed, "The intellectual elite that fixed Confucianesque orthodoxy for future generations did not incorporate such texts as *Stratagems of the Warring States*, *Laozi*, *Sunzi*, or *Han Feizi* into their canon, even if they commonly read and enjoyed these works in private." See p. 18 of Paul R. Goldin, "The theme of the primacy of the situation in classical Chinese philosophy and rhetoric," *Asia Major*, Third Series, 2005, *18*(2), 1–25.

[8] See Yan Shengguo 閻盛國, "Songdai shiren bixia de sunwu yu *Sunzi bingfa*" 宋代詩人筆下的孫武與孫子兵法 (Sun Wu and the *Art of War* as seen through works of Song dynasty poets), *Junshi lishi yanjiu* 軍事歷史研究 (*Military History Research*), September 2011(3), pp. 191–97 (examining twenty poets, some of whom were also eminent statesmen, who mention Sun Tzu in their poetic oeuvres).

[9] For a survey of how Sun Tzu has been studied and received in Japanese circles, non-military as well as military, see Satō Kenji 佐藤堅司, *Sonshi no shisōshiteki kenkyū; shu to shite Nihon no tachiba kara* 孫子の思想史的研究: 主として日本の立場から (*A Study of the History of Sun Tzu's Thought, Mainly from the Standpoint of Japan*) (Tokyo: Kazama Shōbo, Shōwa 37, 1962).

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Each of these three Sun Tzus presents its own distinctive issues and challenges. Within its own realm each can offer important insights. But since quite different modes of interpretive work are called for, those applications should not be freely or indiscriminately commingled, zigzagging back and forth from one Sun Tzu to another. That is too commonly the case in modern literature on Sun Tzu. In particular, a useful byproduct of distinguishing the three Sun Tzus is to help alleviate self-imposed pressure, found in some Sun Tzu studies, to intermingle Sun Tzu (1) content specific to early China, sometimes tinged with exoticism, with Sun Tzu (2) or (3) observations often geared to establishing Sun Tzu's contemporary relevance, when separable writeups might better bring out the essential analytical points.

For work in Sun Tzu (1) mode, the basic toolkit is methods of Chinese history, philology, and archaeology, applied to shed light on the nature of war in Sun Tzu's time and its influence on Sun Tzu's thought.

Work in Sun Tzu (2) mode – which will always be of basic importance, for all the reasons that the art of war on land is a bedrock military focus and skill-set that no high tech will ever supplant entirely[10] – calls for specifically military knowledge pertaining to military strategy, logistics, and tactics and the interplay of all of these with technology and institutions. Sun Tzu (2) work is best approached against a backdrop of what, drawing inspiration from Wayne Hughes's analysis of naval warfare, might be labeled the "great constants."[11] In a land warfare context those constants would include the enduring relevance of human nature and emotions, morale, time and space, terrain features, logistics, fog of war, and a few other comparably fundamental factors.

The historiography of land warfare – involving the kind of expertise and judgment for which Michael Howard's 1961 classic *The Franco-Prussian War* sets a standard – is a basic tool for Sun Tzu (2) development, providing an immensely rich fund of situations, cases, and examples for bringing Sun Tzu's ideas to life on a world stage. Among pioneering Western students of Sun Tzu, Lionel Giles showed particular initiative in fleshing out Sun Tzu's ideas with examples from the annals of world military history, thereby attracting kudos from Lord Roberts, one the most successful British commanders of the latter nineteenth century (Roberts's experience had included both the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the Second Anglo-Afghan War).[12]

For related reasons, Sun Tzu (2) work has the makings of being an important teaching tool, encouraging thinking about Sun Tzu's ideas in settings that are more familiar than early China (and where available historical information is frequently

[10] This point has been made, with a modernist tilt (albeit reflecting an era prior to the rise of drones!), by Rear Admiral J. C. Wylie, Jr., USN: "the ultimate tool of control in war is the man on the scene with a gun" (quoted by Boorman, Introduction footnote 4, see p. 110 note 33 there).

[11] See Captain Wayne P. Hughes, Jr., USN (Retired), *Fleet Tactics: theory and practice* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), chapter 6 ("The great trends") and chapter 7 ("The great constants"), highlighting maneuver, firepower, counter-force, scouting (p. 182 treatment leads off with Sun Tzu) and anti-scouting, and C^2 (command and control) and C^2CM (command and control counter-measures).

[12] Presented with pre-publication proofs of the 1910 Giles translation, Lord Roberts commented that "Many of Sun Wu's maxims are perfectly applicable to the present day." See Giles, p. xlii footnote 6. Kind words indeed; but penned less than five years before the guns of August 1914, heralding a most un-Sun-Tzu-esque kind of war on the Western Front.

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much richer), yet which remain tethered by the "great constants" to the military roots of Sun Tzu's thinking.

Sun Tzu (3) adds to the mix a need for careful judgment in crafting more ambitious leaps, at times of a sustained or extended analogy type.[13] In exploring Sun Tzu (3) it is helpful for an analyst to have an omnivorous interest in phenomena of human conflict, since Sun Tzu's insights can frequently assist in cross-fertilizing realms commonly regarded as distinct. By contrast to Sun Tzu (2), in some major Sun Tzu (3) areas – e.g., contemporary high-tech settings like some cyber warfare – usable history is scant, at times virtually non-existent, and analysis may therefore require supplementation by other tools (e.g., formal modeling, computing, or gaming). Doing so puts in play analytical skill-sets far removed from Sinology and traditional military history alike.

Work on a Sun Tzu (3) level is more difficult than is commonly recognized, since it necessitates intellectual bridge-building between Sun Tzu's terse text and often remote and at times highly technical areas of human endeavor, many of which did not exist in Sun Tzu's time. Such forays call for acts of extrapolation and pattern matching across diverse technological and human contexts where criteria of judgment for evaluating analytical success are frequently not well worked out and it is easy to overreach or otherwise strike a false note. Unsurprisingly, avoiding such missteps best starts with thorough familiarity with Sun Tzu (1) – text, ideas, historical context.

It is also important to recognize that strategic or tactical steps that on one level may appear to profit by Sun Tzu's advice (say, by giving free play to his famous advocacy for deception) may create vulnerabilities on a different level that a Sun Tzu–inspired adversary could exploit (say, by undermining integrity of command or social or organizational trust). To draw on cybernetics imagery, when eyeing Sun Tzu (3) applications it is essential to keep in mind *all* the feedback loops likely to be relevant, not just a favorite (but included) subset of those feedback loops. The latter is a common pitfall among modern students of Sun Tzu who find themselves drawn, often shortsightedly, to Sun Tzu's incarnation as a bad boy.

In developing the three Sun Tzus perspective, the entire text of Sun Tzu – which, as a 1970s archaeological find of a partial text corroborates, had already taken substantially its present form by the second half of the second century BC – will be analyzed. That textual analysis has two basic components. The first, organized theme-by-theme, focuses on the most important Sun Tzu content, providing anchoring for main text thematic analyses that begin with Part A (p. 54) and Theme #1 (pp. 55–87) below. The second involves "also-ran" Sun Tzu content (e.g., because it is less clear or less on point). Likewise presented theme-by-theme, the latter material is assigned to Appendices 1–14 in the online annex. An addendum

[13] Illustrating extended analogies, each developed at book length, are the following two analyses:
(1) Scott A. Boorman, *The Protracted Game: a wei-ch'i interpretation of Maoist revolutionary strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969);
(2) David Howarth, *Law As Engineering: thinking about what lawyers do* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2013).
Sun Tzu–relevant domains that provide foci for these books are, respectively, (1) Chinese Communist revolutionary warfare, 1927–49; (2) the law (a profession having its own major strategic aspects).

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to this coverage involves specialized Sun Tzu content having a technological slant. It is assigned to Appendix 15.

A basic payoff of this division of labor between main text and appendices is to take pressure off students of Sun Tzu to try to treat everything found in Sun Tzu as comparably insightful or of larger lasting relevance. Attempting to do so carries a real risk of obscuring or eclipsing the most significant and enduring Sun Tzu content by commingling it with the rest.

Three features of the Sun Tzu text make it especially well suited to implementing and deriving value-added from the approach to the text just sketched.

Brevity. At around 6,000 characters (count varies with edition used) the Sun Tzu text is short – far shorter, for example, than is Clausewitz's *On War* or countless modern strategic writings.[14] Brevity makes it feasible to hold the tally of basic Sun Tzu themes to a moderate number.[15] Furthermore (and in welcome contrast to many of those modern writings!), Sun Tzu does not waste words, harboring little redundancy. That sparseness also makes it feasible to anchor each theme in a tractable number of Sun Tzu passages (usually around twenty, mostly short). That is one basic reason why the present passage selection can be kept user-friendly.

Disaggregated structure. D. C. Lau, an important modern Sun Tzu authority, has observed that the Sun Tzu text conforms to a widespread tendency found in early Chinese texts, whereby the text tends to fractionate into short passages which are only loosely (if at all) articulated with one another.[16] In the case of Sun Tzu, as with many other early Chinese texts, a factor contributing to this fractured quality is a penchant for short, often numbered, heuristic lists (of factors, elements, problems, patterns, situations, rules, etc.). The upshot is that the Sun Tzu text exhibits, overall, a kind of loose-knit, granular character – very different from the sustained logic chains found in parts of Clausewitz and far more so in modern game theory.

Undercurrents of intellectual unity, but scattered through the text. Each Sun Tzu theme from the set of fourteen has multiple aspects or facets, often diverse and requiring active effort to ferret out.[17] Varying expressions of a given theme commonly surface in different parts of the Sun Tzu text. Pulling the relevant content together stands at the core of the present Sun Tzu analysis. Theme #1 (calculation) illustrates the exercise, since "calculation" is an activity with which Sun Tzu engages from several interconnected but clearly distinguishable angles.

[14] By way of comparison, the US Constitution (including amendments) is around 7,600 words. See p. 399 of Stephen Gardbaum, "The myth and the reality of American constitutional exceptionalism," *Michigan Law Review*, 2008, *107(3)*, 391–466.

[15] Even fourteen could, of course, call to mind a remark attributed to Georges Clemenceau, referring to Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points: "Fourteen? The good Lord had only ten." But a more apt comparison benchmark would be Clausewitz, where a scholarly concordance covers thirty-five-plus subjects each equipped with an associated list of pertinent passages from *On War* – just a list, not those passages themselves – spanning over fifty journal pages. See Jon Sumida, "A concordance of selected subjects in Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*," *Journal of Military History*, 2014, *78(1)*, 271–331.

[16] Lau, 1965 article, p. 322.

[17] Cf. Michael Handel, *Masters of War: classical strategic thought* (3rd rvd. and expanded ed.; London/Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 21: "Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* may seem easier [than Clausewitz] on first reading, but it is actually more difficult to understand in depth."

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By thus establishing priorities in reading the text, and drawing clarifying benefits from delineating and grouping passages, the present approach creates a platform for a disciplined exegesis of Sun Tzu's ideas and their applications. The anchoring in Sun Tzu passages is crucial here. It lets Sun Tzu speak with his own voice and preferred emphases (which were, of course, shaped by the military realities of his era).

This approach also holds seeds of a somewhat different further payoff. Traditional Chinese education was very much a culture of memorization. Given the prodigious feats of memory required by the traditional Chinese examination system in its mature form, it would have been no great further feat for many educated Chinese over the centuries to have similarly memorized the Sun Tzu text, short as it is.[18] Doing so would in turn have created cohorts of individuals who would *really* know their Sun Tzu on a level of detail and specificity that few Westerners (and probably also few twenty-first-century East Asians) can match. As a stand-in for the chains of association and analogy that such memorization (if coupled with reflection on the substance) would encourage, the present Sun Tzu analysis offers a degree of insight into how Sun Tzu's thought might have been internalized by a traditionally educated Chinese steeped in a culture of textual memorization – insight not readily available to modern audiences unaccustomed to that way of absorbing basic texts.

Overview of the Present Approach

The Sun Tzu translation on which primary reliance will be placed is the 1963 one by Brigadier General Samuel B. Griffith, USMC (Ret.), based on Griffith's DPhil thesis in Chinese history at Oxford.[19] This translation draws on, and benefits from, Griffith's knowledge base and intuitions as a professional military officer. Griffith's career background included a distinguished record of World War II combat service, receiving the Navy Cross for action on Guadalcanal in 1942. Importantly (since there are many kinds of military service), Griffith's background involved a type of military

[18] As late as the 1890s, memorization of Sun Tzu (in fact of the full *Seven Military Classics* canon, see footnote 7 on p. xix) was required of candidates taking the official written Military Examination. In practice, things did not work quite that way given widespread illiteracy among examination takers, leading to practices of candidates' seeking third-party help. See Le P. Etienne Zi (Siu), SJ, *Pratique des examens militaires en Chine* (Chang-hai: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1896), p. 21. The more basic point, however, is that memorization of the Sun Tzu text would have been an easy task for traditionally educated Chinese civilians, who might have done so for many reasons including simply personal interest. By way of comparison involving the Confucian canon (Wilkinson, §28.4, pp. 400–403), Miyazaki Ichisada has estimated that candidates for Tang-Song civil examinations had to memorize texts having a Chinese-language counterpart to word count of *c.* 570,000 words – a volume of material exceeding Sun Tzu by some two orders of magnitude. See Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 267. See also Wilkinson, §22.1.6, pp. 319–20 ("How many texts were memorized?").

[19] Supervised by Wu Shichang (then teaching at Oxford). A companion to the Griffith translation is Lau's 1965 article cited on p. xxii. In that article, which mobilizes extensive Sinological expertise, Lau is very critical of Griffith. At times Lau states his criticisms too affirmatively, since crisp "right answers" in scholarship on early China are often few and far between. The upshot, however, is a constructive one, yielding many suggestions for critical thinking about particulars of Griffith's work.

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experience that aligns well on many features of the military situations emphasized by Sun Tzu: land warfare between two opposing conventional armies; operations in complex and demanding terrain; operations where both sides mount all-out efforts and where margins of combat success are often razor-thin (with further lessons for the contributions of sound strategy, logistics, and tactics to being on the winning side of those thin margins).[20] Also importantly, Griffith's post-war active duty military career included three further years spent at the US Naval War College in Newport, RI – one as a student, two on the faculty – in that institution's highly creative early post–World War II era.[21] Griffith's translation did not have the benefit of a 1970s archaeological find of which more recent Sun Tzu translations take cognizance.[22] However, it is easier to compensate for that deficit by drawing on more recent Sun Tzu scholarship than it is to replace the intangible but genuine edge found in Griffith's translation, emanating from Griffith's visceral grasp of core military realities (among them, the fundamental part played by logistics in hard-fought combat operations).[23]

The present approach to Sun Tzu draws on Griffith's subdivision of the Sun Tzu text into short segments or "verses" whose brevity and (often) single-military-issue focus lays a foundation for creating passages illustrating the fourteen themes.[24] In effect, Griffith's verses serve for present purposes as "molecules" of the Sun Tzu text. For present analytical needs, Griffith's verse-based structuring pays its way handsomely, giving just the right degree of flexibility needed to implement passage identification with a minimum grinding of scholarly gears. Although improvements on Griffith's specific versification scheme could be suggested, as a practical matter any such gains seem minor. The well-established status of Griffith's translation

[20] For a lens on Griffith's experience in intensive, sustained land warfare combat see his book *The Battle for Guadalcanal* (Philadelphia, PA/New York: Lippincott, 1963). That work, which cites Sun Tzu on certain military analysis points, is a further natural companion to Griffith's Sun Tzu translation.

For historical context, especially important as World War II recedes in collective memory, it should be noted that Guadalcanal was America's first major offensive action against the Japanese Empire following the Pearl Harbor attack and a succession of humiliating US defeats – Guam, Wake, Bataan, Corregidor – and as such held a special place in the American psyche at a crucial stage of US mobilization for World War II. It was a bitterly fought 1942–43 campaign where US success long hung in the balance. Griffith was executive officer and later commander of the First Marine Raider Battalion during the campaign. For his part in this campaign, in which he was wounded, Griffith was awarded the Navy Cross for "extreme heroism and courageous devotion to duty."

[21] For background on the Naval War College in that period see Boorman, Introduction footnote 4.

[22] This find included the "Han strips" text of Sun Tzu described on pp. 41–42 below.

[23] Griffith, p. xi gives Sun Tzu kudos as one who "appreciated the decisive influence of supply on the conduct of operations." A wry aside showing Griffith's own alertness to logistics issues is found in a late 1950s letter from Griffith to his friend B. H. Liddell Hart: "I think you will be amused at [Tang dynasty Sun Tzu commentator] Du Mu's comment . . . that of a company of one hundred, there were twenty-five administrative people to serve the seventy-five combat troops and care for the horses and oxen. Things don't seem to get any better in this connection, do they?" This letter is filed in LH 1/333/2 in the Liddell Hart Papers, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College London.

[24] For further specifics see pp. 52–53 below and "Scholarly Controls" in the online annex.

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makes efforts at tinkering with his division of the text into verses likely to create more complications than they would be worth.

Leading off with the deservedly famous Passage #1.1 on net assessment (pp. 74–76 below), the present study organizes Sun Tzu content into numbered passages each comprising a sequence of Griffith verses. In all, just over 400 such passages have been used to develop the fourteen themes. Some two-thirds of those passages – the ones deemed most important – appear in the main text of the present study. The remaining passages are assigned to appendices in the online annex.[25]

A basic feature of the present approach is that specific Sun Tzu verses (and longer passages too) commonly appear under more than one theme. Such versatile verses and passages should be regarded as normal. They facilitate capture of different facets of the same material, frequently pointing to alternative paths of generalization or application. The common sense of such multiple thematic assignments is that choice of theme to which to assign a given verse or set of verses frequently boils down to where one places the emphasis. To get the most out of Sun Tzu it is wise not to be too rigid about which emphasis is seen as the "correct" one. As an important case in point, some verses assigned to other themes by reason of their military content lend themselves to additional civilian interpretations ("dual use"), hence also receive assignment to Theme #4 (winning by non-military ways and means).

The present initiative might be described as a type of intellectual "reverse engineering" of Sun Tzu content.[26] Any exercise of this type inescapably involves many judgment calls. In some cases, reasonable readers might dispute assignments of particular passages to particular themes. In certain instances too, the "adhesion" between a given passage and a theme to which it is assigned is not as strong as in other cases (scarcely an unknown problem in concept-matching exercises!). However (subject, of course, to ever-present classical Chinese-language issues), the transparency of the present approach should be emphasized. In a world of digital editing capabilities, a critically inclined reader can try her hand at moving material from one theme to another or between main text and appendices.[27] Insight often comes from the exercise of implementing passage assignments, as when upon rereading a particular passage suddenly leaps into a fresh light; or when, on successive readings, its assignment shifts from "above the line" (main text) to "below the line" (appendices), and perhaps back again, as considerations pro and con are weighed and reweighed. Such possibility for dynamic extension of the

[25] In spirit (though the present goals differ from Lau's), this rounding up of passages for comparison and analysis rises to a challenge thrown down by Lau, who proposes that

> we should treat with impartiality all [Sun Tzu] passages which deal with a common topic (in the case under discussion, the classification of terrain), and there is much to be said for placing all such passages side by side, since when they are read together it is possible that they may serve to illuminate one another, in no matter how small a way.
>
> (Lau, 1965 article, pp. 328–29)

[26] It is worth noting affinities between the present approach and certain types of legal analysis. Manifestations of the same underlying legal idea or principle commonly surface in non-contiguous locations in a statute or other legal text (or set of related texts), often in disparate and at times non-obvious ways. A basic challenge for legal analysis (and law teaching as well) is to reveal the underlying principle and to place its variegated manifestations in clear perspective and relationship.

[27] Or, more ambitiously, proposing a new theme and populating it with Sun Tzu passages.

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present approach merits attention for larger reasons too. Notwithstanding highly developed traditions of wargaming and other gaming applications, strategy education – more so than its counterparts in tactics – remains much in need of further tools, concrete or abstract, that can facilitate active learning about strategic ideas (e.g., much as problem sets facilitate such learning in mathematics). Viewed in that way, the present approach, with its possibilities for fostering disciplined but creative engagement with the text, opens a door for active learning about Sun Tzu.

No textually informed approach can escape the fact that the Sun Tzu text is an ancient one, with accompanying obscurities and textual challenges. The present task is to navigate those minefields in order to clarify Sun Tzu (1), Sun Tzu (2), and – perhaps most importantly for our own time – Sun Tzu (3) substance. The reward from doing so is that the fourteen themes all contain shards of deep strategic insight capable of sustaining far-reaching development, in both theory and applications.

Broader Perspectives on Reading Sun Tzu

By one modern estimate, much of the Sun Tzu text can be assigned a date in the second half of the fifth century BC, close to the start of the Warring States period (for chronological background see p. xviii above).[28] Other estimates, in keeping with dates assigned to Sun-Tzu-the-person by Chinese historiographical tradition, point to an earlier date (e.g., late sixth or early fifth century BC, at the tail end of the Spring and Autumn era of Chinese history). There is also an important body of modern scholarly opinion that would place the Sun Tzu text or major parts of it (notably including the chapter on espionage) considerably later in the Warring States era, say, late fourth century to early third.[29] We would certainly like to know more about dating of the text than we do, especially given that these centuries were a time when Chinese society, including its military institutions and technology, was in great flux.

There has been a longstanding controversy, originating in pre-modern Chinese scholarship, as to whether Sun Tzu was in fact a historical person.[30] Certainly what

[28] See Robin D. S. Yates, "New light on ancient Chinese military texts: notes on their nature and evolution, and the development of military specialization in Warring States China," *T'oung Pao*, 1988, 74(4/5), 211–48, noting (p. 218) that "we may therefore tentatively date the *Sun-tzu* to this period [453 BC – 403 BC], while recognizing that not all the sections derive from the same period." (That dating's rationale has not escaped controversy: see Petersen's work cited in Introduction footnote 32.)

[29] For a strong position in favor of such more recent dating see "Précis" in Mair, (unnumbered) p. li. Taking a compatible stance is Wilkinson, §24.8.1, p. 349. Griffith, pp. 6–11 also rounds up a range of historical and linguistic evidence that bolsters identification of Sun Tzu as a Warring States text.

[30] Evidence that Sun Tzu the person is fictive, not historical, is presented in detail by Mair, pp. 9–23. Weighing against Sun Tzu's historical existence is the fact that the *Zuozhuan*, regarded as China's earliest narrative history (see p. xxiii above), fails to mention Sun Tzu despite extensive coverage of his purported historical time and place. Giles, pp. xxv–xxx makes a tentative case that Sun-Tzu-the-person did exist (*fl. c.* 500 BC) but was at best a minor figure on the historical canvas of his time (perhaps a little like Clausewitz in modern times). Sawyer, p. 84 sums up our ignorance: "Sun Wu [i.e., Sun Tzu] remains an enigma not only because of the absence of historical data in the so-called authentic texts of the period, but also because his life never generated the anecdotes and illustrative stories frequently found about famous figures in the works of succeeding periods."

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we know about Sun Tzu's life is extremely limited. Virtually all of it comes from his biography in the work of the pioneering historian Sima Qian, the "grand historian of China" who lived *c.* 145 BC–86 BC – i.e., centuries after any historical Sun Tzu. That biography is dominated by just one item: the colorful and oft-told tale of the drilling of the ruler's concubines by Sun Wu (traditionally equated to the Sun Tzu of the Sun Tzu text), with outcomes fatal to two of them for disobeying Sun Tzu's orders.[31] The authenticity of Sima Qian's biography of Sun Tzu has long been called into question and modern scholarship has intensified those challenges.[32] Tellingly for a military figure, there is little we are sure of regarding a putative historical Sun Tzu's military experience (e.g., what, if any, were his consequential command decisions?).[33] There is even uncertainty regarding which of several different warring states should be treated as the locale where the Sun Tzu text's perspective on war and geopolitics took shape. Sima Qian's biography places Sun Tzu as a native of the state of Qi (whose capital lay in north China, in modern Shandong province), though his famous anecdote about the concubines has Sun Tzu advising the ruler of Wu, a state centered several hundred miles to the south and whose territory included the Yangzi Delta where modern Shanghai and Nanjing would be built. Some modern scholarship finds intellectual roots of the Sun Tzu text in ambitions and geopolitical problems of the state of Lu, a small state (best remembered for having been home to Confucius, who died in 479 BC) situated between greater powers to the north and south but having aspirations (as Brooks, p. 59, puts it) "to play in the big leagues."

Two basic insights come from asking about origins of the Sun Tzu text.

[31] For translations of this *Shiji* 65 biography (which Mair labels a pseudo-biography), see Griffith, pp. 57–59; Ames, pp. 32–34; Mair, pp. 133–35. Translations with further scholarly apparatus are Nienhauser, Vol. VII (1994), pp. 37–38; Vol. VII (2021), pp. 69–71 (both editions are cited on pp. xxiii–xxiv above). A somewhat different, fragmentary version of the concubines story was recovered from the same archaeological find that recovered the "Han strips" text of Sun Tzu. For that different version see #10 footnote 9 below.

[32] An ingenious theory that this personage was created as a kind of "double out of nothing" (Petersen's evocative phrase) – a fictive collaborator of Wu Zixu (d. 484 BC), a prominent historical figure (naval as well as military) of the late Spring and Autumn era – has been propounded by Danish Sinologist Jens Østergård Petersen. See pp. 14–15 of his "What's in a name? On the sources concerning Sun Wu," *Asia Major*, Third Series, 1992, 5(1), 1–31 (also cited by Wilkinson, §24.8.1, p. 349).

[33] The battle of Boju (506 BC) between the states of Chu and Wu, in which Wu prevailed and went on to take the Chu capital of Ying, is the only battle we know of in which Sun Tzu may have participated. Our source, the *Shiji* 65 biography (see Introduction footnote 31 above), tells us little more than that he was on the winning side. The *Zuozhuan* (p. xxiii above) gives more detail on Boju, but notably without any mention of Sun Tzu. (Read on a level of military ideas, that *Zuozhuan* account does tell a story that evokes several signature Sun Tzu concepts, including death ground. See p. 323 below.)

Shiji 66 does note two cases of Sun Tzu's advising the ruler of Wu on specific high-level military strategy matters. On at least one of those occasions – the other probably too, though the *Shiji* account is slightly less clear – the advice is described as emanating jointly from Wu Zixu, one of the distinguished generals of his time, and from Sun Tzu, which leaves Sun Tzu's contribution to the conversations uncertain at best. For both episodes, see Wu Zixu's *Shiji* 66 biography, translated in Nienhauser, Vol. VII (1994), p. 53; Nienhauser, Vol. VII (2021), pp. 96–97 (both cited on pp. xxiii–xxiv above).

A similar account appears in *Shiji* 31, translated in Nienhauser, Vol. V.1 (cited on p. xxiii above), p. 17.

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First, as noted earlier, archaeological evidence supports the notion that Sun Tzu's thirteen-chapter text had attained close-to-modern form by the second century BC.[34] This was the time of the Western Han dynasty (202 BC–8 AD), successor to the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) of terracotta soldiers fame that brought the Warring States era to a close by unifying China. That dating gives grounds to believe that, for the past two millennia and more, a textually well-defined body of military theory and doctrine has existed under the Sun Tzu rubric. In that sense the Sun Tzu "brand" has been essentially stable for over 2,000 years. Quibbles with this statement are possible – but the basic evidence is archaeologically sound and the quibbles do not seem major.

Second, there is considerable, if still inferential, reason to treat the Sun Tzu text as a compilation – the work of more than one hand, quite possibly spanning decades in the making. Reflecting on the eddies of scholarly opinion swirling around who Sun Tzu may have been, Roger Ames, a contemporary Sun Tzu scholar (and student of D. C. Lau), has observed that a "quest for a single text authored by one person" harbors a "real danger . . . of pursuing the wrong questions and, in so doing, losing sight of what might be more important insights."[35] He goes on to suggest that "works such as the *Sun-tzu* might have emerged more as a process than as a single event, and those involved in its authorship might well have been several persons over several generations."

Carrying this vein of thinking a step or two further, a boldly specific account of how Sun Tzu's thirteen chapters may have taken shape through successive accretions – sequentially adding chapters over a period spanning from the mid-fourth century until the process reached closure around 270 BC – has been advanced by E. Bruce Brooks.[36] While parts of the story he tells seem inescapably conjectural, there is no need to accept all of the details in order to derive plausible and useful insights from it. His story points to an early cluster of Sun Tzu chapters where terrain issues loom large; a later cluster (coming after the first by perhaps half a human

[34] Citing the reconstruction of the archaeologically recovered Sun Tzu text by the Yinqueshan Committee (its name reflects the geographic location in modern Shandong province where that text was found), Ames, p. 36 notes that these "remnants of the thirteen-chapter edition (over 2,700 characters)" contain "representative text from all of the chapters except Chapter 10 [i.e., Sun Tzu X]." For background on the Yinqueshan find – which recovered much more textual material, some Sun Tzu–related, some not, than this partial text of Sun Tzu's thirteen chapters – see Wilkinson, §59.6.2.2, p. 806.

[35] Both this and the following quotation are from Ames, p. 21.

[36] This theory of the genesis of the Sun Tzu text is put forward in Brooks's insightful, if rather telegraphic, mini-essay on Sun Tzu embedded in a much larger review article by Brooks (cited on p. xxii) addressing a wide range of early Chinese texts. For highlights of Brooks's argument, which is informed by analysis of Sun Tzu's military content, see Brooks, pp. 59–62. His proposed accretion sequence appears in Table 12A on p. A-35 in the online annex. With the proviso that some of Brooks's conjectures (e.g., proposing definite calendar years for particular Sun Tzu chapters) seem destined to outrun the evidence, this terse essay, published in a specialized forum, deserves to be widely known to the large community of analysts of many backgrounds and persuasions interested in Sun Tzu's substance. For background on relevant pioneering work of E. Bruce Brooks & A. Taeko Brooks see Mair, pp. 67–68 note 56. See also E. Bruce Brooks & A. Taeko Brooks, *The Emergence of China: from Confucius to the empire* (Warring States Project, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, 2015), p. 238, presenting a bar chart indicating, for a range of early Chinese texts (Sun Tzu among them), estimates of approximate time intervals in which particular texts took shape by an inferred process of accretion.

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generation) comprising all but one of the remaining chapters; and one much later chapter (the espionage one) conjectured as having been added around a human generation later still. While the present Sun Tzu thematic analysis does not rest on the validity of Brooks's proposed ordering of Sun Tzu chapters, his analysis frequently helps sharpen thinking about substantive issues and will be often be used as a heuristic tool for that purpose.

These observations suggest an important perspective on the Sun Tzu text and the military and strategic ideas found in it. Certain types of efforts at a close reading of Sun Tzu may in fact be overreaching in light of the "intergenerational group product" that the text may well represent. It needs to be recognized and accepted that there are limits on the extent to which weight can be placed on the Sun Tzu text as a polished – or even fully internally consistent – repository of military or strategic thought, either textual or intellectual. The lines of thinking exemplified by Ames and Brooks should sound a warning about efforts to deduce too elaborate a logical edifice from delicately titrated exegesis of different parts of the text, after the fashion of reading modern statutes or works of analytical philosophy.

At the same time (and echoing the spirit of Lau's 1965 article) this caveat should definitely not deter efforts to connect and coordinate the thrust of ideas found in different parts of the Sun Tzu text. Importantly, approaching Sun Tzu as a coherent package of ideas need not require taking a stand on the presence of coherent overall organization of the text. Strategic thought is always an act of synthesis, and high-quality strategic writings are notorious for their commonly mongrel roots (as well as for often not being very well organized!). As the writings of Mao in modern times attest – representing as they do an amalgam culled from many sources, among them, parts of the Marxist-Leninist tradition, Mao's own direct experience and observation of Chinese society and politics in his time, Chinese historical romances, and, along the way, some strategy of the game of *weiqi* plus some Sun Tzu – strategic ideas of very different provenance and vintage can at times serendipitously blend to create an original and awesomely powerful punch. Much turns on how those sources are chosen and even more on how adroitly they are conceptually integrated. The Sun Tzu text may indeed be a compilation decades-long or even longer in the making, the work of multiple hands and in many ways loose-knit in its makeup, but it can still express an intellectually coherent strategic style.

That is the fundamental perspective on the text adopted in the present analysis. With a dash of poetic license, it might be labeled the "Axiom of Conceptual Unity for Sun Tzu" (or perhaps more exactly, drawing on the measured language of the law, a "rebuttable presumption" of such unity).[37] It is an approach that works for

[37] Also stressing the consistency of Sun Tzu's concepts and principles is Ralph D. Sawyer, "Military writings," in David A. Graff & Robin Higham (eds.), *A Military History of China* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2012), pp. 97–114 (see p. 100 there). For a kindred "conceptual unity" perspective on the *Laozi* Daoist classic see Benjamin Schwartz, "The thought of the Tao-de-ching," pp. 189–210 in Livia Kohn & Michael LaFargue (eds.), *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). His p. 209 is an acute sketch of the challenges faced in identifying conceptual unity underlying seeming intellectual sprawl.

For background on the *Laozi* text (also known as the *Daodejing*), which is often regarded as having intellectual affinities with Sun Tzu, see *Early Chinese Texts* (cited on p. xxii above), pp. 269–92; Wilkinson, §29.3.2, pp. 414–15.

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Sun Tzu, though definitely not for all early Chinese texts. In the chapters that follow, support for this axiom's credibility is built, one step at a time, by a careful reading of the text that turns up many interconnections and harmonies, some readily apparent, others less so.[38] Support of a different sort comes from within Chinese tradition itself, where Sun Tzu's thirteen chapters have long been read as whole, enjoying one reputation and being treated as one source of intellectual inspiration, indivisible.[39]

Of course, accepting an Axiom of Conceptual Unity for Sun Tzu does not eliminate a battery of textual and interpretive issues that impinge on how we read the text and engage with particular strands of Sun Tzu's thinking. Many of the footnotes to Sun Tzu passages below, starting with Passage #1.1, represent an effort to clarify those issues and, where it seems appropriate, to take a stand on them.

Standing back from the myriad details and disputes, certain approaches to reading Sun Tzu stand out as more productive than others. Much as in many applied mathematics settings, all approaches involve approximations of some kind. The key to analytical success is identifying a serviceable approximation, taking into account the pertinent goals and constraints. Again as in much applied mathematics work, there is "no one size fits all" approach that is best for all purposes. Different approximations may harbor inconsistencies with one another, yet each may have its uses.

Two forks in the road in reading Sun Tzu merit specific comment here.

First, there is a basic divide between the present fourteen themes approach, which pivots on disassembling the Sun Tzu text to anchor and illustrate those themes, and other approaches that seek insights from identifying overall structure in Sun Tzu's thirteen chapters or major parts of the text (in particular at the chapter level). Traces of larger structure may exist even if the text is a compilation (indeed Brooks, p. 61 expands on his accretionist theory by what may be read as a sketch of such a structure, which in his analysis is broadly evolutionary in nature). However, a quest for larger structure in the Sun Tzu text is left here for other Sun Tzu scholarship to address.[40]

There is a second, even more important, divide between approaches that emphasize Sun Tzu's Chinese cultural roots and content and other approaches that play up its place in the universalistic analysis of warfare and strategy. The former focus is

[38] A case in point involves harmonies between Sun Tzu's military thinking about "formlessness" – which one modern scholar has characterized as the "ultimate counterintelligence" (see p. 269 below) – and human intelligence emphases in Sun Tzu's espionage chapter (Sun Tzu XIII).

[39] Of the Sun Tzu book's longevity, a review essay on Griffith's translation observes that "Few books have had a better record." See p. 129 of Scott A. Boorman & Howard L. Boorman, "Mao Tse-tung and the Art of War," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 1964, *24(1)*, 129–37.

[40] A relevant line of analysis has been suggested by David Robert Howell. It is premised on the concept that some (though not all) of Sun Tzu's thirteen chapters lend themselves to being read as organized, coherent essays rather than as loose-knit, unorganized assemblages of short passages. Howell has developed his standpoint in application to Sun Tzu's first chapter via a customized course handout prepared by him for January 2014 Sun Tzu–focused class meetings at the start of that year's Yale University Brady-Johnson Program in Grand Strategy seminar.

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illustrated by the Ames translation.[41] It is also exemplified by work of others who find kinship between Sun Tzu and Daoist strands of Chinese thought.[42]

With some qualifications, the present study hews to the latter – universalistic – emphasis.[43] More specifically, the present perspective on Sun Tzu builds on a premise that there exists a body of fundamental military and strategic knowledge of a universal type – whose delineation is an intellectual ambition shared with Clausewitz and game theory alike – into some of whose deeper recesses Sun Tzu's thinking offers major insights.[44] Generalizing an earlier observation about warfare in its traditional military sense (p. 6 above), universal knowledge grows out of an underlying commonality of many of the problems faced by strategists, transcending particulars of time, place, and technology. An alternative, more nuanced, statement of a universalist position is that there exists a universal military theory with

[41] See Ames, pp. 39ff. Ames, pp. 6–7 very effectively summarizes his culturally oriented standpoint:

> Most accounts of the Sun-tzu have tended to be historical; mine is cultural. In the Introduction that precedes the translations, I have attempted to identify those cultural presuppositions that must be consciously entertained if we are to place the text within its own world view. In our encounter with a text from a tradition as different from ours as is classical China's, we must exercise our minds and our imaginations to locate it within its own ways of thinking and living. Otherwise we cannot help but see only our own reflection appearing on the surface of Chinese culture when we give prominence to what is culturally familiar and important to us, while inadvertently ignoring precisely those more exotic elements that are essential to an appreciation of China's differences. By contrasting our assumptions with those of the classical Chinese world view, I have tried to secure and lift to the surface those peculiar features of classical Chinese thought which are in danger of receding in our interpretation of the text.

That cultural standpoint makes Ames's work on Sun Tzu an excellent foil for the present study, precisely because it represents a coherent, sustained effort to develop and advocate for a way of reading Sun Tzu that contrasts with the universalistic standpoint emphasized in the present study.

[42] On Daoistic aspects of Sun Tzu see Mair, pp. 2, 47–49. Of course, such affinities do not spell identity and it is also important to recognize ambiguities in the concept of Daoism, "a term that covers diverse strains of ancient Chinese thought." See p. 237 of Benjamin I. Schwartz's review of Lisa Raphals, *Knowing Words: wisdom and cunning in the classical traditions of China and Greece* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), published in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1996, *56(1)*, 227–44.

[43] This is largely also Griffith's standpoint. See, e.g., Passage #1.1 discussion on pp. 74–76 below.

[44] This intellectual position is forcefully stated in the introduction to Brigadier General Vincent J. Esposito and Colonel John R. Elting, *A Military History and Atlas of the Napoleonic Wars* (rvd. ed.; London/Mechanicsburg, PA: Greenhill/Stackpole, 1999): "the conduct of war is an art based on ageless fundamental concepts that have remained valid irrespective of the prevailing means and methods of warfare." See also Handel, Introduction footnote 17, p. xvii ("the universal logic of war still exists whether or not it is codified").

Perhaps more compelling than are any general affirmations about universal theory is comparing Sun Tzu with observations from *The Good Soldier* (London: Macmillan, 1948) by Field-Marshall Archibald Wavell, one of the distinguished British commanders of World War II and a major advocate of military deception. The similarities of various key ideas and emphases, separated in time by over two millennia, fairly leap off the page. Compare, for example, Wavell's "Manoeuvre and stratagem" (his pp. 157–61) and Sun Tzu Passage #7.9, entitled "Sun Tzu's 'Second Symphony': deception, calculation, and operational style."

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stylistic variations in its development and application.[45] Adopting that perspective, Sun Tzu represents one style within such a larger family of styles, some of Chinese origin, some not.

Especially by encouraging attention to logistics and related structural constraints that all strategists face in one way or another, a universalistic emphasis gives analytical traction, providing a powerful and versatile tool for shedding light on interpretive issues arising in the Sun Tzu text. Wielding it involves continually posing the question: If I was a general (or strategist), what *usable* insight might I derive from this part of Sun Tzu? Responses to that question unlock many doors. It is a tool that lacks a close counterpart in reading many other early Chinese texts dealing with broad social, political, or philosophical subjects where pertinent context and constraints are commonly far less clear.

Such "usable insight" analysis should be exploited to the fullest possible extent.

Universalistic and culturally oriented approaches to Sun Tzu are by no means mortal enemies of one another, and many possibilities for cross-fertilization exist.[46] Indeed the more seriously a universalistic type of reading is pursued, the more avenues for combining it with a culturally oriented reading start to surface naturally. But efforts to unify a universalistic with a culturally oriented reading prematurely – before work along each path has been developed far enough – can easily lead to confused results, serving neither goal well.

In keeping with the perspective just set forth, the present study of Sun Tzu aims to clarify what Sun Tzu's universal insights are and to point directions for their further development and application, including in our own time in contexts remote from early Chinese warfare. Along the way, Chinese cultural content of various of Sun Tzu's military concepts and principles will be noted, but (with a few important specific exceptions) will not be given center stage. One such exception arises in connection with Theme #5, where the fundamental Chinese strategic concept of *shi* (commonly rendered "strategic advantage," though *shi* has other aspects too) is pivotal and should not be sidestepped. Another involves Theme #14, whose focus is the contrast between *qi* and *zheng* approaches in warfare (which Lau's 1965 article renders as "crafty" and "straightforward," respectively, but which lack truly satisfactory English translations). Even these exceptions will be approached in a way that seeks to identify general insights not limited to Chinese warfare or cultural context. The present study's focus on a universalistic reading of Sun Tzu aspires to capture a

[45] The versatile and useful concept of strategic style owes much to work of Nathan Leites. See, e.g., his *Soviet Style in War* (rvd. ed.; Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1992; first published by Crane, Russak, New York, 1982). Boorman's *weiqi* book, cited in Introduction footnote 13, is in many ways a study of a specific strategic style expressed by Mao's revolutionary warfare writings, one that has considerable common ground with Sun Tzu's style of warfare but that also retains its own identity.

[46] Choices between a universalistic lens and a culturally specific one also arise in history of mathematics, an activity that has had a symbiotic relationship with warfare throughout recorded human history. Useful perspective may come from that quarter. It has been written of one of the great historians of mathematics, Otto Neugebauer (whose mathematical roots lay in Göttingen, where he served as Richard Courant's assistant), that "even through years of allowing that mathematics was grounded in culture, he [Neugebauer] really believed that in a more profound sense it was not." See Noel M. Swerdlow, "Otto E. Neugebauer (26 May 1899 – 19 February 1990)," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, March 1993, *137(1)*, 138–65 (quote is from p. 160). Kindred intellectual issues should be kept in mind when engaging with Sun Tzu.

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remarkable quality of timelessness of Sun Tzu's thought of which B. H. Liddell Hart wrote in his "Foreword" to Griffith's Sun Tzu translation (p. v):

> Among all the military thinkers of the past, only Clausewitz is comparable, and even he is more "dated" than Sun Tzu, and in part antiquated, although he was writing more than two thousand years later. Sun Tzu has clearer vision, more profound insight, and eternal freshness.

A task of distilling universal strategic insights from Sun Tzu is in some important ways more tractable than the culturally oriented exegesis to which some Sun Tzu scholarship aspires. Far from being the politically and culturally consolidated entity that China would later become – at least to a very significant extent – with Confucianism as its predominant cultural force, China in the Warring States era was in a "hundred flowers" period. Intellectually, it brimmed with contending schools of applied philosophy – Confucian, Legalist, Daoist, Mohist, Military Experts (*bingjia*), and many more – with highly variegated menus of analytical, ethical, and policy offerings, the Sun Tzu text being but one.[47] The diversity of schools of thought flourishing in Warring States China, with their many turbulent eddies and cross-currents, contributed to making that era one of the major transitions in world history.[48] It gave rise to an intellectual ferment that would certainly have affected the reading and reception of Sun Tzu's text (which is decidedly not of Confucian persuasion), and in all likelihood the formation of the text itself as well.

That context means that any effort at a cultural interpretation of Sun Tzu's teaching, certainly a unified one that also remains faithful to its historical milieu, needs to be handled with utmost care to avoid overreaching, retrospectively imputing more cultural order than existed when the text took shape. Threading the needle here may at best be only partially feasible with available sources. Nor do the challenges and pitfalls facing culturally oriented readings of Sun Tzu end with the Warring States period. Later Chinese strategic tradition, far from being a monolith, exhibited major internal diversity.[49] In particular, scholarship on the military strand of Chinese strategic thought should not to be allowed to crowd out attention to its comparably longstanding and highly developed civilian bureaucratic strand.[50] The priorities and

[47] For a snapshot of various of the "hundred schools" of China's axial age see Wilkinson, §58.6.1, p. 775. The *bingjia* school goes by various English-language names, e.g., Militarists, School of the Military, School of Strategy, etc. Referring to it as "Military Experts" follows Wilkinson, §24.8, p. 348, and avoids some extraneous connotations as well as possible confusions with other schools.

[48] See Brooks & Brooks, footnote 36 above, p. 14. In this and other work they convey to modern readers the spirit of give-and-take, of advocacy and counter-advocacy, that suffused Warring States intellectual life. As they put it (p. 74), "the theorists responded to each other's work, copying the good ideas or opposing the erroneous ones. Such was the interactive nature of the [fourth-century BC] Golden Age of Chinese Thought." At the same time, modern audiences should be alert to a "general tendency within Chinese philosophical works for rival schools to use the same vocabulary to advance very different ideas" (Raphals, Introduction footnote 42, p. 7) – at times amounting to a type of semantic warfare!

[49] As a case in point see Peter C. Perdue, "Culture, history, and imperial Chinese strategy: legacies of the Qing conquests," pp. 252–87 in Hans van de Ven (ed.), *Warfare in Chinese History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), in particular his pp. 266–72 regarding "Differences between Ming and Qing strategic thinking."

[50] Roots of the Chinese bureaucratic phenomenon are very old. For a vantage on Chinese bureaucracy from a time long before Sun Tzu see Li Feng, *Bureaucracy and the State in Early China: governing the Western Zhou* (Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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cognitive patterns of the bureaucrats were certainly of enormous significance in shaping Chinese grand strategy and sometimes also military strategy down through the dynasties, yet in many ways were very different from those of the military tradition (certainly in context and emphases, starting with choice of tools of conflict).[51] As a further overlay of complexity, it is also essential to take cognizance of the influence on Chinese warfare of Inner Asian strains of military and strategic thought and practice. These are prominently represented, inter alia, by the several conquest dynasties (Liao, Jin, Yuan, and Qing) that ruled China for much of the past thousand years (see Chronology, pp. xix–xx above). There are traditions here that have their own identities distinguishable from Chinese ones (not least because of the formidable logistics challenges facing Inner Asian military operations, as well as the central role therein of mounted troops).[52]

Adding to these complications, efforts to extrapolate a coherent Chinese strategic tradition to our own time runs into the further difficulty that China and the United States are now on the "other side of the river" from one another, to use Edgar Snow's haunting metaphor – a relationship increasingly far too close and fraught with paths of reciprocal influence to be conducive to crisp propositions about cultural and psychological divergences, albeit that some of those persist.

For all these reasons, one should be very wary of generalizations that purport to sum up an overall Chinese "strategic culture" as a neat package, and along the way uncritically to merge readings of Sun Tzu with other major strands of it.[53] Especially

[51] See James T. C. Liu, "Eleventh-century Chinese bureaucrats: some historical classifications and behavioral types," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 1959, *4(2)*, 207–26. One type of bureaucrat Liu labels "manipulative," profiling its characteristics on his p. 224. Such bureaucrats could well have profited from studying Sun Tzu (which many surely did!), but often in ways involving spheres of action remote from military combat. Cross-influences also existed. As Yates observes,

> While it may be difficult to determine in any one instance whether a given military officer was literate or learned enough to modify his behavior on campaign in the light of previous historical examples quoted by these [Sun Tzu commentators] or by the rules of action enunciated by the *Sunzi*, yet it is likely that this mode of commentary did influence the dispassionate analysis of officers' actions by their superior civilian officials and by their civilian contemporaries.

See p. 75 of Robin Yates, "Early modes on interpretation of the military canons: the case of the *Sunzi bingfa*," pp. 65–79 in Ching-I Tu (ed.), *Interpretation and Intellectual Change: Chinese hermeneutics in historical perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ/London: Transaction Publishers, 2005).

[52] For overview see Nicola Di Cosmo, "Introduction: Inner Asian ways of warfare in historical perspective," pp. 1–29 in Nicola Di Cosmo (ed.), *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800)* (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2002). On the Manchu case, with extensive attention to logistics challenges, see Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: the Qing conquest of central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). For overview of Mongol warfare in the time of Chinggis Khan see Timothy May, *The Mongol Art of War: Chinggis Khan and the Mongol military system* (Barnsley, England: Pen & Sword Military, 2007). For broader analysis of a steppe empire's non-bureaucratic nature, worlds apart from the Chinese bureaucratic phenomenon, see also Joseph F. Fletcher, Jr., "The Mongols: ecological and social perspectives," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 1986, *46(1)*, 11–50 (reprinted in Fletcher's posthumously published *Studies on Chinese and Islamic Inner Asia* [Beatrice Forbes Manz, ed.; Aldershot, UK/Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1995]).

[53] A relevant question, too often neglected, centers on means of transmission of Chinese military and strategic thought. Such means would certainly have important bearing on what was transmitted (and along the way, variances, deletions, elaborations, embellishments, or garbles). In Sun Tzu's time (and in later times too) much of that transmission would have taken place via oral tradition – a pattern by no means unknown in how military ideas and doctrine are transmitted

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when one starts to move away from informed Sinological scholarship to parts of the non-specialist modern literature invoking Sun Tzu, this is a very common pitfall. A testament to the many missteps possible here is the proliferation of stereotyped, even largely imaginary, ancient Chinese worlds that populate parts of the contemporary Sun Tzu literature and discourse.

A particular risk arises in attempting to align Sun Tzu (2) or (3) work too closely on culturally specific interpretations of Sun Tzu, especially where contemporary issues are the focus and the goal of the analysis is practical. In cultural analysis settings, the old fallacies of essentialism and reification are difficult to eradicate entirely and often persist in subtle, low-visibility forms. These sources of analytical bias have significant potential for inadvertent encouragement of cultural stereotypes, including ones pertaining to "strategic culture" or behavior patterns regarded as associated with it.[54] In many scholarly settings, the adverse effects of tendencies like these are manageable, if regrettable. But in practically oriented strategic analysis, such intellectual traps can all too easily provide openings for an astute foe to play along with some received and oft-recited cultural stereotype – and then to break from that stereotype, without warning, at a singularly inconvenient moment.[55] Such a stratagem would indeed be vintage Sun Tzu!

Weighing these considerations, the present position is that it would be counterproductive to become so immersed in dissecting the nuances of cultural interpretations of Sun Tzu (and perhaps also so wary of getting them wrong) that the universal military and strategic content of Sun Tzu's thought received only secondary or afterthought attention. That would be a major mistake, unnecessarily hobbling our ability to identify Sun Tzu insights pertinent to our own time and thereby to gain traction on the twin questions with which the present analysis began:

> "*What did Master Sun know that we still don't (or have yet to absorb adequately)?*"[56]
> "*What are Sun Tzu's limitations or blind spots?*"

Ideas and leads sparked by the first question point in diverse directions. The present recommendation is that they definitely not be approached in too literal-minded a way or as constituting a unified "system." To attempt to do so would

today. Relatedly, rhyming passages identified in part of the Sun Tzu text may have assisted its memorization by the marginally literate. See "Overview" section of Kidder Smith website, citing sources (p. xxi above). See also Yates, Introduction footnote 51, p. 67.

[54] Military or strategic doctrinal pronouncements commonly tend to be somewhat simplified, at times very much so. Such simplification is understandable in light of military doctrine's core role as a type of communications system, enabling a degree of coordinated action to be achieved even when timely, secure, direct communication is difficult or impossible (a common circumstance in warfare). But doctrinal simplification, however valid its purpose, can also easily feed cultural stereotypes.

[55] Such a break with tradition is a known move in some pre-modern Chinese military writings, e.g., the military manual *Huqian jing* of Xu Dong (*fl.* 1000 AD). See Ralph D. Sawyer (with the collaboration of Mei-chün Lee Sawyer), *The Tao of Deception: unorthodox warfare in historic and modern China* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), pp. 260–73, in particular p. 260: "[Xu Dong] not only warns against slavishly following ancient methods, but *also advocates deliberately contravening them in order to shed inimical constraints and avoid predictability*" (emphasis supplied).

[56] Failures to absorb importantly include "failures to apply what we already know," with resulting challenges for strategy and logistics education. See Boorman, Introduction footnote 4, p. 112 note 45.

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undercut one of the Sun Tzu text's most appealing and valuable features: namely, its ability to catalyze fresh applications in novel situations (some of which Sun Tzu could not have imagined). In the main body of the present study, candidates for "What did Master Sun know . . ." insights will be suggested from time to time, usually in the Sun Tzu (2) and (3) "frontiers" discussions that accompany each of the fourteen themes.[57] Creative adaptation of Sun Tzu's ideas takes center stage here; specifics vary greatly. This book ends with two further batches of ideas also relevant to the "What did Master Sun know . . ." question, which appear in the last two sections of the Conclusion. The first batch (pp. 504–13) analyzes Sun Tzu as a pioneering information warfare theorist. A second batch (pp. 513–21) profiles "A Sun Tzu for the Twenty-first Century."

The second question (Sun Tzu's limitations) will also be addressed in more than one way, providing an element of critique much needed in modern treatments of early Chinese warfare and strategy which too often fall into a cheerleading trap. First, each of the thematic chapters developing Themes #1–#14 contains a section entitled "Roads Not Taken by Sun Tzu," which is allocated to an overview of analytical directions that Sun Tzu might plausibly have pursued in context of his time, yet did *not* pursue (see p. 51 below). A broader vantage on Sun Tzu's limitations comes from applying to Sun Tzu the Eccles–Rosinski strategy-as-control framework analyzed in Boorman's 2009 *Naval War College Review* strategy article (see Theme #5 "frontiers," pp. 187–94 below).[58] The Conclusion chapter then casts a still wider net, profiling limitations on Sun Tzu's thinking in the broadest terms (see "Reality Check: Sun Tzu's Limitations," pp. 497–504). Table 8 (pp. 498–99) provides an overview.

Themes #1–#14 Chapters As Self-contained Units

Building on basic orientation provided by the Background and Preliminaries chapters, each thematic chapter is designed to be read in a self-contained way. Main text footnotes help indicate connections between themes. Textual support for each theme is anchored by the Sun Tzu passage selection with which every thematic chapter begins.

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[57] Table 9 in the Conclusion (p. 506 below) provides a roundup and finding aid for the present study's harvest of insights of "What did Master Sun know . . ." type. Many of these contribute ideas from Sun Tzu pertaining to the role of information in strategy and conflict.

[58] This framework's seven basic elements (Boorman, Introduction footnote 4, p. 103) are set forth on p. 187 below.

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