

# **Ancient China on Postmodern War**

Enduring ideas from the Chinese  
strategic tradition

**Thomas M. Kane**

Cass Military Studies

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# Ancient China on Postmodern War

Sun Tzu and other classical Chinese strategic thinkers wrote in an era of social, economic and military revolution, and hoped to identify enduring principles of war and statecraft. The twenty-first century is a time of similarly revolutionary change, and this makes their ideas of particular relevance for today's strategic environment. Placing these theories in historical context, Dr Kane explores ancient Chinese reactions to such issues as advances in military technology and insurgency and terrorism, providing interesting comparisons between modern and ancient.

The book explains the way prominent Chinese thinkers – such as Sun Tzu, Han Fei Tzu and Lao Tzu – treated critical strategic questions. It also compares their ideas to those of thinkers from other times and civilizations (e.g. Clausewitz) to illuminate particularly important points. In concluding, the book addresses the question of how ancient Chinese ideas might inform contemporary strategic debates.

This book will be of much interest to students of Strategic Studies, Chinese Philosophy and Military History.

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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First published 2007

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to [www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk](http://www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).”

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Kane, Thomas M., 1969–

p. cm.

1. Strategy. 2. Military art and science—China. 3. Military art and science. I. Title.

U162.K26 2007

355.020931—dc22

2006034181

ISBN 0-203-08888-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN13: 978-0-415-38479-7 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-08888-3 (ebk)

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**To Matthew Agren and Martha Hilton  
Friends in Need**





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# Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Xiudian Dai for suggestions and advice. Thanks also to the University of Hull's Institute for Applied Ethics, for material support.

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# 1 Introduction

'[A]s water has no constant form,' the Chinese strategist Sun Tzu noted, 'there are in warfare no constant conditions' (Tao 1986: 107). Just as Sun Tzu might have predicted, military thought and practice at the beginning of the twenty-first century has been far from constant. Barely two decades earlier, the Cold War dominated world politics and strategic thought. Between 1989 and 1991, with relatively little warning, Moscow relinquished its European satellites, dissolved the Soviet Union and sought more cordial relations with the West. American president George H.W. Bush proclaimed a New World Order based upon the United Nations (UN). Simultaneously, the success of American information technology in the 1990–1 Gulf War encouraged many to foresee a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that would make late twentieth-century armed forces – and even, perhaps, their nuclear arsenals – obsolete.

Other journalists, historians and military officers predicted that ongoing social trends would prove even more revolutionary, possibly destroying the nation-state itself and ushering in a neo-medieval age of overlapping political systems or a neo-barbaric age of anarchy (Kaplan 1994: *passim*). From the late 1990s onwards, spectacular terrorist attacks and equally spectacular responses have lent credence to these hypotheses. Meanwhile, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s 1998/9 decision to attack Serbia without UN authorization challenged earlier concepts of world order and American President George Bush Jr's 2003 decision to bypass the UN in invading Iraq undermined them even further. RMA technology helped Western coalitions overthrow the governments of Afghanistan and Iraq in short order. Since then, insurgents in both countries have plagued Western forces in ways that would have been familiar decades or even centuries earlier. In some circumstances, old principles remain lethally valid, and that may be what makes ongoing changes in military affairs most difficult to analyse.

Those who wish to understand such periods of uncertainty in military affairs do well to revisit classic works on strategy. If these works deserve their reputation, they reveal fundamental principles that will remain useful even as superficial assumptions disintegrate. This is why Thucydides dared to present

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## 2 Introduction

his history of the Peloponnesian War as a 'possession for all time' (Thucydides 1997: 14). Even when classic teachings seem elliptical or dated, earlier writings on military problems can provide a useful foil for contemporary consideration of similar issues.

For those interested in contemporary war and statecraft, classic Chinese works on these topics are particularly relevant. China scholar John J. Fairbank made this point in the introductory chapter to a book on selected topics in Chinese military history. Fairbank begins by quoting from experts who hold that strategic studies must 'become less military and more civilian ... make greater use of political philosophy, economics and sociology, ... [and] come to better terms with applied science' (Fairbank 1974: 1). Fairbank goes on to state 'In all these respects, the Chinese record offers opportunities unique in their possibilities of enlightenment because the Chinese historical record is unique' (Fairbank 1974: 2).

Every country's history is unique in its own way. China's military tradition, however, impresses Fairbank as being exceptionally 'fertile' (Fairbank 1974: 2).

The inventors of the crossbow, cast iron, and gunpowder were also the inventors of paper and printing, civil service examinations, and bureaucracy. Among their many achievements, they early established the idea of civilian supremacy over the military, and China thereby acquired in Western folklore an undying reputation for pacifism. Yet no people before modern times has left so extensive a record of military institutions and exploits.

(Fairbank 1974: 2)

Fairbank adds that China's classic works on strategy influence contemporary Chinese military thinkers. Therefore, '[s]tudy of the Chinese way in warfare can also ease the rest of the world's necessary adjustment to China's participation in the new transnational order' (Fairbank 1974: 2). Sinologist Ralph Sawyer notes that Chinese strategic writings remain popular, not only in the contemporary Chinese military, but throughout the civilian world in China, Korea and Japan (Sawyer 1993: xii-xiii). Japanese writers, he notes, have shown a special penchant for applying Chinese strategic thought to such matters as business and personal relations (Sawyer 1993: xiii).

What Fairbank noted in the late twentieth century is even clearer in the early twenty-first. The need for a fresh perspective on warfare that takes a broad range of factors into account, addresses the importance of contemporary China and offers a fertile field of ideas is as great as ever, and the direct parallels between ancient Chinese problems and contemporary global ones are multiplying. Sun Tzu, Lao Tzu, Han Fei-Tzu, Confucius, and many other influential thinkers from the Chinese tradition wrote during the interregnum between the decline of the Chou dynasty and the rise of the Ch'in Empire.

Theirs' was also an era of social, political and technological flux. Like the thinkers of the early twentieth century, they doubted the future of their civilization, and like the strategic analysts of the current time, they were acutely interested in the problems political and military leaders would face in navigating such change.

This book explores what classic Chinese writers contribute to twentieth-century strategic debates. The remainder of this chapter discusses this book's approach to the subject. First, the author explains how he plans to use a number of key terms. Then the author explains why he describes twentieth-century military problems as postmodern. The author notes that those who must grapple with postmodern problems are particularly likely to benefit from revisiting earlier works in their field.

The section after that reviews existing literature on ancient Chinese strategic thought, noting that few authors have explored the contemporary relevance of Chinese writings. Those who have touched on this topic have interpreted Chinese thought narrowly, missing important points in the process. This book will explore the subject more thoroughly, in the hopes of providing a more useful and satisfying account. The next section discusses the problems of studying ancient Chinese works in English. A concluding section sums up the author's approach, and presents an overview of the rest of the book.

### **Strategy defined**

Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz defined strategy as 'the use of engagements for the object of the war' (Clausewitz 1976: 128). This book uses the word in the same spirit, but applies it in a broader context. Many ancient Chinese writers – notably Sun Tzu – treat the art of military campaigning as an inseparable part of the more general art of statecraft (Handel 1996: 31–3). Except where otherwise noted, the author uses the word strategy to mean what sticklers for linguistic precision might call 'grand strategy' – the art of using military, political and economic actions to support a political community's goals in war and peace.

### **Rationality and rationalism**

This book deals extensively with the concepts of rationalism and rational thought. Since this book contrasts the work of numerous thinkers, it is inevitable that some of these thinkers will define these concepts differently from others. To complicate matters yet further, few of these thinkers explicitly state their definitions. Therefore, the author qualifies and clarifies terms relating to rationality where appropriate. Later in this chapter, for instance, the author introduces the term 'modernist rationalism' to refer to a specific strand of rationalist thought.

Where the author uses the word 'rational' without elaboration, he follows the approach of the *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, which defines irrationality as 'inconsistent thought' and rationality, presumably, as the opposite (Cherniak 1998: 61). For the purposes of this book 'consistent thought' means thought which is consistent with the thinker's other thoughts, the thinker's understanding of reality and, where appropriate, the thinker's goals. Since perfect consistency is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve, one must understand rationality as an aspiration and a matter of degree, not as an absolute condition or 'a Procrustean bed into which genuine cognitive differences must be forced' (Cherniak 1998: 63). The author intends this definition to be inclusive and flexible enough to justify the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy's* assertion that 'to the extent that a belief is rational, it ought to be held' (Cherniak 1998: 61).

The quest for greater rationality often leads to rationalism. 'Rationalism', the *Encyclopaedia* tells us, 'is the view that reason, as opposed to, say, sense experience, divine revelation or reliance on institutional authority, plays a dominant role in our attempt to gain knowledge' (Adler 1998: 75). This author adds that most of the rationalists he plans to discuss are also sceptical of emotion, intuition, judgement, common sense and all other intangible or non-systematic sources of ideas. The fact that rationalism depreciates 'sense experience' is significant, since it compels dedicated rationalists to address problems purely in terms of abstractions.

Ironists will note that since 'sense experience' seems to be the most consistent technique we have for apprehending a physical world which consistently seems to affect us, the strict application of rationalism is, by the previous paragraph's definition of rationality, irrational. In human affairs, ignoring emotion, intuition and judgement may prove equally so. Strategy and politics certainly count as human affairs. These ironies provoked many of the ideas which this book plans to discuss.

## Postmodernism defined

This book characterizes early twenty-first century military thought as postmodern. Postmodern thinkers have acquired – and even courted – a reputation for jargon and nonsense. This author hopes to break with that tradition. In order to use the concept of postmodernity more productively, the author will begin by explaining what he means by it.

The term 'postmodernism' can sound like an oxymoron. Since we normally use the word 'modern' to mean 'the present day', it is difficult to see how anything that currently exists can be 'postmodern'. This idea makes more sense once one establishes that modernism, in this context, refers not to a historical period, but to a way of thinking about an issue. People approached certain problems in modernist and postmodernist ways millennia ago. People

continue to use pre-modern approaches today. A single person can take a modernist approach to some issues while simultaneously taking pre-modern and postmodern approaches to others.

The first stage in thinking about an issue, according to this scheme, is what political theorist Leo Strauss described as the pre-philosophical approach (Strauss 1953: 82). Pre-philosophical thinkers accept the received wisdom of their own group without question (Strauss 1953: 82–3). The next stage of intellectual development comes when thinkers begin to probe their culture's assumptions in order to distinguish the fundamental, the permanent and the objectively true from the superficial, the transient and the arbitrarily asserted. For the purposes of this study, we will also refer to this as the ancient philosophical form of thought.

Ancient philosophical thought begins by looking for the essential nature of things (Strauss 1953: 82–3). This questioning approach, however, leads one to wonder whether things have any fixed nature at all (Strauss 1953: 92). This query becomes more urgent as people develop new technology and new ways of conducting their affairs that render previously cherished assumptions about nature obsolete. Where ancient thinkers sought to find their place in a natural universe that may ultimately lie beyond human understanding, their successors develop an increasing appreciation for people's ability to re-order that universe to suit their own purposes.

This confidence in human ingenuity leads thinkers to presume that since newer ideas and newer ways of doing things benefit from the most refinement, they will be the most reliable concepts and efficient procedures available. This is, in other words, a stage of intellectual development in which thinkers advocate modern approaches. That is why one refers to this stage of development as modernism. In this regard, a Roman consciously exploiting his people's tactical and organizational improvements over the Greek phalanx is as much a modernist as a mid-twentieth-century commander consciously exploiting the improvements of armour, airpower and blitzkrieg doctrine over the methods of 1914.

Since modernists advocate progress, they advocate the attitudes they presume will promote progress. Modernism is, in the terminology of its postmodern critics, *logocentric* – centred upon rationality (Rosenau 1990: 86). This means, not merely that modernists try to avoid nonsense, prejudice and mawkishness, but that they have adopted a particular vision of rational thought – a vision that inclines them, not only towards rationality, but towards rationalism. Modernists are certainly not content to accept the ancient philosophical idea that nature sets inherent limits on what humans can know and do. Nor are modernists willing to rely on such uncertain tools as intuition, inchoate personal experience or allegedly innate knowledge.

To the contrary, modernists seek to explain the phenomena that interest them in the comprehensive and objectively verifiable way that a mathematician



might explain the relationship among factors in an equation or a mechanic might explain the relationship among gears in an engine. Modernists also tend to assume that their intellectual approach is superior to all others, and that those who fail to recognize its superiority will inevitably lose competitions with those who do. When the rich complexities of real life resist modernist dissection, modernists simplify their task by reducing the elements of those complexities to abstract and presumably universal concepts which they can manipulate more easily. Thomas Hobbes set a precedent for those who would follow this approach in political studies when he based his theory on a speculative account of how people might have behaved in a primeval world without government, even while acknowledging that 'it may peradventure be thought, there was never such a time' and admitting that, indeed, 'it was never generally so' (Hobbes 1946: 83).

At a minimum, this approach gives modernists a common language for discussing the phenomena that interest them. More ambitious modernists hope to predict the appearance and development of such phenomena. Yet more ambitious thinkers hope to predict such things with mathematical certainty. Ideally, the modernist approach would reveal practical ways to re-engineer the mechanisms that produce the relevant phenomena, thus allowing people to produce whatever effects they choose.

René Descartes, Francis Bacon, Immanuel Kant and Karl Popper rank prominently among the thinkers who have explored the broader implications of modernist rationalism. Readers seeking more extensive treatment of this theme may wish to begin with Fairlamb's work *Critical Conditions: Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations* (Fairlamb: 1994). Students and practitioners of strategy may be particularly interested in the fact that modernists have enthusiastically applied their approach to the study of military and political decision making. Deborah Stone summarizes the modernist view of this topic in her work *Policy Paradox and Political Reason*:

The rational decision model portrays a policy problem as a choice facing a political actor. The actor is someone – an individual, a firm, an organization, or any entity capable of making a decision – who must choose a course of action in order to attain a desired end. The actor then goes through a sequence of mental operations to arrive at a decision. These steps are (1) defining goals; (2) imagining alternative means for attaining them; (3) evaluating the consequences of taking each course of action; and (4) choosing the alternative most likely to attain the goal.

(Stone 1988: 185)

For this model to work, one must get each of the steps right. One must define the problem accurately, choose genuinely desirable goals, identify all options for attaining them, and anticipate the full and precise consequences of each

action. The model does not explain how to accomplish these things. One might re-apply the model to each decision that arises as one attempts to apply the model, but this merely multiplies the problem. Therefore, the modernist approach proves most effective in situations in which at least some of the steps are obvious.

If the steps actually are obvious, any sensible person will make the same decision every time s/he applies the model. Thus, if one assumes that most people will choose success rather than failure, one may use the model to predict other people's behaviour. Taken to its extreme, logocentrism implies that all actions are pre-determined. In this spirit, the Jesuit Roger Boscovich and his intellectual successor Pierre Simon de Laplace suggested that we live in a 'clockwork universe' (Watts 1996: 109). People within this universe interact as mechanically and predictably as gears in a machine. The way of thinking that began by challenging what ancient philosophers saw as natural limits to human freedom ends up by denying that humans possess any meaningful freedom whatsoever.

The ability to optimize one's own decisions and predict the decisions of others is attractive. Moreover, it often appears to be within reach. The steps in the rational decision-making process may never be self-evident, but they are seldom completely mysterious either. Political leaders may be maddeningly vague about their goals, but they generally have at least a broad idea of the types of outcomes they would prefer to achieve and the types of outcomes they would prefer to avoid. Military commanders seldom have time to consider every possible course of action, but they typically know what their most promising options are, and what the main costs and benefits of each choice are likely to be.

Therefore, much of the time, models of rational decision making work. The Research and Development (RAND) Corporation is well known for its use of such models to advise decision makers (Gray 1982: 129–30). Analysts from many other state-run and private agencies do the same. Many more tacitly operate on similar assumptions about logical decision making, whether or not they describe themselves as modellers.

Not only is the modernist model of decision making directly relevant to strategy, it serves as an example of the way modernists approach other intellectual challenges. Modernists typically approach problems by trying to define them as narrowly as possible, break them down into a sequence of even more narrowly defined steps, and work through those steps to produce one unequivocal solution. Modernist physicians attempt to classify diseases, identify their causes, diagnose individual patients as suffering from one specific ailment, and prescribe a treatment that counters whatever happens to cause that particular illness – a process which proves less straightforward than one might think in such fields as psychiatry (Bental 2003: *passim*). Tacticians use Operational Research to specify military problems, identify alternative

ways of using various weapons to overcome those problems, measure the results of these alternative techniques, and use those measurements to find the optimum tactics for each battlefield situation. (Those seeking an introduction to military and civilian applications of Operational Research may review the literature of the OR Society, [http://www.orsoc.org.uk/orshop/\(fcuhkv55e2iczx45on05kly4\)/orhomepage2.aspx](http://www.orsoc.org.uk/orshop/(fcuhkv55e2iczx45on05kly4)/orhomepage2.aspx).) This way of approaching problems inevitably oversimplifies the complexities of real life, but it offers one way to navigate those complexities in the short term while holding out the ultimate promise of infallibility.

So far, the modernist approach has always fallen short of this promise. Its failures, when they come, have often been spectacular. Political scientists of the 1970s and 1980s used modernist concepts to forecast the future direction of the Cold War, but practically none of them anticipated the events of 1989 (Gaddis 1992: *passim*; Gaddis and Hopf 1993: *passim*). Colonel Harry Summers recalls an anecdote concerning analysts who attempted to use such models to improve America's strategy in the Vietnam War. In 1969, the story goes, a group of American analysts developed a computer program to determine how long it would take to beat the Vietnamese Communists. After they had provided the computer with the data it needed to make its calculation, it printed out the answer 'you won the war in 1964' (Summers 1981: 11).

Experiences such as this force us to reconsider assumptions about particular steps in the model, the model as a whole, and, indeed, progress itself. This is the stage in our thought processes at which simple modernism yields to postmodernism. Postmodernism does not necessarily mean rejecting modernism in its entirety. Where precise measurement is possible, it is useful, and where problems are susceptible to logical analysis, such analysis will, by definition, produce more certain solutions. Modernism's successes in the field of applied science are staggering. Postmodernism need not mean a return to the idea of a timeless nature which places absolute limits on human action either, although it often includes renewed appreciation for factors which remain forever unquantifiable.

Rather, postmodernism means returning to issues that modernism assumed away. Postmodernists reconsider ideas modernists took for granted and reopen debates which modernists declared closed. The postmodern approach often includes developing a fresh appreciation for intangible personal qualities such as will, intuition and creativity, the difficulties of reconciling such characteristics with abstract logic notwithstanding. In the process, postmodernist thinkers pay particular attention to the intellectual history of ideas, including their own. Since postmodernist thinkers wish to re-examine old assumptions, they wish to know why people made those assumptions in the first place.

This book suggests that the discipline of strategic studies has reached a postmodern moment in its consideration of the nature of war, the execution of military operations and the extent to which strategic planning can improve the chances of meaningful victory. The author also attempts to reflect on the evolution of ideas in his own discussions, making this book itself a postmodern work. This book will, however, differ significantly from most works of self-described postmodernism. Those interested in a fuller description of how postmodernism and an assortment of kindred intellectual movements have affected academic work in politics and security studies may consult Rosenau (1990), George (1994), Klein (1994), Wyn Jones (1995) and Williams (1993), to name a few prominent sources. As these works note, postmodern scholars have focused on the problem of defining words. They have also devoted much of their time to debating what many perceive as esoteric points.

This book will take a more practical approach. More traditional postmodern thinkers would counter by asking whether any particular interpretation of reality is inherently more practical than any other. David Campbell, for instance, has written a work suggesting that mainstream understandings of supposedly practical issues such as terrorism and aggressive war are no more than politically inspired fictions (Campbell 1992: *passim*). Jean Baudrillard went so far as to title a book *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* and the fact that many have taken his claim more literally than he intended it need not obscure the fact that even a more sophisticated reading is unlikely to address the interests of those concerned with the direct consequences of events like those which apparently are taking place in Iraq at the time of this writing (Baudrillard 1995: *passim*).

Campbell and Baudrillard notwithstanding, the author retains his faith in the idea that the world which most of us believe we inhabit is, in fact, real. As Deborah Stone put it, despite all the problems of describing objective reality in words 'if we witnessed guards beating a prisoner, we would probably agree that "torture" comes closer to describing the event than "tickling"' (Stone 1988: 254). Nevertheless, the author suggests that the early twenty-first century is a period in which such problems as terrorism, insurgency and economics force us to reconsider our assumptions about technological trends and political/strategic decision making in a postmodern way. Revisiting earlier works – such as ancient Chinese writings on war – is a typically postmodern method of looking beyond the over-simplifications of pure modernism.

### Rediscovering Chinese thought

Those who seek to revisit Chinese thought for these purposes will find little to guide them. Although numerous translations of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* are on the market, detailed and contemporaneously relevant analysis of this work is rare. In the words of China scholar Alistair Iain Johnston:

[T]here is little direct debate over the Sun Zi text because there has been so little written on the topic in the Sinological community. The research in the 1980s through 1990s has generally not focused on the intellectual or philosophical content of ancient Chinese military thought ... The underdeveloped nature of Sun Zi studies in the scholarly community is underscored by the fact that there have been no major scholarly conferences in the US focused on Sun Zi's text in the 1980s or 1990s.

(Johnston 1995: 9–10)

Johnston notes that business writers have attempted to adapt Sun Tzu to contemporary purposes, but goes on to note that these attempts lack substance.

There has been an increase in the popular attention paid to Sun Zi and business over the 1980s and 1990s. Mostly Sun Zi is treated as a source of ideas about how to understand market opportunities. One author, Bernard Boar, models his book, *The Art of Strategic Planning for Information Technology* on the Sun Zi text ... In most cases, however, the application of Sun Zi to business tends to be somewhat faddish and shallow, the reduction of the text to easy-to-remember aphorisms and platitudes. While many business people have read the text, it is not the subject of studies in major US business schools.

(Johnston 1999: 10–11)

Johnston documents his final point with numerous references to business school curricula (Johnston 1999: 11). Military academies frequently include Sun Tzu on reading lists (Johnston 1999: 14–24). Nevertheless, military users of Sun Tzu are also guilty of over-simplification. 'For most ordinary American soldiers exposure to Sun Zi comes from the short axioms, aphorisms and platitudes that often head a chapter in the US military field manuals' (Johnston 1999: 24). Johnston finds little evidence that these axioms actually inform US Army, Navy or Air Force doctrine (Johnston 1999: 25–6).

Indeed, the primary document on Army Doctrine in the post-cold war period, *FM 100-5*, doesn't refer to Sun Zi at all in its chapters on the fundamentals of offense. Neither does the key Army follow-on document on future warfare, *Force 21 Operations*. Nor does a key document on Operational Art produced as part of the Joint Chief's Joint Doctrine project.

(Johnston 1999: 25)

The concepts in Army and Air Force documents recall Clausewitz, not Sun Tzu (Johnston 1999: 25–6). US Marine Corps (USMC) manuals appear to

use Sun Tzu in a more sophisticated fashion, largely due to the influence of General Alfred Gray (Johnston 1999: 26). Gray 'directed the writing of two key manuals, one on "War fighting" (FMFM 1) and one on "Campaigning" (FMFM 1-1)' (Johnston 1999: 26). In Johnston's judgement, these manuals use Sun Tzu's ideas as well as his pithy quotations (Johnston 1999: 26). Even USMC documents, however, treat Clausewitz as the more reliable authority. When Clausewitz and Sun Tzu appear to disagree, the USMC manuals simply quote the Prussian.

Not only are in-depth studies of Sun Tzu in short supply, works that put his work in intellectual context are even more so. Samuel Griffiths's widely-used translation of *The Art of War* reviews the historical origins of Sun Tzu's text (Sun Tzu 1963: 1–62). Griffiths also includes early Chinese commentary on *The Art of War* (Sun Tzu 1963: passim). Later scholars, however, warn that Griffiths relies on outdated sources (Johnston 1999: 3). These critics add that Griffiths seems to have allowed his concerns about Asian Communist movements of the twentieth century to bias his interpretation of the ancient Chinese classic (Johnston 1999: 3).

Moreover, Griffiths limits himself to Sun Tzu and works related to Sun Tzu. Thomas Cleary continues in Griffiths's pattern by comparing Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* to the metaphysical text known as the *Book of Changes*, but more comparisons remain to be made (Zhuge 1989: 10–29). Many other Chinese thinkers from the same historical period wrote about strategy and state politics. Ralph Sawyer notes the absence of any 'truly comprehensive introduction to the entire military enterprise in Ancient China' (Sawyer 1993: xiii). Sawyer helped fill this gap by translating seven classic Chinese writings on military affairs into English, but limited his comments on historical matters and refrained almost entirely from 'sketching comprehensive intellectual issues' (Sawyer 1993: xiii).

[A]lthough we have outlined the essentials of various concepts, such as unorthodox/orthodox, we have not analyzed them in depth, nor have we discussed the details of technology; concrete tactics of deployment; or the overall implementation of strategy beyond the discussions found in the *Seven Military Classics*. Furthermore, except in an occasional note, we have not explored the relationship of these texts to the Kuan-tzu, the *Book of Lord Shang* or other Warring States philosophical writings that prominently espouse military policies, administrative measures and strategic concepts.

(Sawyer 1993: xiv)

Sawyer notes that each of these topics would 'require extensive studies in themselves', making his 'already massive book more unwieldy' (Sawyer 1993: xiv). Moreover, one might note, such studies would have only diverted

Sawyer from his primary purpose of making previously untranslated Chinese writings available to English speakers. Sawyer did, however, indicate his interest in writing a future book analysing 'the interactive development of military technology and tactical thought' (Sawyer 1993: xiv). Those with an interest in twenty-first century affairs may be interested in the interactive development of strategic and political ideas in ancient China as well. That is what this book aims to provide.

Adda Bozeman explores the contemporary strategic significance of certain ancient Chinese writers. In *Strategic Intelligence and Statecraft*, Bozeman notes a direct connection between Leninism, Maoism and the Chinese school of thought known as Legalism (Bozeman 1992: 70–1). Even Bozeman, however, focuses on a relatively narrow group of thinkers. Bozeman devotes little space to Confucius and Lao Tzu, for instance, despite their role in shaping Chinese thought, and despite the fact that they lived in the same period as the Legalists.

Bozeman might justly respond that Confucius and Lao Tzu were not strategic thinkers. Although both refer to military and political affairs, neither emphasize them. Therefore, their works were not particularly useful for her study of political warfare. Those using ancient Chinese thought to develop a new perspective on the strategic problems of the twenty-first century, however, may find Confucius, Lao Tzu and many of their compatriots interesting.

Although relatively few of the thinkers who founded ancient China's 'Hundred Schools of Thought' dwelled on military problems to the same extent as Sun Tzu or the Legalists, practically all of them were concerned with similar problems – the collapse of the old social order, the bankruptcy of traditional assumptions and the epidemic of war. Lao Tzu's ideas tend to be more abstract than those of purely military thinkers such as Sun Tzu, but they appear to inform each other. Later generations of Chinese thinkers portrayed the Confucian emphasis on benevolence as a corrective to the allegedly self-destructive brutality of the Legalists, and those who wish to understand the legacy of Legalism do well to explore this line of argument (de Bary *et al.* 1960: 149–56). For these reasons, this book raises ideas from a wide range of thinkers, holding that a more complete examination of ancient Chinese thought will support a fuller re-appraisal of contemporary strategic issues.

Robert B. Kaplan takes a similar approach to ancient Chinese thought in *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos*. Not only does Kaplan consider a range of Chinese thinkers, he explicitly touches upon the issues of modernity and postmodernity. Since Kaplan's approach resembles this author's in so many ways, his work demands a detailed response. Kaplan sets out his overall argument in his first chapter, titled 'There is no "modern" world' (Kaplan 2002: 3):



'Modern' ideas, politics, architecture, music, and so on imply not an extension of the past or even a reaction against it, but a rejection of it. The term 'modern' is a celebration of *Progress* [emphasis and capitalization in original]. Yet the more 'modern' we and our technology become – the more our lives become mechanized and abstract – the more our instincts are likely to rebel, and the more cunning and perverse we are likely to become, however subtly.

(Kaplan 2002: 12)

Here and elsewhere, Kaplan develops the idea that the rebellions of the twenty-first century are likely to be exceptionally bloody and widespread (Kaplan 2002: 12; Kaplan 1994: *passim*). Accordingly, he warns against the naïve tendency to assume that our age is, or even can be, different from those that have gone before. In this spirit, he rejects the postmodern approach:

As future crises arrive in steep waves, our leaders will realize that the world is not 'modern' or 'postmodern' but only a continuation of the 'ancient': a world that, despite its technologies, the best Chinese, Greek and Roman philosophers might have been able to cope with. So, too, would those like General Marshall, who manifest the ancient tradition of skepticism and constructive realism.

(Kaplan 2002: 15)

One notes that Kaplan uses the word 'ancient' in much the same sense as Strauss. Both agree that ancient thought is sceptical of conventional assumptions, and both agree that ancient thinkers believe that there are natural and insuperable limits to what human beings can accomplish. As a self-proclaimed ancient, Kaplan admires the austere virtue of 'pagans' who do their best in the face of such limits (Kaplan 2002: 29). Kaplan visits the writings of Winston Churchill and Livy before turning to ancient China in his fourth chapter, 'Sun Tzu and Thucydides'.

Kaplan sums up Sun Tzu's work as 'not a military textbook so much as a work of philosophy' (Kaplan 2002: 41). Three pages later, he concludes his discussion of this philosophy as follows:

Sun Tzu and [the ancient Chinese historian] Sima Qian write as if they have experienced large-scale physical suffering firsthand, and will go to almost any length to prevent its recurrence. Theirs is a morality of consequence that finds echoes in the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as in Machiavelli and Churchill.

(Kaplan 2002: 44)



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