

Five Ways to Misinterpret (and interpret) *The Art of War*

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THE FIFTH-CENTURY BCE TEXT *The Art of War* is perhaps the world's most famous manual on strategy. It is a classic military text in its own right, and its sparse and evocative language has also captured the interest of many non-military people – people who are wrestling with conflict or chaos or who seek strategic advantage in the midst of uncertainty. Some people and websites put forth excerpts from *The Art of War* as solutions to your business, marketing and strategic dilemmas, and those people and websites will explain the deeper meaning of the text to you ... often-times for a fee.

To tell the truth, the most common experience of *The Art of War* is perplexity: Is our competition for market share really like an ancient battle? Are the branch managers really “feudal lords” who would “ride one’s distress” given half a chance? Is my relationship to my boss like the relationship of general to sovereign? And what, exactly, does the text tell me to do right now with the dilemma I’m in?



Attributed to Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* is a profound text, and as such, it does not surrender its wisdom easily. Without doubt, it does have application beyond the military sphere. In this article, I will show four of the most common misunderstandings the Sun Tzu text – and suggest more promising alternatives.

Expect to increase my battle readiness

It is easy to think: “*Life at times is a battle, and where better to turn for battle advice than the world’s most-read manual on war? Sun Tzu came out of the Warring States period of ancient China and that was complicated and messy, just like my situation. To succeed, Sun Tzu must have triumphed many times, and so this book must be a great resource in the battles of life.*”

TO TELL THE TRUTH, THE MOST COMMON
EXPERIENCE OF *THE ART OF WAR* IS PERPLEXITY

In fact, winning battles is not the focus of *The Art of War*. As it says in Chapter Three:

One hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the most skillful. Subduing the other's military without battle is the most skillful.¹

In some contexts, this advice makes obvious sense. In a family, for instance, we take little comfort in "winning" battles because we know that every victory comes at a price – loss of trust, respect, co-operation or love. People in small rural communities often know about the price of battle because everyone interacts with their neighbours every day. In the bigger world, however, we are tempted to think that our victories come free, or we underestimate the price of victory. Usually the price is paid in the indefinite future, and we literally discount it.

... MANY WIN-WIN RESOLUTIONS HAPPEN BECAUSE ONE PARTY WAS INSPIRED TO MAKE IT SO.

The Sun Tzu text suggests there are better alternatives to battle, and these are not all that foreign or mysterious. When negotiating we can focus on the shared aspiration, and structure our agreements in a "win-win" fashion. Sun Tzu calls this "taking whole." Taking whole occurs whenever battle is avoided because both parties have found (or were led to) a better alternative. "Taking whole" also implies intentionality, i.e., many win-win resolutions happen because one party was inspired to make it so.

Recommended approach: Think of the Sun Tzu text as a guide for replacing battle with more skilful approaches, approaches that may shift your view as well as that of the other.

Expect advice when you're in trouble

One may think: "Every page of this book is brimming with strategic advice. Surely, I can find the right advice for me and my problem situation. Do I confront my boss or not? How do I deal with this competitor? How can I promote this new initiative when there is so much resistance to change? How can I deal with this ambitious co-worker?"

ONCE WE ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE TEXT, THEN WE CAN TRUST OUR INTUITION TO RECALL THE "RIGHT ADVICE" IN THE MIDST OF DIFFICULT OR CHAOTIC CIRCUMSTANCES.

Unquestionably, there are many bits of advice in *The Art of War*, but it is next to impossible to find an answer in the heat of the moment. As the text says in Chapter 4:

The victorious military is first victorious and after that does battle,

The defeated military first does battle and after that seeks victory.

Victory, the text suggests, is *known* before it is attained. We understand this on an ordinary level – we know a presentation before we give it. We know how to get to a destination before we get into the car. Once trained, we even know how to deal with difficult customers before we answer the phone.

And yet, in particularly chaotic or conflicted situations, our sense of knowing often evaporates. Instead, we seem to parachute into the middle of a battlefield, and there is nothing to do but manage the moment-by-moment challenges. We are anything but sure of victory.

For two reasons, the text works better if there is familiarity before there is need to apply it. First, the best approach is to see disturbances before they become fully manifest so that redirection of potential harm can be more fluid. Second, once we are familiar with the text, our intuition tends to recall the "right advice" in the midst of difficult or chaotic circumstances.

Recommended approach: Read the text in a leisurely way, in very small pieces over a longer period of time, and read some commentaries. Then, when you need some insight, the book is more internalised.

Expect to understand the text by reading it once

You may think: "After all, the text is only about forty pages without commentary – how long can understanding this text take? If I don't understand it in one reading, then maybe



there's a problem with this book or the translation. Someone needs to write the concise explanation so that it makes sense to me!"

This type of thinking is based on a false premise, namely: "everything that makes sense should make sense to me."

Nowadays, it is rare to contemplate a book. In this fast-paced world, we are discouraged from lingering with anything that does not submit to our understanding right away. In other times and cultures, it was more commonplace to return to a book again and again. One Tibetan Buddhist text I know of suggests that a reader should come to full understanding after reading it 108 times!

It really calls into question what we understand by "understanding." More likely than not, an understanding that we quickly "get" is one that fits into our preconceptions easily. Notice what you do the next time you hear or read something you do not immediately understand. Do you assume the message is unclear? Do you assume the message-giver is incompetent? Do you think that the message must not be that important anyway? Or do you become curious? Persistent? Or frustrated?

As the text says in Chapter 1:

The general is knowledge, trustworthiness, courage and strictness.

In other words, being a wise leader in the midst of chaos and conflict is more a matter of character than of having the right methods at your fingertips. As retired General Norman Schwarzkopf, commander of Operation Desert Storm, has famously said, "Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy."

Cultivation of character can happen in many ways, but one way is to hang in there with

difficulty. This connects with contemplation. Why? Because contemplation is little more than hanging in there with the difficulty of not understanding something or of understanding it only superficially.

MORE LIKELY THAN NOT, AN UNDERSTANDING THAT WE QUICKLY "GET" IS ONE THAT FITS INTO OUR PRECONCEPTIONS ANYWAY.

Overall, *The Art of War* conveys more about *how to be* than *what to do*. Chapter 1 is devoted to making assessments – knowledge is key, and the sage leader must cultivate his or her ways of knowing. Many times throughout the text, impatience is portrayed as a foible that enemies may exploit. And in Chapter 10, for example, the text identifies three key character flaws:

A great officer is wrathful and does not submit
When he encounters the enemy,
He is filled with rancor and does battle on his own,
The general does not know his ability,
This is called "the mountain collapsing."

The general is weak and not strict.
His training and leadership are not clear.
The officers and troops are inconstant.
The formations of the military are jumbled.
This is called "chaos."

The general cannot assess the enemy,
With the few he engages the many.
With the weak he engages the strong.
The military is without elite forces.
This is called "routed."

Recommended approach: Think of the text as something to internalize over a longer period, rather than "get" in an evening or two.

Expect to find a repeatable winning strategy

One may be tempted also to think: "*Most things in life involve cultivating proficiency. So*

it stands to reason that once I 'get' the Art of War, I should be able to apply the same technique over and over to succeed."

Sorry, no. Un-complex tasks *do* submit to formula. When making dinner, it is better to follow a recipe. When playing a sport, it is better to follow a coach's instruction. When driving a car, it is better to abide by the traffic laws. In higher levels of mastery and in more complex situations – particularly socially complex situations which involve diverse points of view – there are no repeatable formulas for success. Conventional militaries know this principle well: "If you repeat your strategy, the enemy will adapt."

Sun Tzu says it this way:

... the victories of the military ... cannot be transmitted in advance

To enact real change, to meet chaotic challenge with skill, *The Art of War* suggests not a formula, but a pattern of two phases, or two movements: the orthodox and the extraordinary. The orthodox is what is well-understood and expected, particularly by others. People expect managers to behave in a certain way, and they expect lawyers to behave in a certain way. In fact, in most interactions, the other person holds one or more projections about you. This is the orthodox, is important to know it and to relate to it properly.

IN HIGHER LEVELS OF MASTERY OR IN MORE COMPLEX SITUATIONS—PARTICULARLY SOCIALLY COMPLEX SITUATIONS WHICH INVOLVE DIVERSE POINTS OF VIEW – THERE ARE NO REPEATABLE FORMULAS FOR SUCCESS.

The second movement is the extraordinary, the unexpected. Oftentimes the extraordinary arises spontaneously – we notice one little thing, act on it and then the situation flips. Years ago, at a boy-scout meeting in a church basement, another scout, Karl – a hyper-active football player no less – was pushing me around. A fight was out of the question – he knew it and I knew it. And then, in a single moment, I noticed he was off-balance and I threw him to the floor in what was a remarkable demonstration of judo (especially for someone completely untrained in judo!). He



landed hard. We made amends, and I never had a problem with Karl again.

In the text it says,

When in battle,
Use the orthodox to engage.
Use the extraordinary to attain victory.

In other words, appear conventional on the outside while being open to the unconventional on the inside. Being truly unconventional requires a lot of character, as was suggested above – it requires being disciplined in one's research, open to information coming from unconventional places, and courageous to act on opportunity.

I find that people tend to over-rely on either the orthodox or the extraordinary. There are those that define themselves early on and stick to that definition through thick and thin. These are wedded to the orthodox. They rely on procedure, formulae, and best practices (and in and of themselves there is nothing wrong with those!)

Others are perpetual artists, seeking to wow you with the next new thing. Leading with the extraordinary has its problems – first and foremost, there is not an adequate relationship with the other before the extraordinary is seized. So the effect is diminished or even undermined altogether. Second, once someone is known to be habitually "surprising," the surprise is gone.

There is much more to say about the orthodox and the extraordinary, but space does not permit it here. It may be enough to say that these two principles can mix and match in myriad ways. As the text says:

Musical pitches to not exceed five,
Yet all their variations cannot be heard.
Colors do not exceed five,
Yet all their variations cannot be seen ...
The *shih* [powerful transformations] of
battle do not exceed the extraordinary
and the orthodox,
Yet all their variations cannot be
exhausted.

Recommended approach: Beware of repeating your strategies, and instead draw inspiration from changing circumstances. Approach the text with the goal of being strategic, rather than acting strategically.

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The Art of War is thus a text with a big view – a view that there are endless options available to us. A view that it is often possible to achieve a larger good from the scrappiness of diverse opinion and conflict. A view that winning battles is not true victory.



And a view that strategy (what we do) is less essential to leadership than character (who we are). 🐞

BEING TRULY UNCONVENTIONAL REQUIRES A LOT OF CHARACTER.

¹All quotations are from [The Art of War: the Denma Translation](#). Denma Translation Group. Shambhala Publications. 2001: Boston

[The Rules of Victory](#) is a recommended commentary on *The Art of War* and in fact contains the full translation as well

