



Sois subtil jusqu'à l'invisible; sois mystérieux jusqu'à l'inaudible; alors tu pourras maîtriser le destin de tes adversaires.

## Should we teach Sun Tzu to the military?

military-Earth thinking notebook

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**Most business schools teach the precepts of Sun Tzu. Paradoxically, although knowledge of "The Art of War" is expected for every officer, its study is hardly part of French military education. Doesn't the place of the Chinese strategist deserve to be better considered in our training schools?**

Frequently quoted, "The Art of War"...yet it's hardly taught in the military. Is this an oversight, and if so, how could it be corrected?

After having painted a picture of the situation in France and the rest of the world, we will try to determine whether the study of "..." is a good idea. The Art of War would be of real interest to the tactical training of the soldier, and whether it would then be justified to devote a few hours to it in a The study of "..." would be of real interest to the tactical training of the military, and whether it would then be justified to devote a few hours of course time to it at the Officer Training School, the Staff College, the MSRC, the War College or even the Centre des Hautes Etudes Militaires.

In the end, we will see that while many of Sun Tzu's precepts remain astonishingly relevant and would have all legitimacy to be transmitted, the structure of French military studies is hardly subject to such teaching. Nevertheless, some substantial modifications could be made in order to improve the current situation.

### A generally little taught treatise

«The art of war» Sun Tzu, already 25 centuries ago, did not conceive of a battle without intelligence. As he used to say, "Subduing the enemy without crossing swords is the end of the end", and so on. Yet, in 2011, Sun Tzu is not formally taught in any French military

school, with two exceptions:

- at the War School, as part of the History of Strategy course, where it is only then mentioned;
- within the continuum of Army training [1], as part of the recommended military reading, but completely drowned in the mass [2].

«The Art of War» is therefore part of the "soft" reading exhortations suggested to French officers.

Following this observation, it may be interesting to look at how other countries treat Sun Tzu in learning tactics or warfare. From a study carried out by the author among the international trainees of the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 classes of the École de guerre, covering nearly a hundred countries, it was possible to highlight the fact that the teaching of "... the war" is a very important part of the teaching of Sun Tzu. The Art of War" within military academies throughout the world is highly variable, but globally weak. Only a handful of countries go beyond the framework of military history and really enter the Sun Tzu mechanism. Of course, this teaching is subject to the classic pendulum effect: the teaching of military history can be neglected for many years and suddenly return to favour with a leader who is sensitive to this discipline.

Broadly speaking, the continent that studies with the greatest acuity "... The Art of War" is South America while at the other end of the spectrum is Africa. In other regions of the world, the treaty is taught in a more haphazard way. Tunisia, for example, does not study it, but it is on the curriculum in Morocco. South Korea devotes three full days to it in its School of War, but the Japanese, who were the first to bring Sun Tzu out of China, do not study it. India only occasionally quotes Sun Tzu, while Afghanistan, in its fledgling School of War, devotes half a full day to him. Russia sees it as a reservoir of quotations, while Poland studies it in the context of military history. Germany does not devote any lessons to it, while Greece spends ten hours on it. In the United States, reading is often considered mandatory, but only the Marine Corps actually studies it. Finally, in China, although Sun Tzu is not specifically studied at the military academy, the treatise is one of the Chinese classics that can be studied in high school during language classes.

It is common to see written that the book is taught in all the military schools of the world, but this quick study shows that this is a gratuitous assertion, starting with the French case.

Is this a mistake that needs to be fixed?

### **A thought that deserves so much time...**

So the first question we should ask ourselves is whether Sun Tzu's teachings are still relevant today. Indeed, "The Art of War" is not insurmountable, from the first to the last line. Contemporary reading of the treaty shows that some parts have obviously aged very badly and now seem devoid of any interest. As an illustration, in Chapter 8, Sun Tzu defines the five traits that are harmful to the good general as follows: absence of fear of death, excessive attachment to life, an angry spirit, a sense of honour and compassion. While the first three may seem logical, the last two seem relatively incongruous in our time. It should be noted here, however, that contemporary adaptations of "... The Art of War" to other disciplines than the military can nevertheless

draw modern lessons from a priori obsolete precepts. A good illustration of this is provided by Karen Mc Creadie's book, "... the 'military' is not the same as the 'military'. Sun Tzu - Applied Strategy Lessons"<sup>4]</sup>, which adapts 52 of Sun Tzu's precepts to the corporate world. While most of the transpositions are relatively logical, some are surprising. For example, Lesson 28 focuses on the following commandment:

- "One [supplants] the voice with the drum and the bells; the eye with the standards and the handlebars", (chapter 7).

This injunction to use visual and auditory means to transmit orders seems to be out of date today. But Karen Mc Creadie draws the following lesson for managers:

- "Every day we lose opportunities to make or save money. People with ideas don't talk to anyone because they don't know who to talk to or if they're supposed to. Set up informal meetings every month where employees leave their tools for the afternoon and exchange ideas on how to improve the beer business.

The reasoning behind this modern interpretation is as follows: Sun Tzu recognises the need for clear communication during the fight, so clear communication is very important in the business world; and a very good way to have clear communication in the business is to have informal meetings. The letter of Sun Tzu's original statement is, admittedly, still quite far away<sup>[5]</sup>.

This example shows that it is possible to have an elastic reading of Sun Tzu by considering that if certain precepts are still relevant, others, on the other hand, need to be kept only in spirit without focusing on the application hic et nunc enshrined in the treaty. In the preceding illustration, Sun Tzu's statement could thus be reduced to the overriding need to have an effective chain of command in order to allow orders to be transmitted as quickly as possible.

More generally, the mere fact that Sun Tzu is quoted extensively is enough to prove that his thinking is still relevant: reduction of the opponent's destruction to the bare essentials, preference for the indirect approach, intelligence imperative... the list would be long. We can therefore reasonably consider that "... the list would be long. The art of war" is, sometimes at the cost of exegesis, always relevant.

A final remark: are the lessons of the treaty limited to the army or can they claim to be useful to other milieus? Indeed, Sun Tzu does not mention these other circles at any time. However, following the example of the very numerous transpositions of the "The Art of War"<sup>6]</sup>, the application of most of Sun Tzu's precepts to a universe that is a priori as anachronistic as that of the Air Force is in fact easy. The interesting reading of Sun Tzu is indeed at a very high level: as we have seen before, it is not the injunction to substitute the voice with the drum and the bells that is to be considered, but the idea of having a good chain of command. If Sun Tzu were to be taught in Saint-Cyr, he would have as much reason to be taught in Salon de Provence, Brest or Melun.

### **Sun Tzu: a classic among many others?**

«The art of war» an ancient text, very ancient. Although Sun Tzu was relatively precursory, he did not reveal the totality of this famous art of war: many concepts of the

contemporary teaching of tactics and/or strategy, considered as fundamental, were not treated by the Chinese strategist.

Is there therefore any interest in seeing "The Art of War"<sup>8]</sup>, but ultimately useless for the historian, any contemporary tactical work that more clearly and appropriately takes up the principles enunciated by Sun Tzu, sparing the reader the entire obsolete part of the book? The present treatises have already sorted out the wheat from the chaff, enriched it with all the subsequent reflections, and are moreover perfectly adapted to the time of their publication.

The question of the merits of Sun Tzu's teaching is therefore at least partly a question of the broader question of the classics: Why read Jomini, Guibert or Beaufre, when there are books on the market offering very well-made summaries of these classics, presenting what should be retained without dwelling on the parts that have become obsolete?

It must be noted that the history of military thought is little developed within our teaching model [9].<sup>9]</sup> However, our teaching model does not reject the study of the classics, since some of them are at least recommended for reading, or even imposed. Of course, the eternal lack of time forbids the study of all the classics. Choices must therefore be made. But at what level of priority should Sun Tzu be placed? At the same level as Foch's? Above it? Below? Liddell Hart believed that the Chinese strategist was superior to Clausewitz, but was it not then conjunctural in the context of the Cold War, where indirect strategy appeared to be the answer to an impossible total war because of the existence of nuclear weapons?

It should also be noted that Sun Tzu has a special status among the great classics because, although he is considered to have written the oldest treatise on strategy in the world, he has in fact only been known to Western military thought in recent decades: if the first French translation of "The art of war" dates back to 1772 and was the first in the Western world, it remained totally unknown until the 1970s. In other Western countries, Sun Tzu was not translated into Russian until 1860, into English until 1905 and into German until 1910, each time without finding a real readership. Although being a classic, one cannot paradoxically say that Sun Tzu participated in the construction of the Western art of war.

As we have previously concluded, Sun Tzu seems to us to deserve a better place in French military education than the one he currently occupies. Indeed, if we take the example of the Army training continuum, we believe that within the recommended readings, "... Sun Tzu is a very important part of the French military education system. The Art of War" would have more of a place in the category of the 30 "must-reads" than, for example, "Cobra 2: The Inside Story of the Invasion And Occupation of Iraq" by Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor. Of course, the art of listing is highly subjective and will never achieve unanimity; however, in such a case, a re-evaluation of Sun Tzu's place would seem to us to be self-evident.

Finally, beyond a review of the priorities for reading recommendations, would it also be possible to really teach "... the art of listing is a highly subjective art that can never achieve unanimity. The Art of War»? A module on Sun Tzu, whether a week long or only four hours, would not really make sense in the current structure of French education. Without

going back to the model adopted in France or proposing too radical solutions, it seems to us however possible to put Sun Tzu back in its rightful place within this model.

It would indeed be possible to use the room for manoeuvre provided by "à la carte" courses, such as the CRCOs<sup>101</sup> of the MSRC or the MAPs<sup>102</sup> from the War College. Indeed, why not propose the treatise of Sun Tzu as a support for the officer's reflection, just as a historical work on a battle of the Second World War can be. «The Art of War" could then be used, for example, as a grid of analysis in the framework of a directed work exercise ("How would Sun Tzu react to such a situation?"). What about Clausewitz? And what does the French doctrine say?"

From the conviction that Sun Tzu deserves a better place in French military education, we were finally able to formulate two realistic proposals: to raise the priority given to "... and "...The Art of War" in the recommendations/obligations for officers to read, and to include Sun Tzu's study, or at least that of the great classics, in optional modules of the officer training curriculum. May we be heard.

1) Implemented since 2006, the tactical and academic training continuum aims to establish consistency across all training provided to army officers throughout their careers. A military culture component of this continuum defines, in particular, lists of books to be read as one progresses in military education.

2) Sun Tzu's treatise is indeed included in this list of 350 recommended reading works, without however being part of the thirty or so classified as "essential". Moreover, curiously enough, "The art of war" in comics is included in the list of 18 books from which the officers will have to choose two to read during their course for future unit commanders.

3) The case of South America is very particular: during the 1960s and 1970s, the Chinese secret services translated the writings of Sun Tzu, Mao and Giap into Spanish and Portuguese and ensured their widespread dissemination throughout the continent. This action, which took place at the height of the Cold War, was aimed at promoting revolutions in all countries close to the United States. The undertaking was a complete success, since the counter-insurgency operations carried out against the various guerrillas each time made it possible to reveal that the rebels' doctrinal references were based on these works. Whether through the testimony of the defectors or the documents discovered during rebel positions, it has been established that these writings were and still are used today as tactical manuals for the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front, Nicaragua), the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit, Guatemala), the Shining Path (Peru), FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional, National Liberation Army, Colombia).

4) Karen Mc Creadie, "14 | Karen Mc Creadie, "Sun Tzu - Lessons in Applied Strategy" Maxima Publishing, 2008.

5) Nevertheless, the seriousness of this adaptation undertaking is questionable: the Master Class collection, in which the book is published, engages in the same exercise of transposing a classic author to the business world for Clausewitz, but also Machiavelli, and Confucius, Aristotle and even La Fontaine.

6) Sun Tzu's treatise is regularly adapted to the most diverse themes: golf, children's education, married life, flirting, nightclub surveillance, medicine, etc.[7] The book is also a good example of a classic author's transposition to the business world for Clausewitz, but also for Machiavelli, Confucius, Aristotle and even La Fontaine.

7) This is for example the notions of the desired final state, the center of gravity, the fog of war and other frictions, notions that have become indispensable today.

8) In reality, Sun Tzu's treatise is not the first military treatise in history. Others existed before "The art of war". Sun Tzu even quotes one of them: "[8] In fact, Sun Tzu's treaty is not the first military treaty in history. From the administration of the armed forces" or "Jun Zheng». But these works have now disappeared and, of all those we have left, Sun Tzu is by far the most profound and the one that has retained a real contemporary interest other than historical.

9) In the area of tactics, while doctrine itself is of course taught, there are no courses outside the MSRC that present the various procedures envisaged in history, allowing the officer to develop his tactical creativity. Only individual initiatives, historical studies such as "staff rides" or imposed readings make French officers think about this discipline.

10) CRCO: Operational committees of reflection are study mandates given to small groups of trainees in order to develop reflection on a given theme, then to share the conclusions of the work with the rest of the class.

11] MAP: The in-depth modules of the School of War are teaching and/or research periods of two weeks, the principle of which is obligatory, but where each student has the choice of theme from an imposed list.

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