

# THE ART OF WAR

By Sun Tzu  
Translated with introduction and notes by  
Lionel Giles, M.A.

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To my brother Captain Valentine Giles, R.G. in the hope that a work 2400 years old may yet contain lessons worth consideration by the soldier of today this translation is affectionately dedicated.

## **Preface to the Project Gutenberg Etext**

When Lionel Giles began his translation of Sun Tzu's ART OF WAR, the work was virtually unknown in Europe. Its introduction to Europe began in 1782 when a French Jesuit Father living in China, Joseph Amiot, acquired a copy of it, and translated it into French. It was not a good translation because, according to Dr. Giles, "[I]t contains a great deal that Sun Tzu did not write, and very little indeed of what he did."

The first translation into English was published in 1905 in Tokyo by Capt. E. F. Calthrop, R.F.A. However, this translation is, in the words of Dr. Giles, "excessively bad." He goes further in this criticism: "It is not merely a question of downright blunders, from which none can hope to be wholly exempt. Omissions were frequent; hard passages were willfully distorted or slurred over. Such offenses are less pardonable. They would not be tolerated in any edition of a Latin or Greek classic, and a similar standard of honesty ought to be insisted upon in translations from Chinese." In 1908 a new edition of Capt. Calthrop's translation was published in London. It was an improvement on the first – omissions filled up and numerous mistakes corrected – but new errors were created in the process. Dr. Giles, in justifying his translation, wrote: "It was not undertaken out of any inflated estimate of my own powers; but I could not help feeling that Sun Tzu deserved a better fate than had befallen him, and I knew that, at any rate, I could hardly fail to improve on the work of my predecessors."

Clearly, Dr. Giles' work established much of the groundwork for the work of later translators who published their own editions. Of the later editions of the ART OF WAR I have examined; two feature Giles' edited translation and notes, the other two present the same basic information from the ancient Chinese commentators found in the Giles edition. Of these four, Giles' 1910 edition is the most scholarly and presents the reader an incredible amount of information concerning Sun Tzu's text, much more than any other translation.

The Giles' edition of the ART OF WAR, as stated above, was a scholarly work. Dr. Giles was a leading sinologue at the time and an assistant in the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts in the British Museum. Apparently he wanted to produce a definitive edition, superior to anything else that existed and perhaps something that would become a standard translation. It was the best translation available for 50 years. But apparently there was not much interest in Sun Tzu in English-speaking countries since it took the start of the Second World War to renew interest in his work. Several people published unsatisfactory English translations of Sun Tzu. In 1944, Dr. Giles' translation was edited and published in the United States in a series of military science books. But it wasn't until 1963 that a good English translation (by Samuel B. Griffith and still in print) was published that was an equal to Giles' translation. While this translation is more lucid than Dr. Giles' translation, it lacks his copious notes that make his so interesting.

Dr. Giles produced a work primarily intended for scholars of the Chinese civilization and language. It contains the Chinese text of Sun Tzu, the English translation, and voluminous notes along with numerous footnotes. Unfortunately, some of his notes and footnotes contain Chinese characters; some are completely Chinese. Thus, a conversion to a Latin alphabet etext was difficult. I did the conversion in complete ignorance of Chinese (except for what I learned while doing the conversion). Thus, I faced the difficult task of paraphrasing it while retaining as much of the important text as I could. Every paraphrase represents a loss; thus I did what I could to retain as much of the text as possible. Because the 1910 text contains a Chinese concordance, I was able to transliterate proper names, books, and the like at the risk of making the text more obscure. However, the text, on the whole, is quite satisfactory for the casual reader, a transformation made possible by conversion to an etext. However, I come away from this task with the feeling of loss because I know that someone with a background in Chinese can do a better job than I did; any such attempt would be welcomed.

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Sun Wu and his Book

Ssu-ma Ch'ien gives the following biography of Sun Tzu:<sup>1</sup>

Sun Tzu Wu was a native of the Ch'i State. His ART OF WAR brought him to the notice of Ho Lu,<sup>2</sup> King of Wu.

Ho Lu said to him: "I have carefully perused your 13 chapters. May I submit your theory of managing soldiers to a slight test?"

Sun Tzu replied: "You may."

Ho Lu asked: "May the test be applied to women?"

The answer was again in the affirmative, so arrangements were made to bring 180 ladies out of the Palace. Sun Tzu divided them into two companies, and placed one of the King's favorite concubines at the head of each. He then bade them all take spears in their hands, and addressed them thus: "I presume you know the difference between front and back, right hand and left hand?"

The girls replied: Yes.

Sun Tzu went on: "When I say "Eyes front," you must look straight ahead. When I say "Left turn," you must face towards your left hand. When I say "Right turn," you must face towards your right hand. When I say "About turn," you must face right round towards your back."

Again the girls assented. The words of command having been thus explained, he set up the halberds and battle-axes in order to begin the drill. Then, to the sound of drums, he gave the order "Right turn." But the girls only burst out laughing. Sun Tzu said: "If words of command are not clear and distinct, if orders are not thoroughly understood, then the general is to blame."

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<sup>1</sup>SHI CHI, ch. 65.

<sup>2</sup>He reigned from 514 to 496 B.C.

So he started drilling them again, and this time gave the order "Left turn," whereupon the girls once more burst into fits of laughter. Sun Tzu: "If words of command are not clear and distinct, if orders are not thoroughly understood, the general is to blame. But if his orders ARE clear, and the soldiers nevertheless disobey, then it is the fault of their officers."

So saying, he ordered the leaders of the two companies to be beheaded. Now the king of Wu was watching the scene from the top of a raised pavilion; and when he saw that his favorite concubines were about to be executed, he was greatly alarmed and hurriedly sent down the following message: "We are now quite satisfied as to our general's ability to handle troops. If we are bereft of these two concubines, our meat and drink will lose their savor. It is our wish that they shall not be beheaded."

Sun Tzu replied: "Having once received His Majesty's commission to be the general of his forces, there are certain commands of His Majesty which, acting in that capacity, I am unable to accept."

Accordingly, he had the two leaders beheaded, and straightway installed the pair next in order as leaders in their place. When this had been done, the drum was sounded for the drill once more; and the girls went through all the evolutions, turning to the right or to the left, marching ahead or wheeling back, kneeling or standing, with perfect accuracy and precision, not venturing to utter a sound. Then Sun Tzu sent a messenger to the King saying: "Your soldiers, Sire, are now properly drilled and disciplined, and ready for your majesty's inspection. They can be put to any use that their sovereign may desire; bid them go through fire and water, and they will not disobey."

But the King replied: "Let our general cease drilling and return to camp. As for us, we have no wish to come down and inspect the troops."

Thereupon Sun Tzu said: "The King is only fond of words, and cannot translate them into deeds."

After that, Ho Lu saw that Sun Tzu was one who knew how to handle an army, and finally appointed him general. In the west, he defeated the Ch'u State and forced his way into Ying, the capital; to the north he put fear into the States of Ch'i and Chin, and spread his fame abroad amongst the feudal princes. And Sun Tzu shared in the might of the King.

About Sun Tzu himself this is all that Ssu-ma Ch'ien has to tell us in this chapter. But he proceeds to give a biography of his descendant, Sun Pin, born about a hundred years after his famous ancestor's death, and also the outstanding military genius of his time. The historian speaks of him too as Sun Tzu, and in his preface we read: "Sun Tzu had his feet cut off and yet continued to discuss the art of war."<sup>3</sup> It seems likely, then, that "Pin" was a nickname bestowed on him after his mutilation, unless the story was invented in order to account for the name. The crowning incident of his career, the

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<sup>3</sup>SHI CHI, ch. 130.

crushing defeat of his treacherous rival P'ang Chuan, will be found briefly related in Chapter V. ss. 19, note.

To return to the elder Sun Tzu. He is mentioned in two other passages of the SHIH CHI:

In the third year of his reign [512 B.C.] Ho Lu, king of Wu, took the field with Tzu-hsu [i.e. Wu Yuan] and Po P'ei, and attacked Ch'u. He captured the town of Shu and slew the two prince's sons who had formerly been generals of Wu. He was then meditating a descent on Ying [the capital]; but the general Sun Wu said: "The army is exhausted. It is not yet possible. We must wait".... [After further successful fighting,] "in the ninth year [506 B.C.], King Ho Lu addressed Wu Tzu-hsu and Sun Wu, saying: "Formerly, you declared that it was not yet possible for us to enter Ying. Is the time ripe now?" The two men replied: "Ch'u's general Tzu-ch'ang,<sup>4</sup> is grasping and covetous, and the princes of T'ang and Ts'ai both have a grudge against him. If Your Majesty has resolved to make a grand attack, you must win over T'ang and Ts'ai, and then you may succeed." Ho Lu followed this advice, [beat Ch'u in five pitched battles and marched into Ying.]<sup>5</sup>

This is the latest date at which anything is recorded of Sun Wu. He does not appear to have survived his patron, who died from the effects of a wound in 496.

In another chapter there occurs this passage:<sup>6</sup>

From this time onward, a number of famous soldiers arose, one after the other: Kao-fan,<sup>7</sup> who was employed by the Chin State; Wang-tzu,<sup>8</sup> in the service of Ch'i; and Sun Wu, in the service of Wu. These men developed and threw light upon the principles of war.

It is obvious enough that Ssu-ma Ch'ien at least had no doubt about the reality of Sun Wu as an historical personage; and with one exception, to be noticed presently, he is by far the most important authority on the period in question. It will not be necessary, therefore, to say much of such a work as the WU YUEH CH'UN CH'IU, which is supposed to have been written by Chao Yeh of the 1st century A.D. The attribution is somewhat doubtful; but even if it were otherwise, his account would be of little value, based as it is on the SHIH CHI and expanded with romantic details. The story of Sun Tzu will be found, for what it is worth, in chapter 2. The only new points in it worth noting are: (1) Sun Tzu was first recommended to Ho Lu by Wu Tzu-hsu. (2) He is called a native of Wu. (3) He had previously lived a retired life, and his contemporaries were unaware of his ability.

The following passage occurs in the Huai-nan Tzu: "When sovereign and ministers show perversity of mind, it is impossible even for a Sun Tzu to encounter the foe."

<sup>4</sup>The appellation of Nang Wa.

<sup>5</sup>SHI CHI, ch. 31.

<sup>6</sup>SHI CHI, ch. 25.

<sup>7</sup>The appellation of Hu Yen, mentioned in ch. 39 under the year 637.

<sup>8</sup>Wang-tzu Ch'eng-fu, ch. 32, year 607.

Assuming that this work is genuine (and hitherto no doubt has been cast upon it), we have here the earliest direct reference for Sun Tzu, for Huai-nan Tzu died in 122 B.C., many years before the SHIH CHI was given to the world.

Liu Hsiang (80-9 B.C.) says: "The reason why Sun Tzu at the head of 30,000 men beat Ch'u with 200,000 is that the latter were undisciplined."

Teng Ming-shih informs us that the surname "Sun" was bestowed on Sun Wu's grandfather by Duke Ching of Ch'i [547-490 B.C.]. Sun Wu's father Sun P'ing, rose to be a Minister of State in Ch'i, and Sun Wu himself, whose style was Ch'ang-ch'ing, fled to Wu on account of the rebellion which was being fomented by the kindred of T'ien Pao. He had three sons, of whom the second, named Ming, was the father of Sun Pin. According to this account then, Pin was the grandson of Wu, which, considering that Sun Pin's victory over Wei was gained in 341 B.C., may be dismissed as chronological impossible. Whence these data were obtained by Teng Ming-shih I do not know, but of course no reliance whatever can be placed in them.

An interesting document which has survived from the close of the Han period is the short preface written by the Great Ts'ao Ts'ao, or Wei Wu Ti, for his edition of Sun Tzu. I shall give it in full:

I have heard that the ancients used bows and arrows to their advantage.<sup>9</sup> The SHU CHU mentions "the army" among the "eight objects of government." The I CHING says: "'army' indicates firmness and justice; the experienced leader will have good fortune." The SHIH CHING says: "The King rose majestic in his wrath, and he marshaled his troops." The Yellow Emperor, T'ang the Completer and Wu Wang all used spears and battle-axes in order to succor their generation. The SSU-MA FA says: "If one man slay another of set purpose, he himself may rightfully be slain." He who relies solely on warlike measures shall be exterminated; he who relies solely on peaceful measures shall perish. Instances of this are Fu Ch'ai<sup>10</sup> on the one hand and Yen Wang on the other.<sup>11</sup> In military matters, the Sage's rule is normally to keep the peace, and to move his forces only when occasion requires. He will not use armed force unless driven to it by necessity.

Many books have I read on the subject of war and fighting; but the work composed by Sun Wu is the profoundest of them all. [Sun Tzu was a native of the Ch'i state, his personal name was Wu. He wrote the ART OF WAR in 13 chapters for Ho Lu, King of Wu. Its principles were tested on women, and he was subsequently made a general. He led an army westwards, crushed the Ch'u state and entered Ying the capital. In the north, he kept Ch'i and Chin in awe. A hundred years and more after his

<sup>9</sup>"They attached strings to wood to make bows, and sharpened wood to make arrows. The use of bows and arrows is to keep the Empire in awe."

<sup>10</sup>The son and successor of Ho Lu. He was finally defeated and overthrown by Kou chien, King of Yueh, in 473 B.C. See post.

<sup>11</sup>King Yen of Hsu, a fabulous being, of whom Sun Hsing-yen says in his preface: "His humanity brought him to destruction."

time, Sun Pin lived. He was a descendant of Wu.]<sup>12</sup> In his treatment of deliberation and planning, the importance of rapidity in taking the field,<sup>13</sup> clearness of conception, and depth of design, Sun Tzu stands beyond the reach of carping criticism. My contemporaries, however, have failed to grasp the full meaning of his instructions, and while putting into practice the smaller details in which his work abounds, they have overlooked its essential purport. That is the motive which has led me to outline a rough explanation of the whole.

One thing to be noticed in the above is the explicit statement that the 13 chapters were specially composed for King Ho Lu. This is supported by the internal evidence of I. ss. 15, in which it seems clear that some ruler is addressed.

In the bibliographic section of the HAN SHU, there is an entry which has given rise to much discussion: "The works of Sun Tzu of Wu in 82 P'IEN (or chapters), with diagrams in 9 CHUAN." It is evident that this cannot be merely the 13 chapters known to Ssu-ma Ch'ien, or those we possess today. Chang Shou-chieh refers to an edition of Sun Tzu's ART OF WAR of which the "13 chapters" formed the first CHUAN, adding that there were two other CHUAN besides. This has brought forth a theory, that the bulk of these 82 chapters consisted of other writings of Sun Tzu – we should call them apocryphal – similar to the WEN TA, of which a specimen dealing with the Nine Situations<sup>14</sup> is preserved in the T'UNG TIEN, and another in Ho Shin's commentary. It is suggested that before his interview with Ho Lu, Sun Tzu had only written the 13 chapters, but afterwards composed a sort of exegesis in the form of question and answer between himself and the King. Pi I-hsun, the author of the SUN TZU HSU LU, backs this up with a quotation from the WU YUEH CH'UN CH'IU: "The King of Wu summoned Sun Tzu, and asked him questions about the art of war. Each time he set forth a chapter of his work, the King could not find words enough to praise him." As he points out, if the whole work was expounded on the same scale as in the above-mentioned fragments, the total number of chapters could not fail to be considerable. Then the numerous other treatises attributed to Sun Tzu might be included. The fact that the HAN CHIH mentions no work of Sun Tzu except the 82 P'IEN, whereas the Sui and T'ang bibliographies give the titles of others in addition to the "13 chapters," is good proof, Pi I-hsun thinks, that all of these were contained in the 82 P'IEN. Without pinning our faith to the accuracy of details supplied by the WU YUEH CH'UN CH'IU, or admitting the genuineness of any of the treatises cited by Pi I-hsun, we may see in this theory a probable solution of the mystery. Between Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Pan Ku there was plenty of time for a luxuriant crop of forgeries to have grown up under the magic name of Sun Tzu, and the 82 P'IEN may very well represent a collected edition of these lumped together with the original work. It is also possible, though less likely, that some of them existed in the time of the earlier historian and were purposely ignored by him.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The passage I have put in brackets is omitted in the T'U SHU, and may be an interpolation. It was known, however to Chang Shou-chieh of the T'ang dynasty, and appears in the T'AI P'ING YU LAN.

<sup>13</sup>Ts'ao Kung seems to be thinking of the first part of chap. II, perhaps especially of ss. 8.

<sup>14</sup>See chap. XI.

<sup>15</sup>On the other hand, it is noteworthy that WU TZU, which is not in 6 chapters, has 48 assigned to it in the HAN CHIH. Likewise, the CHUNG YUNG is credited with 49 chapters, though now only in one only. In