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The Art of War

孫子兵法

Sun Tzu

c. 5th c. BC

Philosophy · Religion

The Art of War

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Translated from the Classical Chinese by Ether Library

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Sunzi bingfa

Sun Tzu (Sun Wu, fl. late sixth century BC)

Translated from the Classical Chinese by Ether Library

Composed in the fifth century BC or somewhat later, and handed down in
thirteen chapters.

A Note on the Translation

This is a complete translation of the *Sunzi bingfa*, the thirteen chapters on war traditionally ascribed to Sun Wu, made directly from the Classical Chinese. No earlier English version was used as its basis. The source is a public-domain digital transcription of the received text, the thirteen-chapter form that has been standard since Cao Cao wrote his commentary on it early in the third century AD. “Sun Tzu,” the name by which the book is known in English, means “Master Sun.” We keep it for the author and in the phrase that opens every chapter, “Sun Tzu said”; all other Chinese names are given in pinyin.

The transcription has a number of misprints, most of them characters wrongly restored from simplified forms. We have corrected them silently by the received text. Where a correction changes the sense of a passage (in chapters XI and XII), a short note says so. The transcription prints chapters VII to XIII each as a single block; there we have divided the text into paragraphs by content, as in our Korean edition, and those paragraphs, eighty-eight in all, are kept one for one. The chapter titles are our own English renderings of the Chinese ones.

Sun Tzu builds his argument from a handful of words he uses as terms, and each is rendered by one English word throughout. *Shi* is “momentum,” the force a situation stores up, like water rushing downhill or a drawn crossbow; *xing* is “form,” the visible disposition of an army. *Qi* and *zheng* are “the unorthodox and the orthodox,” the surprise move and the expected one. *Xu* and *shi*, which name the sixth chapter, are “the empty and the full.” The first of the five factors in chapter I, *dao*, is “the Way”; elsewhere the same word is simply a way or a road.

The text speaks in statements and commands, and so does the translation. It does not address a reader as “you,” and nothing from the commentators has been folded into it. Spelling and punctuation are American. The twenty-two notes are short and factual: persons, states, measures, and the few places where the text or its reading is in question.

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I. Initial Calculations

Sun Tzu¹ said: War is a great matter of the state. It is the ground of death and life, the way to survival or ruin. It must be examined.

So assess it by five factors, compare the two sides by calculation, and search out the true situation. The first factor is the Way, the second Heaven, the third Earth, the fourth the General, the fifth Law.

The Way is what makes the people one in purpose with those above them, so that they will die with them and live with them and not fear danger. Heaven is yin and yang, cold and heat, and the order of the seasons. Earth is far and near, rugged and easy, wide and narrow, ground of death and ground of life. The General is wisdom, trustworthiness, humaneness, courage, and strictness. Law is the organization of units, the ranks and duties of officers, and the control of supplies. There is no general who has not heard of these five. Those who know them win; those who do not know them do not win.

So compare the two sides by calculation and search out the true situation, asking: Which ruler has the Way? Which general has ability? Which side has Heaven and Earth? Whose laws and orders are carried out? Whose troops are stronger? Whose soldiers are better trained? Whose rewards and punishments are clearer? By these I know who will win and who will lose.

If a general heeds my plans and is employed, he will surely win: keep him. If a general does not heed my plans and is employed, he will surely lose: send him away.²

Once the advantageous plans have been heeded, create momentum to support them from outside. Momentum means taking control of the balance by following advantage.

War is the way of deception. So when able, appear unable; when using troops, appear not to be using them; when near, appear far; when far, appear near. If he wants gain, lure him; if he is in disorder, take him; if he is at full strength, be prepared for him; if he is strong, avoid him; if he is angry, rile him; if he is humble, make him arrogant; if he is at ease, wear him out; if they are close to one another, divide them. Attack where he is unprepared; go out where he does not expect. This is how the strategist wins, and it cannot be handed down beforehand.

Now, the side that wins the reckoning in the temple³ before battle has more counts in its favor; the side that does not win the reckoning in the temple before battle has fewer. More counts win and fewer do not, to say nothing of having none at all! Looking at it this way, I can see who will win and who will lose.

[1.](#) “Master Sun,” the title by which Sun Wu is known. He came from the state of Qi and, according to the historian Sima Qian, served as a general under Helü, king of Wu, at the end of the sixth century BC.

[2.](#) Some old commentators read the opening word not as “general” but as “if”: if the king heeds Sun Tzu’s plans and uses them, he will surely win, and Sun Tzu will stay; if not, he will surely lose, and Sun Tzu will leave.

[3.](#) Before a campaign the ruler and his advisers reckoned the chances of victory in the ancestral temple, perhaps with counting rods.

II. Waging War

Sun Tzu said: In general, the method of using troops is this. A thousand fast four-horse chariots, a thousand leather-covered wagons, a hundred thousand armored men, and provisions carried a thousand li:¹ the expenses at home and at the front, the cost of envoys and guests, materials such as glue and lacquer, and the upkeep of chariots and armor come to a thousand pieces of gold a day. Only then can an army of a hundred thousand be raised.

When it is used to fight, prize victory. If it drags on, weapons grow dull and the edge is blunted; if it lays siege to cities, its strength is exhausted; if the army is kept long in the field, the resources of the state will not suffice. When weapons are dulled and the edge blunted, strength exhausted and wealth spent, the feudal lords will rise to take advantage of the exhaustion, and even the wise will not be able to make the outcome good. So in war we have heard of haste that was clumsy, but we have never seen length that was clever. That a war should drag on and the state profit by it has never happened. So one who does not fully know the harm of using troops cannot fully know its advantage.

Those skilled at using troops do not levy men twice or ship grain three times. They take their equipment from home and their food from the enemy, and so the army has enough to eat. A state is impoverished by its army when it ships supplies far; when supplies are shipped far, the common people grow poor. Near the army, prices rise; when prices rise, the people's wealth is drained, and when wealth is drained, the levies on the villages press hard. With

strength exhausted and wealth spent, the households at the heart of the country are emptied. Of the people's means, seven parts in ten are gone. Of the government's means, for broken chariots and worn-out horses, armor and helmets, arrows and crossbows, halberds and shields, spears and great shields, draft oxen and heavy wagons, six parts in ten are gone.

So a wise general makes a point of feeding on the enemy. One zhong of the enemy's grain is worth twenty zhong of our own; one dan of his fodder is worth twenty dan of ours.² What makes men kill the enemy is anger; what makes them take the enemy's goods is reward. So in chariot fighting, when ten or more chariots are captured, reward the man who took the first, and change their flags and banners. Mix the captured chariots in with ours and drive them; treat the captured soldiers well and keep them. This is called defeating the enemy and growing stronger.

So in war, prize victory, not length. The general who understands war is the master of the people's fate,³ the one on whom the safety or peril of the state depends.

[1.](#) The li was a measure of distance, roughly a third of a mile.

[2.](#) Measures of grain and fodder; a zhong held several times as much as a dan.

[3.](#) Siming, "Master of Fate," was the name of a star and of the god believed to govern the span of human life.

III. Attacking by Stratagem

Sun Tzu said: In general, the method of using troops is this. Keeping a state intact is best; breaking it is second. Keeping an army intact is best; breaking it is second. Keeping a battalion intact is best; breaking it is second. Keeping a company intact is best; breaking it is second. Keeping a squad intact is best; breaking it is second.¹ So to win a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the height of skill. To subdue the enemy's army without fighting is the height of skill.

So the best use of troops is to attack the enemy's plans; next, to attack his alliances; next, to attack his army; the worst is to attack walled cities. Attacking cities is a method for when there is no other choice. Making ready the great shields and the covered assault carts and preparing the siege engines takes three months to finish; piling up the earthen ramps against the walls takes another three months. If the general cannot master his anger and sends his men swarming up the walls like ants, a third of his soldiers are killed and the city still does not fall. This is the calamity of attack.

So those skilled at using troops subdue the enemy's army without battle, take his cities without attacking them, and destroy his state without a long campaign. They must contend for the world by keeping things intact, so that their troops are not worn down and the advantage can be kept intact. This is the method of attacking by stratagem.

So the method of using troops is this. At ten to one, surround them; at five to one, attack; at two to one, divide. If equal, be able to fight; if fewer, be able to slip away; if no match, be able to avoid them. A small force that holds stubbornly is captured by a large one.

The general is the support of the state. If the support is complete, the state will surely be strong; if the support has gaps, the state will surely be weak. There are three ways in which a sovereign brings trouble on his army. Not knowing that the army cannot advance, he orders it to advance; not knowing that the army cannot retreat, he orders it to retreat. This is called hobbling the army. Not knowing the affairs of the Three Armies,² he takes part in their administration, and the soldiers are confused. Not knowing the expedients of the Three Armies, he takes part in their command, and the soldiers are doubtful. When the Three Armies are both confused and doubtful, trouble from the feudal lords arrives. This is called throwing the army into disorder and handing victory to the enemy.

So there are five ways to know who will win. One who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will win. One who understands how to use large and small numbers will win. One whose superiors and subordinates want the same thing will win. One who is prepared and waits for the unprepared will win. One whose general is able and is not interfered with by the sovereign will win. These five are the way to know victory.

So it is said: One who knows himself and knows the enemy will not be in danger in a hundred battles. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will win one and lose one. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will be defeated in every battle.

[1.](#) An army (jun) was 12,500 men, a battalion (lǔ) 500, a company (zū) 100, and a squad (wū) 5.

[2.](#) The whole army of a state, traditionally divided into three.

IV. Form

Sun Tzu said: Those skilled at fighting in ancient times first made themselves unbeatable and then waited for the enemy to become beatable. Being unbeatable lies with oneself; being beatable lies with the enemy. So those skilled at fighting can make themselves unbeatable, but they cannot make the enemy certain to be beaten. So it is said: Victory can be known, but it cannot be made.

Being unbeatable is a matter of defense; being able to win is a matter of attack. One defends when one's strength is not enough and attacks when it is more than enough. Those skilled at defense hide beneath the ninefold earth; those skilled at attack move above the ninefold heavens. So they can protect themselves and win a complete victory.

To foresee a victory that the crowd can also see is not the height of skill. To win in battle and have the whole world call it skillful is not the height of skill. Lifting a strand of autumn down is no proof of great strength; seeing the sun and moon is no proof of sharp eyes; hearing thunder is no proof of keen ears. Those skilled at fighting in ancient times won where winning was easy. So the victories of those skilled at fighting bring them no fame for wisdom and no merit for courage. Thus their victories in battle never go astray. Never going astray, whatever they set in place is sure to win, for they defeat an enemy already defeated. Hence those skilled at fighting take their stand on ground where they cannot be defeated and do not miss the enemy's defeat. That is why a victorious army first wins and then seeks battle; a defeated army first fights and then seeks victory. Those skilled at using troops culti-

vate the Way and preserve Law, and so they can govern victory and defeat.

The art of war has, first, measurement; second, quantity; third, count; fourth, weighing; fifth, victory. Ground gives rise to measurement, measurement to quantity, quantity to count, count to weighing, and weighing to victory. So a victorious army is like a yi weighed against a zhu, and a defeated army like a zhu weighed against a yi.¹ When the victor fights, it is like pent-up water bursting into a gorge a thousand fathoms deep. This is form.

[1.](#) Units of weight: a yi was about five hundred times a zhu.

V. Momentum

Sun Tzu said: Governing many is like governing few; it is a matter of division and numbers. Fighting many is like fighting few; it is a matter of flags and drums. That the whole host of the Three Armies can be made to take the enemy's attack without ever being defeated is a matter of the unorthodox and the orthodox. That the army falls on the enemy like a whetstone thrown against an egg is a matter of the empty and the full.

In all fighting, one engages with the orthodox and wins with the unorthodox. So those skilled at bringing forth the unorthodox are as inexhaustible as heaven and earth, as unfailing as the rivers and seas. Ending and beginning again: so are the sun and moon. Dying and being born again: so are the four seasons. There are no more than five notes, but the variations of the five notes are more than can ever be heard. There are no more than five colors, but the variations of the five colors are more than can ever be seen. There are no more than five flavors, but the variations of the five flavors are more than can ever be tasted. In the momentum of battle there are no more than the unorthodox and the orthodox, but the variations of the unorthodox and the orthodox can never be exhausted. The unorthodox and the orthodox give rise to each other like a ring that has no end. Who could ever exhaust them?

That rushing water, in its speed, sweeps boulders along is momentum. That a hawk, in its speed, strikes and breaks its prey is timing. So those skilled at fighting have momentum that is steep and timing that is short. Momentum is like a drawn crossbow; timing is like the release of the trigger.

In the tumult and the turmoil the fighting looks like chaos, yet the army cannot be thrown into chaos; in the confusion and the murk its formation is round, yet it cannot be defeated. Disorder is born of order, cowardice of courage, weakness of strength. Order and disorder are a matter of numbers; courage and cowardice are a matter of momentum; strength and weakness are a matter of form. So those skilled at moving the enemy show him a form, and he is sure to follow it; they offer him something, and he is sure to take it. They move him with advantage and wait for him with their troops.

So those skilled at fighting look for it in momentum and do not demand it of men; so they can choose their men and rely on momentum. One who relies on momentum sends his men into battle as one rolls logs and stones. It is the nature of logs and stones to lie still on level ground and move on a slope, to stop when square and roll when round. So the momentum of one skilled at sending men into battle is like rolling round boulders down a mountain a thousand fathoms high. This is momentum.

VI. The Empty and the Full

Sun Tzu said: Whoever is first on the field of battle and waits for the enemy is at ease; whoever comes to the field later and hurries into battle is worn out.

So those skilled at fighting bring others to them and are not brought by others. What can make the enemy come of his own accord is advantage; what can keep the enemy from coming is harm. So if the enemy is at ease, be able to wear him out; if well fed, to starve him; if settled, to move him. Go out to where he must hurry; hurry to where he does not expect. One who marches a thousand li without tiring marches through land where there is no one. One who attacks and is sure to take attacks where the enemy does not defend. One who defends and is sure to hold defends where the enemy does not attack.

So against those skilled at attack, the enemy does not know where to defend; against those skilled at defense, the enemy does not know where to attack. Subtle, so subtle, to the point of having no form! Mysterious, so mysterious, to the point of having no sound! Thus they can be the masters of the enemy's fate. They advance and cannot be resisted, because they strike at his emptiness; they withdraw and cannot be pursued, because they are too quick to be overtaken. When we want to fight, the enemy, though he has high ramparts and deep moats, cannot help but fight us, because we attack what he must rescue. When we do not want to fight, though we only draw a line on the ground and hold it, the enemy cannot fight us, because we lead him away from where he would go. If we make others show their form while we have none,

we are concentrated and the enemy is divided. If we are concentrated into one and the enemy is divided into ten, we attack one with ten. Then we are many and the enemy is few; and if we can strike the few with the many, those we fight will be few indeed. The ground where we will fight must not be known. If it cannot be known, the enemy must prepare in many places; and if the enemy prepares in many places, those we fight will be few. If he prepares at the front, the rear has few; if he prepares at the rear, the front has few; if he prepares on the left, the right has few; if he prepares on the right, the left has few; if there is no place he does not prepare, there is no place where he is not few. The few are those who prepare against others; the many are those who make others prepare against them. Therefore, if one knows the place of battle and knows the day of battle, one can march a thousand li to join battle. If one knows neither the place of battle nor the day of battle, the left cannot help the right, the right cannot help the left, the front cannot help the rear, and the rear cannot help the front, to say nothing of the farthest units tens of li away and the nearest several li! As I reckon it, though the troops of Yue¹ are many, what good will that do them toward victory? So it is said: Victory can be made. Though the enemy is numerous, he can be kept from fighting. Weigh him up to learn the calculation of gain and loss; stir him to learn the pattern of his movement and rest; make him show his form to learn the ground of death and life; test him to learn where he has more than enough and where too little. Thus the height of giving an army form is to reach formlessness. Without form, the deepest spy cannot see in, nor the wise make plans against it. By form one sets victory before the crowd, and the crowd cannot understand it. Everyone knows the form by which we win, but no one knows the form by which we shaped the victory. That is why our victories in battle are not repeated, and we answer form with form without end. Now, the form of an army is like water. Water in

its course avoids the high and hurries to the low; an army in its form avoids the full and strikes the empty. Water shapes its flow by the ground; an army shapes its victory by the enemy. Therefore war has no constant momentum, and water no constant form. One who can win by changing with the enemy is called divine. Among the five phases none always prevails, among the four seasons none keeps its place forever, the days are short and long, and the moon dies and is born again.

[1](#). Yue was the southern neighbor and bitter enemy of Wu, the state Sun Tzu served.

VII. Contending for Advantage

Sun Tzu said: In general, in the method of using troops, the general receives his orders from the sovereign, gathers the army, and assembles the host; and from then until he camps facing the enemy, nothing is harder than contending for advantage. What is hard in contending for advantage is to make the roundabout into the direct and misfortune into advantage. So make the route roundabout and lure the enemy with advantage; set out after him and arrive before him. This is knowing the calculation of the roundabout and the direct.

Contending for advantage can bring gain; contending for advantage can bring danger. If the whole army is sent to contend for advantage, it will not arrive in time; if part of the army is left behind to contend for advantage, the baggage train is lost. So if men roll up their armor and hurry, resting neither day nor night, covering double the distance at a forced march, to contend for advantage a hundred li away, the generals of all three armies are captured: the strong arrive first, the weary fall behind, and as a rule one in ten arrives. If they contend for advantage fifty li away, the general of the vanguard falls, and as a rule half arrive. If they contend for advantage thirty li away, two in three arrive. So an army without its baggage train is lost, without provisions is lost, without stores is lost.

So one who does not know the designs of the feudal lords cannot make alliances in advance; one who does not know the lay of mountains and forests, passes and defiles, marshes and swamps cannot march an army; one who does not use local guides cannot

gain the advantage of the ground. So war is founded on deception, moves by advantage, and changes by dividing and combining.

So when it is swift the army is like the wind, when slow like the forest; in raiding and plundering it is like fire, in standing still like a mountain; it is as hard to know as the dark, and it moves like a clap of thunder. In plundering the countryside, divide the men; in extending territory, divide the gains. Weigh things in the balance, then move. One who first knows the calculation of the roundabout and the direct will win. This is the method of contending for advantage.

*The Book of Military Administration*¹ says: "Because words cannot be heard, gongs and drums were made; because men cannot see one another, flags and banners were made." Gongs and drums, flags and banners are the means by which the ears and eyes of the men are made one. Once the men are made one, the brave cannot advance alone and the cowardly cannot retreat alone. This is the method of using a multitude. So in night fighting, use many gongs and drums; in day fighting, use many flags and banners. These are the means of changing what men hear and see.

The Three Armies can be robbed of their spirit; the general can be robbed of his heart. So in the morning spirit is keen, at midday it flags, and in the evening it turns toward home. Those skilled at using troops avoid the enemy when his spirit is keen and strike him when it flags and turns toward home. This is managing spirit. In order, they wait for disorder; in calm, they wait for clamor. This is managing the heart. Near the field, they wait for those who come from far; at ease, they wait for the weary; well fed, they wait for the hungry. This is managing strength. Do not intercept banners in perfect order; do not attack a formation drawn up in full array. This is managing change.

So the method of using troops is this. Do not march up against an enemy on high hills; do not meet head-on an enemy with his

back to a ridge; do not pursue a feigned flight; do not attack crack troops; do not take the bait of troops offered as bait; do not block an army going home; leave a way out for a surrounded army; do not press a desperate enemy. This is the method of using troops.

[1.](#) An older military book, now lost.

VIII. The Nine Variations

Sun Tzu said: In general, in the method of using troops, the general receives his orders from the sovereign, gathers the army, and assembles the host. On difficult ground, do not camp; on cross-roads ground, join with allies; on cut-off ground, do not linger; on enclosed ground, use stratagem; on deadly ground, fight. There are roads not to be taken, armies not to be attacked, cities not to be besieged, ground not to be contested, and commands of the sovereign not to be obeyed.¹

So a general who understands the advantages of the nine variations knows how to use troops. A general who does not understand the advantages of the nine variations, though he knows the lay of the land, cannot gain the advantage of the ground. One who commands troops without knowing the art of the nine variations, though he knows the five advantages, cannot get the use of his men.

So the deliberations of the wise always take advantage and harm together. Because they take advantage into account, their undertakings can be relied on; because they take harm into account, their troubles can be resolved. So one subdues the feudal lords with harm, keeps them busy with undertakings, and sends them running with advantage.

So the method of using troops is this. Do not rely on the enemy's not coming; rely on our having the means to meet him. Do not rely on his not attacking; rely on our having made ourselves unassailable.

So a general has five dangers. One bent on dying can be killed; one bent on living can be captured; one quick to anger can be provoked by insult; one fastidious about his honor can be shamed; one who loves the people can be harassed. These five are the faults of a general and a calamity in the use of troops. When an army is overthrown and its general killed, it is always through these five dangers. They must be examined.

[1.](#) The list does not come to nine in any obvious way, and what the “nine variations” of the next paragraph are has been disputed since antiquity.

IX. Moving the Army

Sun Tzu said: In general, in positioning the army and observing the enemy: to cross mountains, keep close to the valleys; face the open, sunny side and take the heights; do not climb to fight an enemy above. This is positioning an army in the mountains. Having crossed a river, move well away from it. When the invader crosses a river to come on, do not meet him in the water; let half his army cross and then strike, to advantage. One who wants to fight should not meet the invader close by the water. Face the open, sunny side and take the heights; do not face upstream against the current. This is positioning an army on rivers.

In crossing salt marshes, simply get across quickly and do not linger. If the armies meet in the middle of a salt marsh, keep close to water and grass, with a grove of trees at the back. This is positioning an army in salt marshes. On level ground, take a position that is easy, with high ground on the right and at the back, death in front and life behind. This is positioning an army on level ground. These four advantageous positions are how the Yellow Emperor defeated the four emperors.¹

In general, an army likes high ground and dislikes low, values the sunny side and scorns the shady. Keep where the men can be nourished and occupy firm ground, and the army will be free of the hundred diseases. This is called certain victory. On hills and embankments, always occupy the sunny side, with the slope on the right and at the back. This is the advantage for the troops and the help of the ground. When it has rained upstream and the

water comes flowing down, those who want to ford must wait until it settles.

Wherever the ground has steep-walled ravines, Heaven's Wells, Heaven's Prisons, Heaven's Nets, Heaven's Pits, or Heaven's Cracks, leave quickly and do not go near. We keep away from them and let the enemy approach them; we face them and let the enemy have them at his back. If beside the army there are passes and defiles, ponds and pools, reeds and rushes, small woods, or dense undergrowth, search them carefully and repeatedly, for these are where ambushers and spies lie hidden.

When the enemy is near and quiet, he is relying on a strong position. When he is far off and challenges us to battle, he wants us to advance. When he has camped on easy ground, it is because that is to his advantage. When the trees move, he is coming. When there are many screens set up in the grass, he means to mislead us. When birds rise, there is an ambush. When beasts take fright, a surprise attack is coming. When dust rises high and in a sharp column, chariots are coming; when it is low and spread wide, infantry are coming; when it is scattered in strands, they are gathering firewood; when it is thin and comes and goes, they are making camp.

When his envoys speak humbly while he makes preparations, he will advance. When their words are strong and he drives forward as if to attack, he will retreat. When light chariots come out first and take position on the flanks, he is forming for battle. When he asks for peace with no prior agreement, he has a plot. When his men run about and set out the troops in ranks, he has fixed a time. When some advance and some retreat, he is luring us. When the soldiers stand leaning on their weapons, they are hungry. When those sent to draw water drink first, they are thirsty.

When he sees an advantage and does not advance, he is weary. When birds gather, the camp is empty. When there is shouting at

night, he is afraid. When the army is in turmoil, the general lacks authority. When flags and banners shift about, there is disorder. When the officers are angry, the men are exhausted. When they kill their horses and eat the meat, the army has no grain. When they hang up their water jars and do not go back to their quarters, they are desperate. When the general speaks to his men slowly and softly, in a coaxing murmur, he has lost the men. Frequent rewards mean he is at the end of his resources; frequent punishments mean he is in distress. To be harsh at first and then fear one's own men is the height of incompetence. When envoys come with gifts and apologies, he wants a respite.

When the enemy's troops come on in anger and face us, but for a long time neither join battle nor withdraw, watch them with great care. In war, more is not better. Only do not advance rashly; it is enough to concentrate strength, size up the enemy, and take him. One who has no forethought and takes the enemy lightly is sure to be captured by others.

If the soldiers are punished before they have grown attached, they will not submit, and if they do not submit, they are hard to use. If they are attached but punishments are not carried out, they cannot be used. So unite them with civility and bring them into line with martial discipline. This is called being sure to prevail. If orders are consistently carried out in instructing the people, the people will submit; if orders are not consistently carried out in instructing the people, the people will not submit. When orders are consistently carried out, the general and the men are of one accord.

¹ The Yellow Emperor was a legendary sovereign of earliest antiquity; the “four emperors” were said to be rulers of the four quarters whom he overcame.

X. Terrain

Sun Tzu said: Among the kinds of terrain there is accessible ground, entangling ground, standoff ground, narrow ground, steep ground, and distant ground. Ground where we can go and they can come is called accessible. On accessible ground, be first to occupy the high, sunny side and keep the supply routes open; then fight, to advantage.

Ground that is easy to go into and hard to come back from is called entangling. On entangling ground, if the enemy is unprepared, go out and defeat him; if the enemy is prepared, going out will not win, and since it is hard to come back, this is not to our advantage. Ground where it is to our disadvantage to go out and to his disadvantage to go out is called standoff ground. On standoff ground, even if the enemy offers us an advantage, do not go out; draw off and leave, and when half the enemy has come out, strike, to advantage.

On narrow ground, if we occupy it first, we must fill it and wait for the enemy. If the enemy occupies it first and has filled it, do not follow him in; if he has not filled it, follow him in. On steep ground, if we occupy it first, we must hold the high, sunny side and wait for the enemy. If the enemy occupies it first, draw off and leave; do not follow him. On distant ground, when the two sides are equal in momentum, it is hard to provoke battle, and fighting is to our disadvantage. These six are the way of the ground. This is the general's gravest responsibility; it must be examined.

Among armies there is flight, slackness, sinking, collapse, disorder, and rout. These six are not disasters sent by Heaven and Earth

but the faults of the general. When the two sides are equal in momentum and one strikes ten, it is called flight. When the soldiers are strong and the officers weak, it is called slackness. When the officers are strong and the soldiers weak, it is called sinking. When the senior officers are angry and insubordinate, and on meeting the enemy fight on their own out of resentment, and the general does not know their ability, it is called collapse. When the general is weak and not strict, his instruction and guidance are unclear, officers and men have no fixed duties, and the troops are drawn up every which way, it is called disorder. When the general cannot size up the enemy, engages many with few, strikes the strong with the weak, and has no picked vanguard, it is called rout. These six are the way to defeat. This is the general's gravest responsibility; it must be examined.

The shape of the ground is an aid to the army. To size up the enemy and gain control of victory, and to calculate how steep, narrow, far, and near the ground is: this is the way of the superior general. One who knows this and fights will surely win; one who does not know this and fights will surely lose. So if the course of battle points to certain victory, then even if the ruler says not to fight, one may fight; if the course of battle does not point to victory, then even if the ruler says one must fight, one may refrain.

A general who advances without seeking fame and retreats without avoiding blame, whose only concern is to protect the people and to serve his ruler's advantage, is the treasure of the state. He looks on his soldiers as infants, and so they will go with him into deep ravines; he looks on his soldiers as beloved sons, and so they will die with him. But if he is generous and cannot employ them, loving and cannot command them, and if they are disorderly and he cannot govern them, they are like spoiled children and cannot be used.

To know that our soldiers can attack but not know that the enemy cannot be attacked is only halfway to victory. To know that the enemy can be attacked but not know that our soldiers cannot attack is only halfway to victory. To know that the enemy can be attacked and that our soldiers can attack, but not know that the lay of the ground does not allow a battle, is only halfway to victory. So those who understand war move without confusion and act without being at a loss. So it is said: One who knows the enemy and knows himself wins without danger; one who knows Heaven and knows Earth can make his victory complete.

XI. The Nine Grounds

Sun Tzu said: In the method of using troops there is dispersive ground, shallow ground, contested ground, open ground, crossroads ground, deep ground, difficult ground, enclosed ground, and deadly ground.

When the feudal lords fight in their own territory, it is dispersive ground. When one enters another's territory but not deeply, it is shallow ground. Ground that is advantageous to us if we take it and advantageous to him if he takes it is contested ground. Ground where we can go and they can come is open ground. Ground where the lands of three lords meet, so that whoever arrives first wins the multitudes of the world, is crossroads ground. When one has gone deep into another's territory, with many walled towns at one's back, it is deep ground. Mountains and forests, passes and defiles, marshes and swamps, any road hard to travel, are difficult ground. Ground where the way in is narrow and the way back roundabout, so that a few of theirs can strike many of ours, is enclosed ground. Ground where one survives by fighting swiftly and perishes by not fighting swiftly is deadly ground.

So on dispersive ground, do not fight; on shallow ground, do not stop; on contested ground, do not attack; on open ground, do not let the army be cut off; on crossroads ground, join with allies; on deep ground, plunder; on difficult ground, keep moving; on enclosed ground, use stratagem; on deadly ground, fight.

Those skilled at using troops in ancient times could keep the enemy's front and rear from reaching each other, his large and small units from relying on each other, his nobles and commoners

from rescuing each other, and his superiors and subordinates from supporting each other; his soldiers, once scattered, could not regroup, and when assembled could not form in order. When it accords with advantage, move; when it does not accord with advantage, stop.

“May I ask: if the enemy comes on in great numbers and in good order, how should we meet him?” The answer is: First seize what he holds dear, and he will do our bidding. The essence of war is speed. Take advantage of the enemy’s failure to keep up, go by roads he does not expect, and attack where he has taken no precautions.

In general, the way of an invading army is this. When it has gone deep, it is concentrated, and the defenders cannot overcome it. Plunder the fertile countryside, and the Three Armies will have enough to eat. Look carefully to the men’s nourishment and do not overwork them; unite their spirit and build up their strength; move the troops and lay plans so that none can fathom them.

Throw them where there is nowhere to go, and they will die rather than flee. Ready to die, what can they not achieve? The soldiers will give all their strength. When soldiers are in deep peril, they are not afraid; when there is nowhere to go, they stand firm; when they have gone deep, they hold together; when there is no choice, they fight.

So without being drilled they are on guard; without being asked they do what is needed; without being bound by agreement they are close; without being ordered they are trustworthy. Forbid omens and do away with doubts, and until death they will go nowhere else. Our soldiers have no surplus wealth, not because they dislike goods; they have no surplus life, not because they dislike long life. On the day the orders are issued, the soldiers who are sitting wet their collars with tears, and those lying down have tears running down their cheeks. Throw them where there is

nowhere to go, and they will show the courage of Zhuan Zhu and Cao Gui.¹

So those skilled at using troops are like the shuairan. The shuairan is a snake of Mount Chang.² Strike its head, and its tail comes; strike its tail, and its head comes; strike its middle, and head and tail both come. "May I ask whether troops can be made like the shuairan?" The answer is: They can. The men of Wu and the men of Yue hate each other, yet if they were crossing in the same boat and met a storm, they would help each other like a left hand and a right. Therefore tethering the horses side by side and burying the wheels is not enough to rely on. To make courage uniform, as if it were one, is the way of governing; to get the best from the hard and the soft alike is the principle of the ground. So those skilled at using troops lead the whole army as if leading one man by the hand: the men have no choice.

The business of the general is to be calm and inscrutable, upright and orderly. He can keep the soldiers' eyes and ears in ignorance, so that they know nothing. He changes his arrangements and alters his plans, so that no one recognizes them; he changes his camp and takes roundabout routes, so that the men cannot anticipate him. When the commander sets a time with them, it is like climbing up high and taking away the ladder. When the commander goes deep into the territory of the feudal lords with them, he releases the trigger. He drives them like a flock of sheep, driven this way and driven that, and no one knows where they are going. To gather the host of the Three Armies and throw it into danger: this is the business of the general.

The variations of the nine grounds, the strength in drawing in and stretching out, and the patterns of human nature must be examined. In general, the way of an invading army is this: deep, it is concentrated; shallow, it disperses. Where one leaves one's own state and crosses the border with an army, it is cut-off ground.

Where roads lead off on all four sides, it is crossroads ground. Where one has gone in deep, it is deep ground. Where one has gone in shallow, it is shallow ground. With strongholds behind and narrow passes in front, it is enclosed ground. Where there is nowhere to go, it is deadly ground.

So on dispersive ground, I will make their will one; on shallow ground, I will keep them together; on contested ground, I will hurry up the rear; on open ground, I will look carefully to defense; on crossroads ground, I will make our alliances firm;³ on deep ground, I will keep the food coming; on difficult ground, I will press on along the road; on enclosed ground, I will block the gaps; on deadly ground, I will show them that there is no living through it. So it is the nature of soldiers to resist when surrounded, to fight when there is no choice, and to obey when the danger is extreme.

So one who does not know the designs of the feudal lords cannot make alliances in advance; one who does not know the lay of mountains and forests, passes and defiles, marshes and swamps cannot march an army; one who does not use local guides cannot gain the advantage of the ground. An army that does not know even one of these four or five things is not the army of a hegemon-king.⁴ When the army of a hegemon-king attacks a great state, that state cannot assemble its multitudes; when its might falls on the enemy, his alliances cannot come together. So it does not contend for alliances in the world, nor does it nurture power in the world; trusting in its own designs, it lets its might fall on the enemy, and so it can take his cities and overthrow his state.

Bestow rewards beyond the rules; issue orders beyond the usual measures. Handle the host of the Three Armies as if handling one man. Set them to their tasks, but do not explain in words; set them to danger, but do not tell them of the advantage. Throw them into ground where they will perish, and they will survive;

sink them in deadly ground, and they will live. Only when the multitude has fallen into harm can it decide victory and defeat.

So the business of war lies in going along with the enemy's intentions while studying them closely, then massing against him in one direction to kill his general a thousand li away. This is called achieving one's aim by skill.

So on the day the war is decided, close the passes and break the tallies, and let no envoys through; deliberate sternly in the temple hall to settle the matter. When the enemy opens a door, be quick to enter. Go first for what he holds dear, and quietly set a time for it; keep to the inked line while shadowing the enemy, until the battle is decided. So at first be like a maiden, and the enemy will open his door; afterward be like a hare breaking loose, and the enemy will be too late to resist.

[1.](#) Zhuan Zhu stabbed King Liao of Wu to death on behalf of Prince Guang, the future King Helü. Cao Gui, a man of Lu, held a dagger to Duke Huan of Qi at a covenant and made him return the land Lu had lost. The text gives only one syllable of each name.

[2.](#) The shuairan is a snake of legend; its name means "quick to respond." Mount Chang, also called Mount Heng, is a famous mountain in northern China.

[3.](#) Our source text reads "open ground" a second time here and adds a clause the received text lacks, "on crossroads ground, I will be careful of what we rely on." We take the second "open ground" as a copying error for "crossroads ground" and follow the received text.

[4.](#) The hegemon (*ba*) was the leading lord who presided over the others; the king (*wang*) ruled all under heaven.

XII. Attacking with Fire

Sun Tzu said: In general, there are five kinds of fire attack. The first is burning men, the second burning stockpiles, the third burning baggage trains, the fourth burning storehouses, and the fifth burning formations.¹ Using fire requires the right conditions, and the means must always be kept ready. There is a season for setting fires and there are days for starting them. The season is when the weather is dry. The days are when the moon is in the Winnowing Basket, the Wall, the Wings, or the Chariot.² These four lodges mark the days when the wind rises.

In general, in a fire attack one must respond to the five changes of fire. When fire breaks out inside the enemy's camp, respond early from outside. If fire breaks out but his troops stay calm, wait and do not attack; let the fire reach its height, and if it can be followed up, follow it up; if it cannot, stop. If fire can be set from outside, do not wait for it inside; set it at the right time. When fire is set upwind, do not attack from downwind. Wind that blows by day lasts long; wind at night dies down. Every army must know the five changes of fire and keep watch for them by calculation.

So using fire to aid an attack shows intelligence; using water to aid an attack shows strength. Water can cut the enemy off, but it cannot take what is his. To win battles and take what one attacks but fail to consolidate the achievement is ominous. It is called wasteful lingering.³

So it is said: The enlightened ruler thinks it through; the good general consolidates it. Do not move unless there is advantage; do

not use troops unless there is gain; do not fight unless there is danger. The ruler must not raise an army out of anger; the general must not do battle out of resentment. When it accords with advantage, move; when it does not accord with advantage, stop.

Anger can turn back into delight, and resentment back into pleasure, but a state destroyed cannot be restored, and the dead cannot be brought back to life. So the enlightened ruler is careful about it, and the good general is wary of it. This is the way to keep the state secure and the army intact.

[1.](#) Some read the last word as “roads” rather than “formations”: burning the supply routes.

[2.](#) Four of the twenty-eight lunar lodges into which the Chinese divided the sky. The wind was thought to rise when the moon entered them.

[3.](#) Our source text has “neglect” where the received text has “consolidate,” here and in the next paragraph. Read that way the sentence says the opposite of what it means; we follow the received text.

XIII. Using Spies

Sun Tzu said: In general, when an army of a hundred thousand is raised and sent on a campaign a thousand li away, the expenses of the people and the outlays of the government come to a thousand pieces of gold a day. There is turmoil at home and abroad, men are worn out on the roads, and seven hundred thousand households cannot attend to their work.¹ The two sides hold each other off for several years to contend for victory on a single day. To begrudge ranks, salaries, and a hundred pieces of gold, and so not know the enemy's situation, is the height of inhumanity. Such a man is no general of the people, no aide to his ruler, no master of victory.

So what enables the enlightened sovereign and the wise general to move and defeat others, and to achieve successes beyond those of the crowd, is foreknowledge. Foreknowledge cannot be had from ghosts and spirits, cannot be drawn by analogy from events, cannot be verified by measurement. It must be had from men, from those who know the enemy's situation.

So there are five kinds of spies to use: local spies, inside spies, turned spies, doomed spies, and surviving spies. When the five kinds of spies are all at work and no one knows their ways, it is called the divine thread, the treasure of the sovereign. Local spies are people of the enemy's own countryside whom we employ. Inside spies are the enemy's officials whom we employ. Turned spies are the enemy's spies whom we employ. Doomed spies are those for whom we stage false business outside, letting our own

spies learn of it and pass it on to the enemy's spies. Surviving spies are those who come back to report.

So in the affairs of the Three Armies, none are held closer than spies, no rewards are richer than those for spies, and no business is more secret than that of spies. Only a sage can use spies; only one who is humane and just can employ spies; only one who is subtle and fine can get the truth from spies. Subtle, so subtle! There is nothing for which spies are not used. If a spy's business is heard of before it has been carried out, the spy and those he told shall both die.

In general, whether it is an army we want to strike, a city we want to attack, or a person we want to kill, we must first know the names of the general in command, his attendants, his ushers, his gatekeepers, and his retainers, and have our spies search them out.

Tempt with gain the enemy spies who come to spy on us, lead them in, and house them; so turned spies can be won and used. Through them we learn, and so local spies and inside spies can be won and employed. Through them we learn, and so doomed spies can stage false business and carry it to the enemy. Through them we learn, and so surviving spies can come back as planned. The ruler must know all about the five kinds of spies, and the knowledge must come from the turned spies; so turned spies must be treated with great generosity.

In ancient times, when Yin rose, Yi Zhi was in Xia; when Zhou rose, Lü Ya was in Yin.² So only the enlightened sovereign and the wise general who can make men of the highest intelligence their spies will surely achieve great things. This is the essence of war, that on which the Three Armies depend in every move.

[1.](#) By an old system, eight households formed a unit; when one sent a man to war, the other seven supported it. An army of a hundred thousand thus kept seven hundred thousand households from their work.

[2.](#) Yi Zhi, better known as Yi Yin, had served the Xia before he became minister to Tang, founder of the Yin (Shang) dynasty. Lü Ya, better known as Lü Shang or Jiang Taigong, had lived under the Yin before he helped King Wu found the Zhou.

Colophon

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