



Sunzi's 《Methods of War》

1. [Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - Introduction](#)
2. [Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - War](#)
3. [Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - Planning Attacks](#)
4. [Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - The Army's Form](#)
5. [Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - Potential](#)

Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - Introduction

This is a translation of the Chapter 1 of *The Art of War* by Sunzi. No English sources were used. The original text and many of the interpretations herein come from [古诗文网](#).

孙子曰：兵者，国之大事，死生之地，存亡之道，不可不察也。

War determines life and death of troops, existence and destruction of a country. It cannot be ignored.

故经之以五事，校之以计，而索其情：一曰道，二曰天，三曰地，四曰将、五曰法。

Five aspects are of paramount important:

1. Dao
2. Heaven
3. Earth
4. Generalship
5. Method

道者，令民与上同意也，故可以与之死，可以与之生，而不畏危。

"Dao" concerns alignment. Your side must be unified. By dying together, living together, you shall be unafraid.

天者，阴阳，寒暑、时制也。

"Heaven" concerns timing, yin and yang, winter and summer.

地者，远近、险易、广狭、死生也。

"Earth" concerns the near and far, impassable and passable, open fields and choke points, death and life.

将者，智、信、仁、勇、严也。

"Generalship" is a matter of wisdom, fidelity, benevolence, bravery and severity.

法者，曲制、官道、主用也。

"Method" concerns tactics, doctrine and organization.

凡此五者，将莫不闻，知之者胜，不知者不胜。

A commander must not ignore these five aspects. Understanding them brings victory. Lack of understanding does not bring victory.

故校之以计，而索其情，曰：主孰有道？将孰有能？天地孰得？法令孰行？兵众孰强？士卒孰练？赏罚孰明？

Ask yourself: Are ruler and subjects aligned? Is the general capable? Heaven (climate) and Earth (geography) in your favor? Methods effective? Troops strong? Trained? Enlightenedly punished?

吾以此知胜负矣。将听吾计，用之必胜，留之；将不听吾计，用之必败，去之。计利以听，乃为之势，以佐其外。势者，因利而制权也。

These things determine victory and defeat.

兵者，诡道也。故能而示之不能，用而示之不用，近而示之远，远而示之近；利而诱之，乱而取之，实而备之，强而避之，怒而挠之，卑而骄之，佚而劳之，亲而离之。攻其无备，出其不意。此兵家之胜，不可先传也。

The art of war depends on local conditions. The near informs you about the far. The far informs you about the near.

- If the enemy is clever then tempt.
- If the enemy is disordered then raid.
- If the enemy is capable then prepare.
- If the enemy is mighty then run.
- If the enemy is angry then provoke.
- If the enemy is inferior then threaten.
- If the enemy is dissolute then persevere.

Attack where the enemy is unprepared. Do what is least expected. But do not forget the five aspects. They are of primary importance.

夫未战而庙算胜者，得算多也；未战而庙算不胜者，得算少也。多算胜，少算不胜，而况于无算乎？吾以此观之，胜负见矣。

A war cannot be won without lots of equipment. This facet of war too must be examined.

Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - War

This is a translation of Chapter 2 of *The Art of War* by Sunzi. No English sources were used.

孙子曰：凡用兵之法，驰车千驷，革车千乘，带甲十万，千里馈粮，内外之费，宾客之用，胶漆之材，车甲之奉，日费千金，然后十万之师举矣。

The ordinary methods of war demand:

- 1,000 teams of 4 horses each,
- 1,000 wagons,
- 100,000 shields,
- provisions to march 1,000 miles,
- domestic and foreign expenses,
- hospitality for guests,
- construction materials for siege weapons,
- armored vehicles,
- salaries

...and an army of 100,000 soldiers.

其用战也胜，久则钝兵挫锐，攻城则力屈，久暴师则国用不足。

A long war is an expensive war.

夫钝兵挫锐，屈力殫货，则诸侯乘其弊而起，虽有智者，不能善其后矣。

An expensive war will cause your vassals to rebel against you.

故兵闻拙速，未睹巧之久也。夫兵久而国利者，未之有也。

There is no such thing as a beneficial protracted war.

故不尽知用兵之害者，则不能尽知用兵之利也。

If you do not understand the costs of war then you do not know which wars are worthwhile to fight.

善用兵者，役不再籍，粮不三载，取用于国，因粮于敌，故军食可足也。

Do not conscript troops more than once. Do not resupply your army with grain more than twice. Take what you need from the enemy. The enemy has ample grain and an army of troops.

国之贫于师者远输，远输则百姓贫；

Resupplying an army over long distances impoverishes a country.

近师者贵卖，贵卖则百姓财竭，财竭则急于丘役。

Prices soar in wartime. Levying the peasantry under such circumstances will impoverish them while extracting only forced labor.

力屈财殫，中原内虚于家，百姓之费，十去其七；

The central plains will go unfarmed. Seven tenths of the peasantry's labor will be wasted.

公家之费，破军罢马，甲冑矢弩，戟楯蔽橹，丘牛大车，十去其六。

Supplying an army out of the public purse slows the army down. Horses sicken. Shields split. Oxen tire. Six tenths is wasted.

故智将务食于敌，食敌一钟，当吾二十钟；萁秆一石，当吾二十石。

The wise general eats the enemy's food. A captured bowl of enemy food is worth twenty bowls of your own. A captured ton of enemy grain is worth twenty tons of your own.

故杀敌者，怒也；取敌之利者，货也。车战得车十乘以上，赏其先得者，而更其旌旗，车杂而乘之，卒善而养之，是谓胜敌而益强。

Let your troops kill the enemy in anger, plunder the enemy in greed. A captured enemy combat vehicle is worth no fewer than ten of your own. Reward your first soldier to capture one. Replace its flag. Mix it in among your own.

A good soldier steals victory from the enemy.

故兵贵胜，不贵久。故知兵之将，生民之司命，国家安危之主也。

A valuable victory is a quick victory. A general who, understanding this, issues orders to the people—thereupon is the fate of a state determined.

Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - Planning Attacks

This is a translation of Chapter 3 of *The Art of War* by Sunzi. No English sources were used.

孙子曰：夫用兵之法，

全国为上，破国次之，

全军为上，破军次之；

全旅为上，破旅次之；

全卒为上，破卒次之；

全伍为上，破伍次之。

- It is best to conquer a state whole rather than breaking it.
- It is best to conquer an army whole rather than breaking it.
- It is best to conquer a regiment whole rather than breaking it.
- It is better to conquer a company whole rather than breaking it.
- It is better to conquer a squad whole rather than breaking it.

是故百战百胜，非善之善者也；

不战而屈人之兵，善之善者也。

A hundred victories in as many battles is imperfect perfection.

To defeat an enemy without a fight is perfect perfection

故上兵伐谋，

其次伐交，

其次伐兵，

其下攻城。

- The best use of soldiers is to dispatch plans,
- followed by dispatching ambassadors,
- followed by dispatching troops,
- followed by attacking cities.

攻城之法为不得已。

Attack cities reluctantly.

修櫓輶輶，具器械，三月而后成，距堙，又三月而后已。

Furbish your mortuary tools. In three months, dig a grave. Then dig another grave three months after that.

将不胜其忿而蚁附之，杀士三分之一而城不拔者，此攻之灾也。

A general who grows impatient, angers and storms a city will kill one third of the attacking force and fail to take the city.

故善用兵者，

屈人之兵而非战也，

拔人之城而非攻也，

毁人之国而非久也，

必以全争于天下。

The perfect general

- subdues the enemy without battle,
- draws enemies out of cities to be attacked,
- destroys people quickly,
- utilizes every attack under the sun.

故兵不顿而利可全，此谋攻之法也。

Total benefit without halt, this is the strategem of war.

故用兵之法，

十则围之，

五则攻之，

倍则分之，

敌则能战之，

少则能逃之，

不若则能避之。

If you outnumber the enemy

- 10× surround
- 5× attack
- 2× divide
- 1× engage, if possible
- <1× run, if possible

- <<1× escape, if possible

故小敌之坚，

大敌之擒也。

A small stubborn force will be captured by a large enemy.

夫将者，国之辅也。

辅周，则国必强；

辅隙，则国必弱。

The general complements the country. If the complement is whole then the country will be mighty. If the complement is chinked then the country will be weak.

故君之所以患于军者三：

There are three obstructions to commanding armies:

不知军之不可以进而谓之进，不知军之不可以退而谓之退，是谓“糜军”；

If you do not know the army cannot advance then the army will not advance at your command. If you do not know the army cannot retreat then the army cannot retreat at your command. This is called a "tied up" army.

不知三军之事，而同三军之政者，则军士惑矣；

If you do not know the three armies^[1] and their command structure then soldiers will be confused.

不知三军之权，而同三军之任，则军士疑矣。

If you contradict the commands already issued by officers then they will be hesitant.

三军既惑且疑，则诸侯之难至矣，是谓“乱军引胜”。

If your army is confused and hesitant then your feudal lords will rebel against you. This is called a "self-defeating army".

故知胜有五：知可以战与不可以战者胜，识众寡之用者胜，上下同欲者胜，以虞待不虞者胜，将能而君不御者胜。此五者，知胜之道也。

There are five things you must know in advance to ensure victory:

- If you understand the conditions you can fight or cannot fight, then you are capable of victory.
- If you understand how to flexibly employ the many and the few, then you are capable of victory.
- If the whole army is of one heart, then you are capable of victory.
- If, prepared, you attack an unprepared enemy, then you are capable of victory.
- If the regent does not meddle with the general, then you are capable of victory.

These five conditions, know the Dao of victory.

故曰：知彼知己者，百战不殆；

Know the other, know yourself, one hundred battles, zero defeats.

不知彼而知己，一胜一负，

Know not the other or know not yourself, one victory, one defeat.

不知彼，不知己，每战必殆。

Know not the other, know not yourself, every battle, requisite defeat.

Translation Note

"知彼" is often translated "know your enemy". The word for enemy is "敌". Sunzi uses it frequently. If Sunzi wanted to say "know [your] enemy" then he would write "知敌". Instead he writes "知彼". The pronoun "彼" means "that which is not you".

-
1. The phrase "three armies" 三军 used to refer to the upper, middle and lower army. Today, the phrase refers to the Army, Navy and Air Force. [↩](#)

Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - The Army's Form

This is a translation of Chapter 4 of *The Art of War* by Sunzi. No English sources were used.

孙子曰：昔之善战者，先为不可胜，以待敌之可胜。

Do not first seek victory. Establish conditions such that you cannot lose.

不可胜在己，可胜在敌。

Then await an opportunity to win.

故善战者，能为不可胜，不使敌之必可胜。

You can, with skill, survive, but only the enemy can permit your victory.

故曰：胜可知，而不可为。

Victory can be foreseen, but cannot be forced.

不可胜者，守也；可胜者，攻也。

If you cannot win, defend. If you can win, attack.

守则不足，攻则有余。

Defend when your forces are insufficient. Attack when your forces are ample.

善守者，藏于九地之下，善攻者，动于九天之上，故能自保而全胜也。

The capable defender hides under the nine earths. The capable attacker strikes from the nine heavens. Protect yourself and obtain total victory.

见胜不过众人之所知，非善之善者也；战胜而天下曰善，非善之善者也。

Forseeing victory when the masses cannot is an imperfect perfection. Obtaining victory by moving everything under heaven is an imperfect perfection.

故举秋毫不为多力，见日月不为明目，闻雷霆不为聪耳。

It is like lifting up the vellus hair of autumn's newborn fauna. Noticing the sun and moon does not indicate a keen eye. Hearing thunder does not indicate a keen ear.

古之所谓善战者，胜于易胜者也。故善战者之胜也，无智名，无勇功。

The great generals of history defeated weak enemies. They employed neither cleverness nor courage.

故其战胜不忒，不忒者，其所措必胜，胜已败者也。

They did not win by a hair. Victory was assured.

故善战者，立于不败之地，而不失敌之败也。

Firmly established, all they did was not lose.

是故胜兵先胜而后求战，败兵先战而后求胜。

Victorious armies first seek victory and then fight. Defeated armies first fight and then seek to win.

善用兵者，修道而保法，故能为胜败之政。

Good commanders maintain proper military governance in order to govern the outcome of war.

兵法：一曰度，二曰量，三曰数，四曰称，五曰胜。地生度，度生量，量生数，数生称，称生胜。

You must pay attention to:

1. the territory
2. the quantities
3. the numbers
4. the names
5. victory

The territory determines the quantities. The quantities determines the numbers. The numbers determine the names. The names determine victory.

故胜兵若以镒称铢，败兵若以铢称镒。

The victorious soldier weighs a kilo and is called a gram; the defeated soldier weighs a gram and is called a kilo.

胜者之战民也，若决积水于千仞之溪者，形也。

The good general embodies the form an unstoppable river with a thousand tributaries.

Sunzi's 《Methods of War》 - Potential

This is a translation of Chapter 5 of *The Art of War* by Sunzi. No English sources were used.

孙子曰：凡治众如治寡，分数是也；斗众如斗寡，形名是也；三军之众，可使必受敌而无败者，奇正是也；兵之所加，如以礮投卵者，虚实是也。

To command the many as if commanding the few; to combat the many as if combating the few; the three armies can receive enemy attacks without being defeated, can attack like a stone thrown at an egg.

凡战者，以正合，以奇胜。故善出奇者，无穷如天地，不竭如江海。终而复始，日月是也。死而更生，四时是也。声不过五，五声之变，不可胜听也；色不过五，五色之变，不可胜观也；味不过五，五味之变，不可胜尝也；战势不过奇正，奇正之变，不可胜穷也。奇正相生，如循环之无端，孰能穷之哉！

Conventional combat achieves typical results. Invent surprises to achieve victory. Elite soldiers have the creativity of Heaven and Earth, the tirelessness of a river flowing into the sea. They finish and start again like the sun and the moon. They die and are reborn like the four seasons.

From the arrangements of five^[1] musical notes can be heard infinite sounds. From the arrangements of [five colors](#) can be seen infinite colors. From the arrangements of five flavors can be tasted infinite flavors.

The use of military power is limited to invention and convention. From convention and invention can be arranged infinite strategies.

激水之疾，至于漂石者，势也；鹜鸟之疾，至于毁折者，节也。故善战者，其势险，其节短。势如彍弩，节如发机。

Turbulent water can move a boulder in one swift impulse. A raptor can kill its prey in one swift swoop. The skilled at war create precarious tension and abrupt release like the rhythm of the bolt(s) fed through a repeating crossbow.

纷纷纍纍，斗乱而不可乱；浑浑沌沌，形圆而不可败。乱生于治，怯生于勇，弱生于强。治乱，数也；勇怯，势也；强弱，形也。

Though the battlefield is chaotic, your command structure must be in order.

- Numbers: one side is in chaos = the other side is ordered
- Potential: one side is cowardly = the other side is brave
- Form: one side is weak = the other side is strong

故善动敌者，形之，敌必从之；予之，敌必取之。以利动之，以卒待之。

Those skilled at war move the enemy via the situation, the enemy follows the situation; provide bait, the enemy will seize it. Do not let your own troops be so

moved.

故善战者，求之于势，不责于人故能择人而任势。任势者，其战人也，如转木石。木石之性，安则静，危则动，方则止，圆则行。

Those skilled at war seek out potential by placing the right talent in the right circumstances like placing wood and stone. Wood and stone stand still on flat terrain, rolls down steep terrain. A square is easy to stand still. A round shape is easy to roll.

故善战人之势，如转圆石于千仞之山者，势也。

To command troops as if rolling a round stone down a 10,000-foot mountain. This is called "potential".

-
1. "Five musical notes" refers to the pentatonic scale. [↩](#)