Eric Pereira

Lieutenant Colonel O’Connor

Military Science MSC4001

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*The Art of War* Book Report

*The Art of War* is a military text written over two thousand years ago by Sun Tzu. This fantastic treatise is somehow able to stand the test of time and be a great literature for those interested in military strategy. An informative piece of writing, *The Art of War* can express the fundamental ideas of understanding human nature, exploiting human nature, and using proficient tactical ideas that can stand the test of time.

A primary aspect of *The Art of War* is understanding the self. Understanding the self seems to be a very important theme in this writing, in fact Sun Tzu describes it as fundamental. The last line of the chapter “Attack by Stratagem” states “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.” (Sun Tzu 3:18). This is fundamental to the rest of the military treatise, where all other facts end up being dependent on understanding this one line. Such an idea can stand the tests of time as it is not dependent on technology, or changes in the advancement of humanity, but understanding human nature. When you understand your enemy, you do not necessarily have to understand their tools or tactics, it is also important to know what they are fighting for, their purpose. One of the five essential rules for victory, as stated is “He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks.” (Sun Tzu, 3:17(3)). Warfare is not always dependent on better tactics and armies, history has proven this before. Determination, an act that is deeply embedded in our nature does this. This idea is the backbone of The Art of War, it is one of the fundamental ideas. This idea, along with loyalty, charisma, the want of a people to be sovereign and powerful, as well as pride, fear, compassion, these ideas are important to human nature, and as such it is important to know how to control yourself and abuse the case for the enemy. *The Art of War* teaches what is entailed in human nature, how understanding it can help one understand the self and better appreciate higher level tactics instructed later.

Exploiting Human nature is another aspect of this writing, it is important to understand human nature before exploiting it. Human nature is to be understood, so that one does not fall to it and one is able to see how they are able to abuse it in their enemy. It is important to recognize one’s own nature, in order to not let fear, hate, or rashness impair one’s ability. These emotions can also be used to benefit one’s ability. “Simulated disorder postulates perfect discipline, simulated fear postulates courage; simulated weakness postulates strength.” (Sun Tzu, 5:17). The point being made Sun Tzu is trying to make is that the best time to act disciplined, courageous, or strength is when all seems in disarray. Sun Tzu describes each case scenario as “simulated”. In a similar way the simulation of discipline, courage, and strength are oppositions to what is naturally expected in a battle, and such “simulations” are what makes a leader prevail. Acting out of what is natural will lead to a higher chance of victory. “When you surround an army, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard… Soldiers when in desperate straits lose the sense of fear.” (Sun Tzu, 5:36, 11:24). A point Sun Tzu made here, there is the illusion of choice in this case scenario. The illusion that the enemy has a possibility to escape, which can make them more willing to comply, and will prevent warfare. A desperate enemy, much like a cornered animal, will do anything they can to survive. Abusing human nature, making it as if they are not cornered when they in fact are, can help make capture a more seamless and easy process, and as a result will cost less lives. Such an abuse of nature is instructed in *The Art of War* and is used as a main tactic for defeating and manipulating the enemy.

Sun Tzu can provide tactics that stand the test of time. Strategy and tactics make up the largest portion of this treatise. Overall the largest portion of stratagem is not small unit battlefield tactics, but large-scale battle strategies. These ideas are crucial to recognizing how to beat the enemy, and what is important to consider when taking on the enemy. The most emphasized form of battle strategy is to beat the enemy in a way that will not destroy them and ruin them. A famous quote from The Art of War, “[T]he skillful leader subdues the enemy’s troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field.” (Sun Tzu, 3:7). The concept of beating the enemy without destroying and demolishing the enemy is very important and emphasized later. This tactic, although not always followed in history and not agreed upon by many of the elite in warfighting, has been proven effective multiple times throughout human history. Moreover, this idea can continue as useful advice for many future generations as it is a concept that is not dependent on technology, or advancement of war, it is a central idea as to what is most important when fighting war. *The Art of War* emphasizes big battle strategies, and as a main point emphasizes the *idea* instead of the baseline tactics, in order to express a timeless way to know how to defeat the enemy.

This ancient Chinese text is a great resource to understanding the complexities of battle and remains as one of the most influential writings defining the principles of warfare. *The Art of War* can provide answers to many questions and give insight to those ignorant in warfighting. Although it provides mainly ideas, not in-depth tactics, these ideas are fundamental when looking at the big picture of a battle.

Bibliography

Tzu, Sun. *The Art of War*. Translated by Lionel Giles, Canterbury Classics, 2014.