

## Book Review

### A Reinterpretation of Sun Tzu's The Art of War

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Winning Engagements: A Sun Tzu Retelling

(A book in final draft stages)

#### *General Description*

An icon in the world of management theory is a series of principles developed 2500 years ago by the almost mythical Sun Tzu of China. These principles were named Sun Tzu. Much later the appellation "The Art of War" was added.

Sun Tzu is a collection of 13 "books" of aphorisms. A long sequence of translators and interpreters have deemed this a work on military strategy and tactics. But there have been many other analyses and applications to the world of business, industry and socio-political affairs. Invariably, the war metaphor has guided both interpretation and application. Was this Master Sun's intent?

Understanding Sun Tzu demands some knowledge of the religions and philosophies of ancient China. For any degree of ease maneuvering through the obscure and unfamiliar images one needs at least some exposure to, and comfort with the Tao Te Ching. Previous works, for whatever reasons, have suffered from either too superficial an analysis and application, or too tactical an interpretation. Master Sun speaks through high level principles concerned with behavioral management in the wide variety of social situations within which individuals and organizations find themselves.

Too often Western authors seem unable to escape the confines of their heritage and perspective or to penetrate beyond what are clearly images and idioms. *Winning Engagements* is an interpretation and organizational application of Sun Tzu that draws on the author's knowledge and experience with business, government, sociology and Eastern philosophy. Approached from such perspectives Sun Tzu emerges as a guide for beneficial human relationships, effective interaction within and between individuals and organizations. Though intended to be neither a manual for conflict resolution nor a text book on war it has applicability to these domains as well. But Master Sun would say that if one is reading these books to find ways of successfully concluding open or armed conflict, the engagement has already failed.

#### *Themes and Conclusions*

Sun Tzu is not easy to read or understand. The available translations and interpretations are of two types:

- a) the work of translators. They, with rare exceptions, are literal interpretations that tend to be low level and tactical.
- b) the work of management analysts. In limited cases this work has been carefully researched and applied. Others have not been well done. Some have tried to generalize what is already very general; still others have consolidated unrelated principles and misapplied others. These efforts usually force meaning when time and study would have allowed penetration to

Master Sun's real intent. Assuming the text refers only to conflict and war will cause one to miss the work's subtleties.

When looking at the emerging global economy contemporary management theorists have made clear that success will demand change. Westerners need to shred and shed mediaeval notions of organization, process and relations. They need an organizational style that transcends tradition and hierarchy and focuses on the future instead of the past. In this future other cultures and traditions must be considered than our own Greco-Roman one.

In the main the Sun Tzu work to date will not give impetus and material advantage in our economic and social initiatives along the Pacific Rim. In fact, they may be causing potentially irreparable harm as they perpetuate notions of Eastern obscurity and mystery.....the "inscrutable Orient", as it were.

Winning Engagements seeks to do several things. It strives to provide a readable and understandable interpretation of Sun Tzu, clause by clause. This component is preceded by an analysis supporting the argument that this is not a textbook on war, but rather a guideline on engagements in general. The work concludes with some illustrations of how one can move Master Sun's principles closer to the personal and professional environments. These are written as a series of "memos" to those who lead and participate in engagements. They could serve as useful "discussion points" on the principles of Master Sun in functional areas, such as training for collective bargaining, or in reviewing corporate communications plans.

This publication is an academic and applied exercise. It is academic in its ambition to add to our understanding and dialogue about Eastern philosophy. It is applied in that it brings plain English to a text that is challenging for the newcomer. Indeed, much of Sun Tzu is illegible to someone who is completely unversed in Eastern religion and philosophy. Having said that, the book is not a religious tract nor is it filled with the jargon of either philosophy or business.

Continuing study and analysis of "basic texts" from the Oriental milieu can help us immeasurably as our global relations increase in scope and speed. Failure to take the time to develop a better understanding can have grave consequences as North American trade shifts from a European focus to an Asia-Pacific one. This work may also be considered an argument for better cultural understanding in business and social relations.

**About the Author:**

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