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Print of the 75th Ranger Regiment making a parachute assault 20 December 1989 on Rio Hato Drop Zone, Panama, during Operation Just Cause. The print, by noted combat artist James Dietz, is titled *Energetically, Will I Meet the Enemies of My Country*.

Unconventional Art and Modern War

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Much visual art is produced about and because of war. But, when an artist paints a war scene, does he or she paint just the warriors and their weapons? Far from it. Artists strive for visual effects that capture the ambiance and the meanings of their subjects, regardless of their style of painting.

So, how might an artist capture the energy, friction, and chaos of war? Would Clausewitzian friction in a painting look like James Dietz's

Energetically, Will I Meet The Enemies of My Country, a classical composition that shows a scene of war in a realistic style?

Would Clausewitzian friction in a painting look like a frenetic explosion of energy and color? Or, might it be more akin to Umberto Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* (see page 18), an abstract, symbolic composition that shows objects in contact creating friction as potential energy becomes kinetic energy?

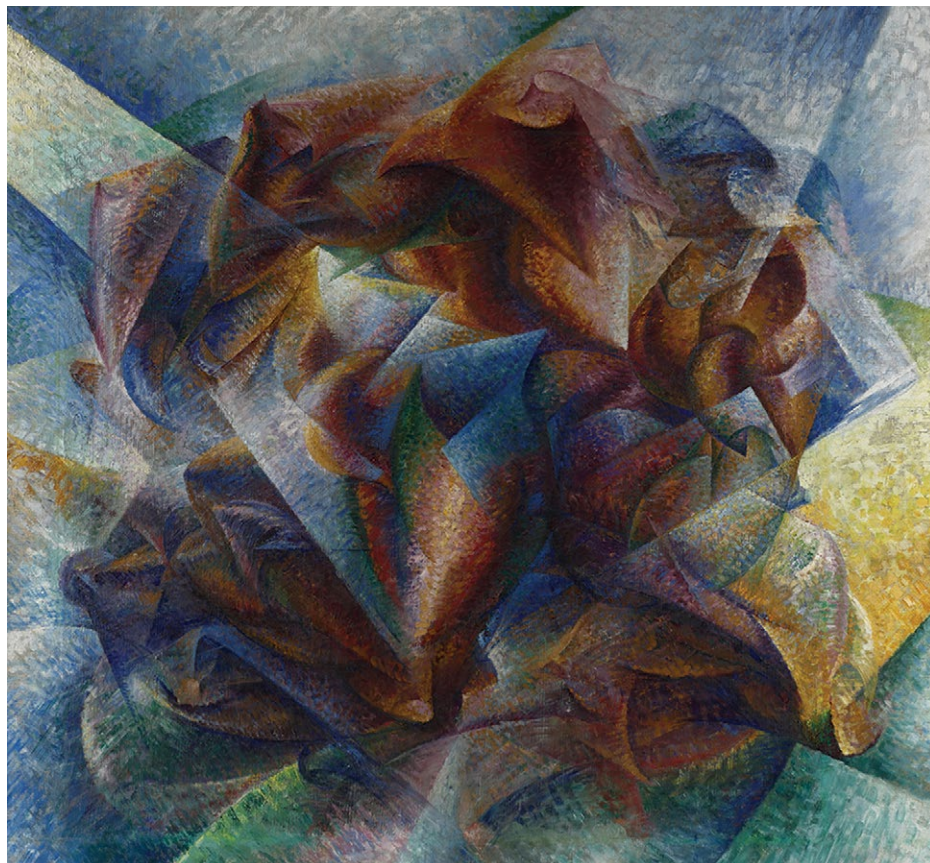
If the energy, the friction, and the chaos of war were illustrated in the latter style, if kinetic energy were a frenetic explosion of colors and angles, then how would potential energy be painted? Would it be illustrated through the absence of colors and objects, or would it look like something else? How would an artist's cultural perspective influence ways of representing potential energy in a scene of war, or potential energy in any kind of scene? How might understanding cultural perspectives in art reveal their influence in ways of conducting warfare?

The West Paints Like It Fights

The precepts of design in visual art and the art of war overlap. For example, the military concept of a *center of gravity* relates to the artistic concept of *emphasis*.¹ If a center of gravity is “the hub of all power and movement,” then a visual artwork's center of gravity, or focal point, is the subject matter receiving emphasis.² For instance, in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* (see page 19), the subject's smile is the most important aspect of the composition—the smile is the work's center of gravity.

In Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (see page 20), the son's head in his father's chest is the center of gravity. All faces and gazes point to a single hub in the composition, a hub that gives the composition power. Without the smile or the paternal embrace, neither the *Mona Lisa* nor the *Prodigal Son* would emphasize any subject. The very concept of emphasis, that one aspect of a picture is more important than all others, reinforces the idea that a picture can have a center of gravity.

As gravity is a force exerted on objects to pull them in a certain direction, the weights of objects have certain relationships to the center of gravity, and the center of gravity helps determine their



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Dynamism of a Soccer Player (1913), oil on canvas, by Umberto Boccioni.

relationships to each other. Objects in visual art have a visual weight, and the weight of the objects should balance each other, symmetrically or asymmetrically.³ While some may think of asymmetry as the absence of balance, in fact it encompasses all methods of balance that are not symmetrical. The *Mona Lisa* is symmetrically balanced. Her face and her stance balance in the composition so that nothing is disproportional. In contrast, Vincent van Gogh's *The Starry Night* (see page 21), demonstrates asymmetrical balance. On the left, it shows several stars and a prominent cypress tree. These are offset by the disproportionately large moon and the town on the right. Similarly, defense strategists refer to symmetry and asymmetry to describe how enemies counter each other.

The West Fights Like It Paints

U.S. Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster quipped about the Iraqi army in the First Gulf War, “there are two ways to fight the United States military:

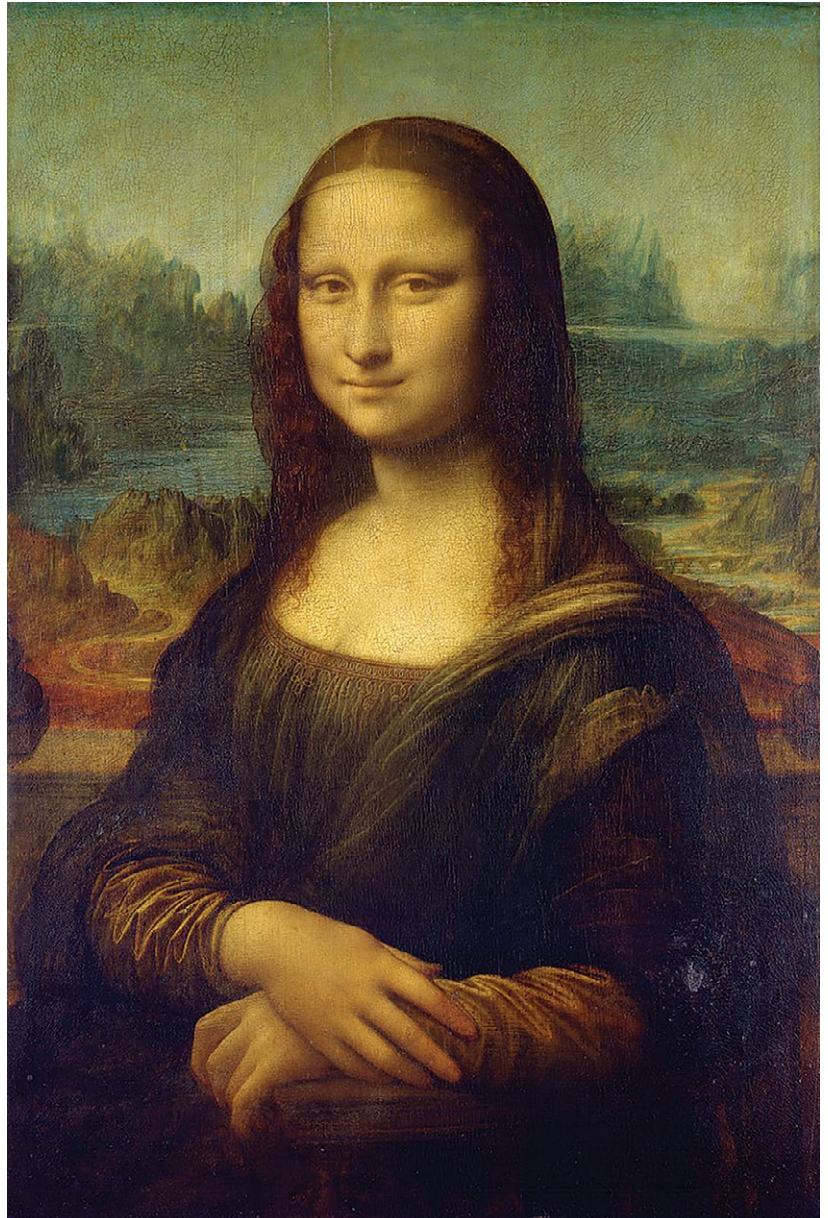
asymmetrically and stupid.”⁴ While the implication of this statement is that no military should ever engage the U.S. military in a balanced, conventional fight, the U.S. military always has organized its staffing, equipping, and doctrine around a symmetric threat. U.S. military forces conduct what historian Russell F. Weigley dubbed in 1973 “the American way of war,” based on “a strategy of attrition.”⁵ Although it evolved into what Max Boot would describe in 2003 as “a new American way of war,” U.S. forces, nonetheless, still organize around a symmetric threat.⁶ The American way of war now emphasizes technological overmatch, overwhelming precision firepower, and the offense. This understanding treats war as a narrow and specific activity of violence in isolation from other elements of national power.⁷

Returning to McMaster’s belief that no rational actor, of a nation-state or any other group, would go toe-to-toe with the U.S. military, asymmetric warfare suggests that weaker adversaries will counter the United States’ power by excelling in areas where the United States performs weakly. In many instances, adversaries seek to exploit U.S. reluctance to deviate from relying on technological overmatch, overwhelming firepower, and the offense—which the United States considers its strengths in conventional war.

Adversaries Probably Will Fight Like They Paint

Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, colonels in the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA), argue in *Unrestricted Warfare: China’s Master Plan to Destroy America* (an English summary translation based on a 1999 Chinese publication) that “hacking into websites, targeting financial institutions, terrorism, using the media, and conducting urban warfare” are all potential ways unconventional warfare could asymmetrically match conventional militaries.⁸

Though disavowed by the PLA after an international uproar, unconventional ways of war such as those described in *Unrestricted Warfare* have been on parade around the world—Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014, the disintegration of Syria since 2011, the



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Mona Lisa (1503–06), oil on poplar wood, by Leonardo da Vinci.

various Paris attacks in 2015, PLA Unit 61398’s theft of intellectual property throughout the past decade, hacktivism against Sony in December 2014, and irregular warfare by Muslim African radicals such as Boko Haram since 2009.⁹ The United States has struggled to establish a lasting grand strategy to

address these kinds of wicked complex threats.

Traditionally, the United States (as well as other Western nation-states) has chosen to treat war as a specific action governed by a specific system of laws, mores, and norms. Strategists do not explicitly disconnect war from the political ends it is intended to achieve. Implicitly, however, war is often disassociated from the whole-of-government approach needed to achieve political goals; consider the differences in the apparatuses of the Departments of State and Defense, and the often-used diplomatic, informational, military, and economic (DIME) model of national power. This treatment of war as a specific, governable activity disguises the essence of war—the organized violence of human beings killing each other. In different words, the United States believes that all war is organized violence, but not all organized violence is war.

On the other hand, if it is accepted that all war is politically motivated, then all organized violence or aggression could also be considered politically motivated. However, this would mean that organized violence, without formally “going to war,” advances a political agenda just as a conventional war might. Limiting the concept of what constitutes a war limits the ability of the United States to understand its enemies. For example, it is very likely that some U.S. enemies believe they are already in a state of war—being that U.S. enemies have selected to use a level of organized violence to achieve an essentially political goal.

When leaders stop considering war as only a violent action of the state, and they start considering it as any

organized aggression with the intent to harm—physically violent actions or otherwise—on behalf of political agendas, the aperture for understanding what war is opens wider. Denying that all violence or aggression in service of an agenda is war limits strategic approaches to engaging enemies.

A U.S. Army Special Operations Command 2015 white paper, *Redefining the Win*, depicts a spectrum of conflict (see figure on page 22).¹⁰ Using that spectrum, the paper describes unconventional warfare in a nebulous gray area of not quite being “political warfare” but also not quite being war. The implication is that in an intermediate, undefined area of “unconventional



The Return of the Prodigal Son (1668), oil on canvas, by Rembrandt.

(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

The Starry Night (1889), oil on canvas, by Vincent van Gogh.

warfare,” the United States very likely would refuse to sanction organized violence or to regard the situation as war (though organized, politically motivated violence happens regularly) based on defined thresholds for “going to war.”

This is the distinct difference between how the United States narrowly understands war versus what the broader nature of war could be. To the United States, war is conventional and defined, and it looks like Omaha Beach or the race to Baghdad. Therefore, organized aggression that occurs outside a declared theater of armed activity or conflict is unconventional, irregular.

However, to certain cultures the treatment of war as a narrow and specific activity of violence may be considered unconventional. Other cultural

perspectives on war can be likened to how certain classic works of Chinese art regard *negative space*.

Nebulous Conflicts are like Negative Space

Twentieth-century Chinese leader Mao Zedong described war as “politics with bloodshed.”¹¹ Similarly, *Dau Tranh*, the Vietnamese military strategy of the late twentieth century, sought to unify war and politics as different forms of the same struggle that worked in concert with each other.¹² These approaches to war, which achieved their political goals, operated inside the nebulous area between political struggle and armed conflict. A possible reason these East Asian cultures do not define war as narrowly as Western cultures is that in East

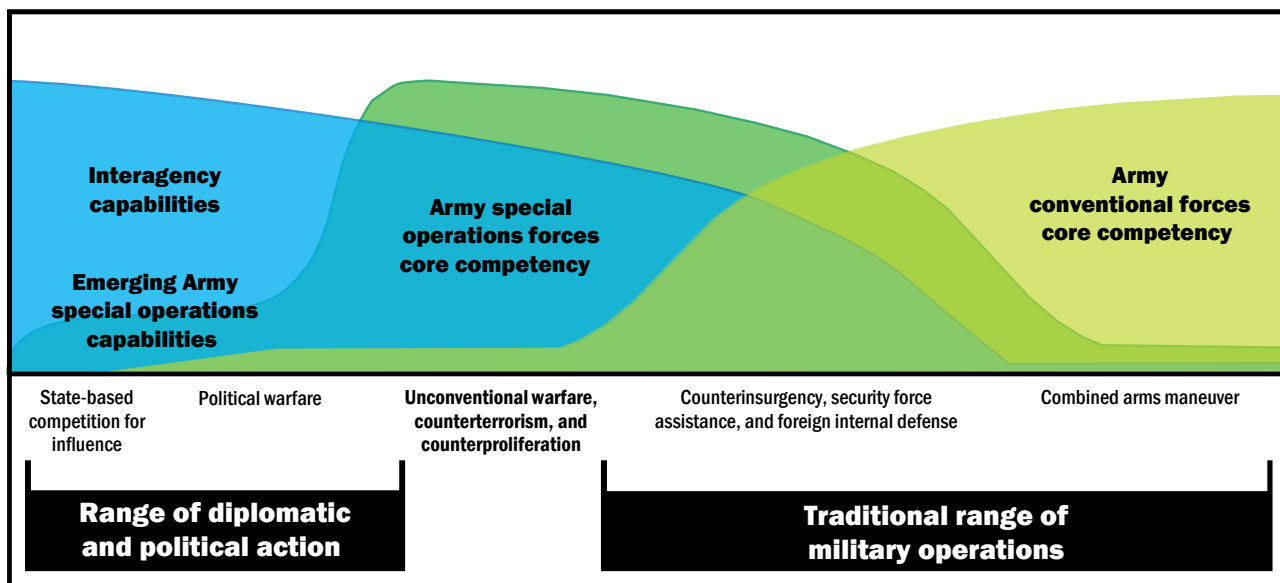


Figure. Spectrum of Conflict from a U.S. Army Special Operations Command White Paper (Modified)

Asian cultures, people tend to be more comfortable with negative space.

Negative space, in artistic terms, means the space not consumed by the primary subject matter in a work of visual art.¹³ In the West, negative space represents a dilemma for the artist. Does the artist fill the space with substance, or does the artist leave the space empty? Cultural biases in traditional Western visual art usually induce the artist to fill the negative space with something of substance. For example, Rembrandt filled the negative space of the background in *Prodigal Son* with darker shades of objects in shadow. The shading is so dark that the objects are nearly indiscernible.

In contrast, according to Seong-heui Kim, traditional East Asian visual art celebrates the emptiness of negative space not as lacking substance, but rather as emptiness being “the latent form before the realization and ... the potentiality of all existence.”¹⁴ For example, Kim describes how the “potentiality” in negative space can be seen in Guo Xi’s landscape scroll painting *Early Spring*, completed in 1072 (see page 24), where in the fore, middle, and background, the mountain’s traits are implicitly, rather than explicitly, represented. The background is left absent of objects or shades.

Kim also explains how in Cui Bai’s *Magpies and Hare* (see page 25), negative space, or emptiness, and

positive space, or substance, wrestle while coexisting in oneness with the universe as *chi* (vital energy, spirit, or natural force). East Asian artists also express “the interchange and vibrancy of [chi].”¹⁵ From a philosophical perspective, *chi* is “a biological phenomenon revealed in the field of exchanging experience between our body and the world.”¹⁶ To depict the movement of *chi*, East Asian art emphasizes the mechanics of “line.”¹⁷ A line’s mechanics integrate and intuitively depict the natural world “as an endlessly circulating and changing flow which humans had to become one with.”¹⁸

A 2002 Department of Defense annual report on China’s military power describes China’s broad strategy for building national strength by balancing “comprehensive national power” (elements of national power such as DIME) and a “strategic configuration of power.”¹⁹ The report interprets the strategic configuration of power, which encompasses “unity, stability, and sovereignty,” as *shi*—which it calls an “alignment of forces, ... propensity of things, ... or potential born of disposition ... that only a skilled strategist can exploit to ensure victory over a superior force.”²⁰

The similarity is that both *chi* and *shi* celebrate the “notion of a situation or configuration (*xing*), as it develops and takes shape before our eyes (as a relation of forces) ... and counterbalancing this, the

notion of potential (shi), which is implied by that situation.”²¹ To the East Asian artist and military strategist alike, negative space—along with its inherent potential—is necessary to balance positive space and its defined objects.

Unconventional War is Like Modern Art

The negative space between war and peace is where actors are fighting modern wars in unconventional ways, such as activities in the cyber domain by the Anonymous hackers’ collective.²² Instinctively, the West focuses on the parts of the whole and desires substance to fill the negative space.²³ East Asian artwork, in contrast, demonstrates a cultural preference to focus on the whole, recognizing “that action always occurs in a field of forces.”²⁴

François Julien contrasts Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz in *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*. Julien explains how Sun Tzu describes war: as water flowing down a mountain, so military officers are encouraged to learn how to use the existing conditions of the world, the river’s flow, to their benefit.²⁵ Julien explains that Clausewitz describes war as an idea, and Clausewitz encourages officers to reckon historical analysis against conceptual models to define and set conditions for wars to be successful.²⁶

The unconventional nature of conflict in the modern era does not conform to traditional Western conceptions of war. Sun Tzu’s advocacy of accepting conditions and working within them, as opposed to the West’s tradition of defining and setting conditions, challenges the strategic assumptions of U.S. policy. Accepting the friction of war as it is, rather than war as conforming to Western conceptions of war, could offer considerable insight for U.S. policymakers.

Considering how chaotic the world is, a military planner is a kind of strategic artist painting a response to volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous conflicts. The strategic artist must choose if the violence, for example, is the center of gravity and the focal point of the painted response, or if violence is just an object surrounded by negative space. Principles used in Western artwork imply that the Western strategic artist will identify centers of gravity and develop counters to balance systems,

rather than operate inside negative space to “make the most of the ongoing process.”²⁷

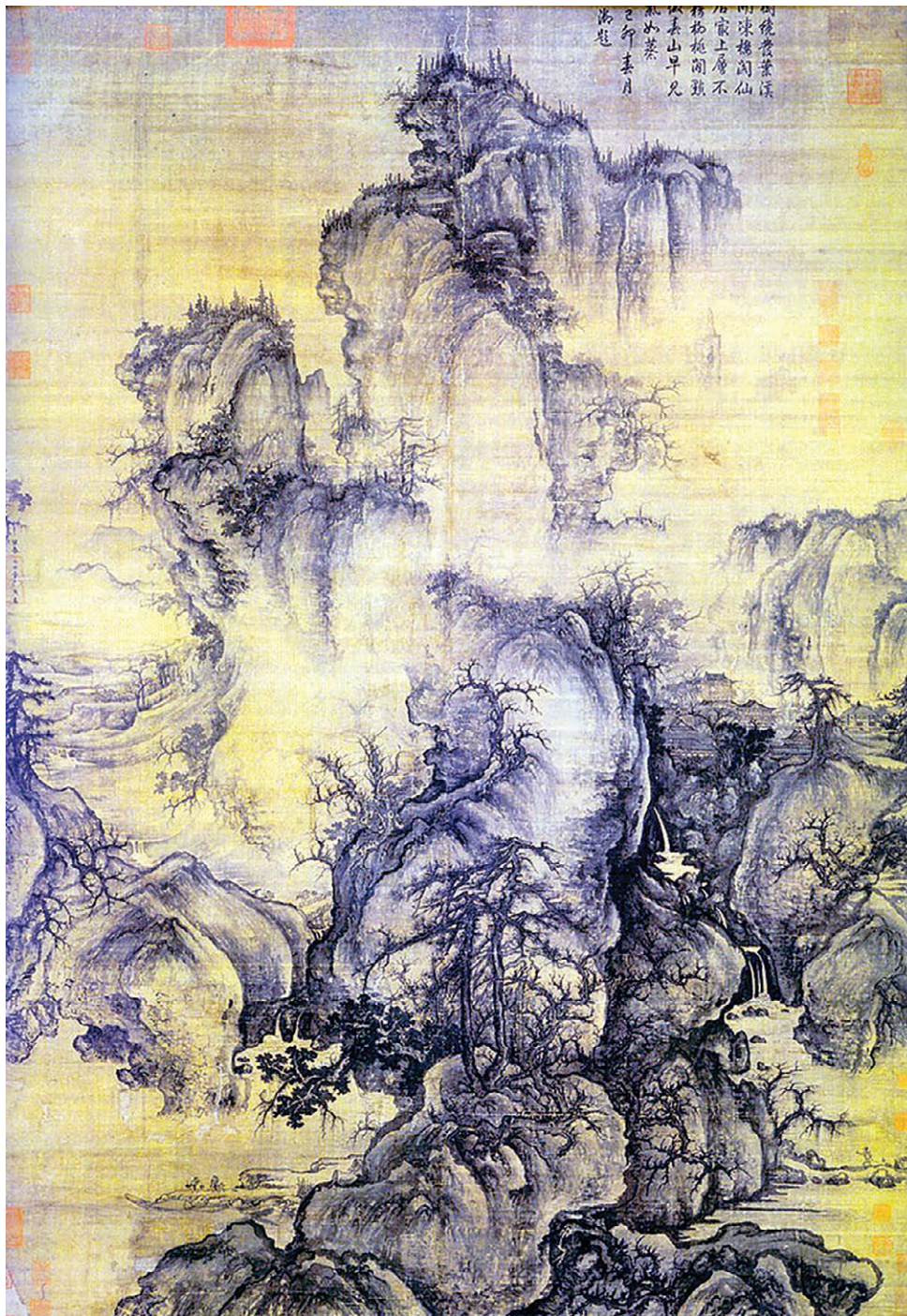
Complexity is Nonlinear

In “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War,” Alan D. Beyerchen applies principles from modern nonlinear science to show that war, even as described by Clausewitz, is a nonlinear system. Following Beyerchen’s premise, negative space in art, or conflicts that fall outside Western definitions of war, with their unpredictable potentiality, would be like the “nonlinear phenomena that have always abounded in the real world.”²⁸ Nonlinear systems upset the Western predilection to look for “stable, regular, and consistent” rules to govern the world since nonlinear, or complex adaptive systems, “may involve ‘synergistic’ interactions in which the whole is not equal to the sum of the parts.”²⁹

In many ways, East Asian cultures depict nonlinearity in visual art by using the emptiness of negative space to imply potential. In contrast, Western artists instinctively fill negative space with objects or substance that are consistent with the rest of the picture.

The West’s cultural bias to analyze inherently complex adaptive systems as if they were stable, regular, and consistent systems is why traditional Western art emphasizes objects. Western painters try to balance all objects with other objects within a specific boundary. In contrast, East Asian painters try to accept complexity by focusing on the system as a whole.

Beyerchen identifies the West’s cultural biases, arguing that even though Clausewitz perceives war as “a profoundly nonlinear phenomenon,” there is a desire by the West to define the world through analysis, and “to partition off pieces of the universe to make them amenable to study.”³⁰ This cultural bias artificially validates focusing on parts of systems in isolation of the important links that have a bearing on the systems as a whole.³¹ Julien believes that the West’s cultural biases, such as those summarized by Beyerchen, are what made it impossible for Clausewitz to connect his empirical observations of war with any lasting theory of war.³² Clausewitz understood the West’s cultural bias favoring analysis. He described the conflict between analysis of parts and the complexity of the whole as friction.³³



Early Spring (1072), ink and light colors on silk, by Guo Xi.

The ill-defined area on the U.S. Army Special Operations Command's spectrum of conflict—where conflict is not politics but is not war—represents a complex adaptive system that is a kind of negative space. In this negative space, the East Asian military strategist would see the vibrant interchange of the potential born of disposition. The Western

strategist trying to analyze objects isolated from their synergy would see friction in that negative space. Seeing negative space as friction can impede painting an appropriate strategic response to threats because no amount of analysis can accurately predict what the “painted line” of action—the input of a lever of national power—will do to synergize outcomes in a complex world. Yet, confronted with negative space, U.S. military and state leadership feel compelled to *do something*, because to the United States a goal unattained is as unnerving as a painting that seems half-painted.

Modernity Defies Conventional Perspectives

The strategic challenge to the United States is to innovate, adapt, and adopt unconventional warfare through a broad strategic approach rather than sustaining its current view of a tactical capability for a niche mission. This approach would address the needed fusion of diplomatic and military actions.

Modern art began as a reaction to the limitations traditional Western artworks imposed on the artist's desire to represent the world.³⁴ Modern art has since demonstrated a fusion of the principles of Western art with modern implements and unconventional

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approaches. Modern war should similarly integrate the principles of traditional strategists with modern means and unconventional warfare's evolving ways.

To win in a complex world, the United States must become more comfortable with operating in the negative space of unconventional war. Clausewitz advises the strategist to know the nature of war. For the United States to know the nature of its wars in a world of many cultures, its leaders must better understand the limitations of its approach to strategic thought. They must recognize that war is not a narrow and specific activity of violence isolated from other elements of national power. War is not just a way for political ends. Rather, it is the vibrancy and interchange of diplomacy and organized force—organized force that affects both the actors and the many nonlinear systems composing the world with unpredictable results. War, being as chaotic as Boccioni's *Dynamism of Soccer Player*, needs to be understood as a violent struggle that is anything but conventional. ■

Biography

Maj. Randall A. Linnemann, U.S. Army, is the regimental signal officer for the 75th Ranger Regiment, Fort Benning, Georgia. He holds a BA from the University of Dayton and an MA from the Naval War College. He has served in a variety of signal command and staff assignments.



(Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Magpies and Hare (1061), ink and watercolor on silk, by Cui Bai.

Notes

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