

China's Military History and Way of War

A Backgrounder

Geoff Babb



Qing-era representation of Sun Tzu (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

For China, the importance of The Art of War has spread far beyond military studies. The book has deep influence in framing China's foreign policy and its approach to security and defence.

—Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom
Liu Xiaoming, speech at the UK Joint Services
Command and Staff College, 2012

Introduction

The writings of Sun Tzu (Sunzi) and Mao Tse-tung (Mao Zedong) are a useful place to start any

examination of the concept of a Chinese Way of War. The Lionel Giles translation of Sunzi's *Art of War* argues that it is "the world's oldest treatise on war."¹ In the late eighteenth century, in the time of Napoleon, a Jesuit priest brought back a translation to France.² Today, it is widely read and studied among America's allies, friends, and potential enemies in the USINDOPACOM. Sunzi's thirteen chapters, characterized in an introduction by General (Ret.) David C. Petraeus to a new translation, as "a mixture of poetic and pragmatic," provides the foundation for the study of a distinct Chinese Way of War. Petraeus begins his comments with this:

The Art of War has rightly become one of the world's most influential books on military strategy. Written well over two thousand years ago in China, but not translated into English until the beginning of the twentieth century, it is now studied in military academies around the globe. Indeed, its relevance has been reconfirmed in the twenty-first century.³

The Art of War also influenced Mao in his writings on revolutionary guerrilla war (People's War) indicative of the timeless value of Sunzi to Chinese military thought and the evolution of its way of fighting:

The influence of the ancient military philosopher Sun Tzu on Mao's military thought will be apparent to those who have read *The Book of War*. Sun Tzu wrote that speed, surprise, and deception were the primary essentials of the attack and his succinct advice, "Sheng Tung, Chi Hsi ("Uproar [in the] East, Strike [in the] West), is no less valid today than it was when he wrote it 2,400 years ago. The

tactics of Sun Tzu are in large measure the tactics of China's guerrillas today.⁴

Mao wrote key military tracts in the 1930s during a pause in the Chinese Civil War when the Red Army was in a sanctuary at Yan'an (Yenan) in north central China at the end of the Long March. In 1936, the Communists and the Nationalists under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) formed a temporary 2nd United Front to oppose further Japanese territorial encroachments. In July 1937, the 2nd Sino-Japanese War began almost two years before Hitler's attack into Poland. The Chinese fought alone with limited assistance from the Soviet Union and the United States for more than four years against the Japanese until December of 1941, when the near simultaneous attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies, Malaya, and Hong Kong brought the United States, the Netherlands, and Great Britain into World War II in Asia. The Japanese also attacked into Burma (Myanmar) to cut the vital supply line to China. For nearly four years, China, Great Britain, and the United States fought together in the "Forgotten Theater" of China-Burma-India until the Japanese were defeated in August of 1945.⁵

With the allied victory in 1945, and despite diplomatic attempts by the United States to unify the two Chinese factions, the civil war began anew. After four more years of conflict, Mao and the Communists prevailed and established the People's Republic of China (PRC). By October of 1949, the Nationalist forces had retreated to Taiwan and several smaller offshore islands to re-establish a Republic of China (ROC) seat of government. In 1950, Mao's ongoing consolidation of Communist China was interrupted by the outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula, leading to a direct conventional military confrontation with the United States. Today, China is seen as a potential enemy making it critically important to study and understand how and why the PRC fights.⁶

What emerges in China, the Middle Kingdom (as depicted in the written characters of its name and its sense of standing in the world), over its long span of history is not synonymous with the Western nation-state. China evolved as a long-standing empire expanding, fracturing, and contracting with warfare against both internal and external enemies. The beginning of the last Chinese Dynasty, the foreign-led Qing (Manchu), began in 1644, four years prior to the Treaty of Westphalia. Dynastic China ended in 1911, three years before the start of



Mao Zedong in 1925 (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

WWI. A modern Chinese Way of War has evolved over nearly 5,000 years of unique social, economic, and political developments, and military history. The two key Chinese military theorists, separated by 2,500 years, are the most well-known and influential. An examination of Sunzi and Mao exhibits continuities within a distinct Chinese Way of War over time and both similarities and differences to the Western and American Ways of War.

Ancient and Dynastic China

Sunzi wrote at the end of the Spring and Autumn period (772–476 BC) of Chinese history at about the same time as that country's most famous philosopher Kongzi (Confucius). Sunzi's *Art of War* is a unique distillation of military theory, doctrine, and best practices observed over a long period of internecine warfare among the many feudal states of the collapsing Zhou Dynasty (1056–256 BC). His thirteen chapters cover the warfighting functions, civil-military relations, strategy and tactics, and techniques of both successful and unsuccessful leaders. *The Art of War* was written as a guide for feudal kings to conduct battles, plan campaigns, and select and evaluate their generals. This era of Chinese history overlaps with the Warring States period (475–221 BC). By this time, the wars among the

many separate feudatories had coalesced into large-scale conflict among seven major states (Yan, Qi, Zhao, Wei, Han, Chu, and Qin) that vied to unify China under one ruler. The hegemonic king, the Emperor Qin, eventually achieved his victory.⁷

In 221 BC, the single, unitary state of Qin was established. Two thousand years of Chinese empire under dynastic rule ensued. Two of these dynasties were

the seat of power in Beijing. This war ended with the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing), providing the British territorial concessions including Hong Kong, expanded trading and most favored national rights, and extraterritoriality shielding its citizens from prosecution under Chinese law. Soon additional foreign nations including the United States were afforded the same humiliating treaty concessions as Great Britain.⁹

“*The Art of War* was written as a guide for feudal kings to conduct battles, plan campaigns, and select and evaluate their generals.”

foreign led. During the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) established by the Mongols, China's power reached well beyond Asia into Europe and the Middle East. The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) that replaced the Mongols, was the last Han Chinese dynasty to rule. They were defeated by the foreign Manchus from the northeast who began rule by the Qing, the last dynasty.

The Century of Humiliation

By the end of the Qing Dynasty, China was weakened by both internal conflicts and beset by technologically superior and advanced Western trained and equipped military forces. This period is repeatedly referenced by Chinese leaders from Mao to Xi Jinping as the *Century of Humiliation*. This era of military defeats and unequal treaties began in 1839 in the middle of the Qing period. It ended with the successful establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) announced by Mao in October 1949, a year before the Chinese intervention into the Korean Conflict. The key conflicts of the Century of Humiliation are outlined in the following paragraphs. While China continued as a sovereign state, the foreign powers “carved it up like a melon,” not with colonies, but with concession areas.⁸

The beginning of this key period of Chinese history is the *First Opium War*, 1839–1842 against invading British land and sea forces precipitated by a trade war. The conflict began with an attempt by the Chinese leadership to stop the import of opium into China by the foreign powers through the port city of Guangzhou (Canton). By 1842, the conflict had spread up the coast to the areas around Shanghai and Tianjin threatening

The next conflict was an internal revolt, the *Taiping Rebellion*, 1850–1864. Its leader, Hong Xiuquan, was influenced by Christian religious tracts provided by an American missionary. Hong came to believe he was Jesus Christ's younger brother. He led his followers north and established by force of arms the Kingdom of Heavenly Peace in Nanjing, the former Ming capital. His army continued north and nearly captured the Qing capital at Beijing. During this major internal conflict that may have killed more than 20 million Chinese, the *Arrow War* or *Second Opium War*, 1856–1860, began against British and the French forces, aided by both Russians and Americans.¹⁰

While the Qing forces with some foreign assistance eventually destroyed the Taiping armies, military weakness brought further defeats against foreign powers. British and French forces captured Beijing an event followed by extensive looting and wanton destruction. China was forced to sign additional treaties in 1858 and 1860, again ceding territory and concessions to the foreign powers including Russia. In 1854, during these conflicts, the United States Navy began the Yangzi River Patrol along China's great river and its tributaries to protect businessmen and missionaries expanding into China's interior. America was now fully participating in the humiliating military defeats and treaty concessions to the foreign occupying powers.¹¹

In the late 1860s, generally in parallel to Japan's Meiji Restoration of 1868, China began its Self-Strengthening Movement to build more modern and capable military forces. However, China's military and diplomatic woes continued in the *Sino-French War*, 1884–1885 for control of Vietnam. China's newly built

and modern Southern Fleet was quickly destroyed, while its forces in the north watched from afar. Chinese land forces defending Taiwan were also defeated, and their weaknesses noted by Japan. The Chinese army, including guerrillas, performed better on land in northern Vietnam, but in the end, Beijing signed additional humiliating treaties ceding its tributaries in Vietnam and Burma (Myanmar) to France and Britain, respectively. While China's military was attempting to modernize, its leadership, training, doctrine, and organization for combat did not keep pace with Western advances—a pattern that would continue.¹²

Perhaps, China's most humiliating loss was the *First Sino-Japanese War, 1894–1895*, fought over influence on the Korean peninsula. On both land and sea in Korea, northeast China, and adjacent waters, the newly modernized Japanese forces overwhelmingly defeated their Chinese counterparts. This war ended with the Treaty of Shimonoseki, another humiliating loss of territory and tributary influence. Japan now controlled Korea and was ceded Taiwan, which it would retain for the next fifty years. The additional loss of a key Chinese port on the Liaodong peninsula (Port Arthur/Dalian) to Japan was only prevented by the Triple Intervention (Germany, France, and Russia). This war and the European diplomatic effort to rob Tokyo of its military gains, heated up the tensions between the Japanese and the Russians, who vied for control of Manchuria's key ports, railroads, and resources.¹³

Japan and Russia were the largest force contingents in the intervention known by the foreign allies as the *Boxer Rebellion of 1900–1901*. The Eight Nation Alliance defeated the Yihetuan, the Righteous Harmonious Fists or Boxers, supported by China's Imperial forces and drove the Chinese government of the Empress Dowager Cixi from Beijing. The forces of the foreign powers took the port of Daku, marched approximately one hundred miles from the sea, through the city and fort at Tianjin, and breached the walls of the Forbidden City palace complex in Beijing over a period of about two months. The conflict ended with the Boxer Protocols that forced the Chinese to pay the foreign powers for the expenses of the war and allowed the permanent stationing of foreign forces in its capital and along a route to the sea.¹⁴

The United States provided forces under the command of Brigadier General Adna Chaffee. These forces

were dispatched from the Philippines where the US was fighting its own colonial war. The capital Beijing, the city of Tianjin, and a corridor to the sea remained under foreign occupation through the late 1930s. During this period, elements of four U.S. Army regiments (9th, 14th, 15th, and 31st) were either permanently stationed in China or rotated in as the security situation on the ground dictated. In the aftermath of this humiliating defeat, two allies who fought side-by-side in the Boxer Rebellion fought the *Russo-Japanese War, 1904–1905*. This conflict was fought on Chinese territory for control and influence in Manchuria. The rise of Japanese diplomatic and military power in northeast China signaled the end of dynastic rule with the collapse of the Qing government, in the *Chinese Revolution of 1911*.¹⁵

The Republic of China (ROC) was established in 1912 under the Western trained Dr. Sun Yat-sen (Sun Yixian). The once powerful and expansive foreign-led Manchu Qing Dynasty collapsed unprepared and unable to deal with the internal and external challenges to its rule. This was in part the result of the military, religious, and economic pressures of the European powers and eventually Japan and the United States.¹⁶ The ROC began a nearly four-decade long period of continued foreign encroachment, warlord rule, and civil unrest in part fomented by a new political force founded with a foreign ideology.

In 1921, the Communist Party of China (CPC) was formed and held its inaugural conference in Shanghai. Initially, under the tutelage of the Soviet Union, the Communists partnered with the Nationalists in the 1st United Front. However, in 1927, Chiang Kai-shek purged the Communist wing of the party and began his two decades of Nationalist rule in China variously opposed by warlords, surviving Communist factions, and the Japanese in Manchuria in the *Chinese Civil War Part 1, 1927–1936*. Among the Communists, Mao was the rising star in a domestic revolutionary movement Chiang was determined to exterminate. Mao rose to power over the Communist Party and threw out the Soviet advisors during the *Long March, 1934–1935*. This forced retrograde from sanctuaries in southeast China was the result of Chiang's fifth encirclement/extermination campaign.

Mao and the Ending of the Hundred Years of Humiliation

Mao and the survivors of the 9,000-kilometer fighting retreat sought sanctuary in north central China.

In the remote area around Yan'an, north of Xian, Mao led the effort to rebuild the army, write both a philosophy to govern and military doctrine, and re-organized the party. He chronicled and practiced his theory of revolutionary organization and protracted people's war with the now battle-hardened Red Army, born a decade earlier in August of 1927. In 1936, while Chiang was in Xian planning the sixth anti-Communist extermination campaign he was kidnapped by his own subordinates. After lengthy negotiations, an accommodation, the 2nd United Front, was reached with the Communists. It was agreed that Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek would lead the unified Chinese effort to fight the Japanese. More than seven years of war, destruction, and economic devastation followed.

The Allied victory over Japan in the Asiatic Pacific theater ended the Second World War. The concurrent end of the *Second Sino-Japanese War, 1937–1945* finally finished Tokyo's influence in China, a humiliation that had endured for more than fifty years. American direct military support to China had begun in July of 1941, with military assistance, trainers, and advisors. This program eventually built 39 Nationalist divisions and in 1944 also included a military-state team, the Dixie Mission, to the Communists at Yan'an. Post-war, this assistance intermittently continued while the United States began a diplomatic effort to bring the Communists and the Nationalists together. This effort, first by Ambassador Patrick J. Hurley and then by General George C. Marshall, failed and the civil war re-ignited during the negotiations. The mission to the Communists also ended in 1947, however, support to the Nationalists continued until their defeat and retreat to Taiwan.¹⁷

The *Chinese Civil War Part 2, 1945–1949* began with Mao and the Communists at a major disadvantage in terms of manpower and equipment. However, over the next four years using Chinese ways of conventional and people's war, Chiang and the Nationalists were defeated and were forced to re-established the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. On 1 October 1949, Mao, on a dais overlooking Tiananmen Square in Beijing, announced the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This long period of foreign domination and humiliation ended with Mao arguing that the Chinese people had "stood up."¹⁸ The Communists were now in charge, the Century of Humiliation was over, but a conflict with the world's major power and nations on



Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, 24 May 2019 (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

their periphery rooted in historical animosities would continue over the coming decades.¹⁹

Communist China

In a July 2021 speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party and the meeting in Shanghai, Xi announced,

The victory of the new-democratic revolution put an end to China's history as a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society, to the state of total disunity that existed in old China, and to all the unequal treaties imposed on our country by foreign powers and all the privileges that imperialist powers enjoyed in China. It created the fundamental social conditions for realizing national rejuvenation.²⁰

From 1949 to today, the PRC and its military arm, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) have fought several conflicts and crises. From 1950-1953, the PLA fought the U.S. forces and their allies to a stalemate and negotiation on the Korean Peninsula. During the period from 1954–1958 there were two major Taiwan Strait crises involving confrontations with Nationalist and American forces. In 1962, China easily prevailed

against Indian forces in a short conflict on their still unsettled border. In 1969, China and Russia skirmished over the demarcation of their common border signaling the opportunity for the beginning of a Sino-American rapprochement. In 1979, elements of as many as thirty divisions deployed for the attack into Vietnam in a limited six-week offensive followed by an announced withdrawal.²¹ This was followed by a decade of tensions and intermittent fighting until successful border demarcation negotiations concluded. During this period Sino-American military-to-military relations improved accompanied by limited arms sales. Throughout its long history, ancient, dynastic, and modern, China has not hesitated to use military force and temporary coalitions

with and against major and minor powers to defend of its interests and sovereignty.

A study of Chinese history and military theory certainly indicates the wars of the Communists are not outliers but are within a long tradition of a Chinese Way of War. In China's effort at rejuvenation, conflict is always a possibility. This is especially true as China seeks to protect its sovereignty in Tibet and Xinjiang, fulfill its pledge to take back Taiwan, and control the South China Sea.

*The PRC has expanded and modernized nearly every aspect of the PLA, with a focus on offsetting U.S. military advantages. The PRC is, therefore, the pacing challenge for the Department [of Defense].*²² ■

Notes

Epigraph. Liu Xiaoming, "Sun Tzu's Wisdom Behind China's Diplomacy and Defence Policy" (speech, UK Joint Services Command and Staff College, 11 February 2012), accessed 3 March 2023, http://gb.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/ambassador/dshd/2012/201202/t20120211_3384936.htm.

1. Lionel Giles, trans., *Sun Tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World* (Leicester, UK: Allandale Online Publishing, 1910), accessed 3 March 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/132/132-h/132-h.htm>.

2. "The Nine Formulas of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*: First Western Translation," Science of Strategy Institute, accessed 4 January 2023, <https://scienceofstrategy.org/main/content/first-western-translation>.

3. David Petraeus, "'The Art of War': As Relevant Now as When It Was Written," *Irish Times* (website), 26 March 2018, accessed 6 January 2023, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-art-of-war-as-relevant-now-as-when-it-was-written-1.3440724>.

4. Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1961), 26.

5. Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Harcourt, 2013). This book outlines the crucial role played by China from 1937 to 1945 in holding down significant Japanese military forces that might otherwise have been used in Japan's defense of the perimeter across the Pacific and into Southeast Asia established in early 1942.

6. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2022), 4.

7. Warren I. Cohen, *East Asia at the Center* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 10–17.

8. Rudolf G. Wagner, "'Dividing up the [Chinese] Melon': The Fate of a Transcultural Metaphor in the Foundation of National Myth," *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.ts.2017.1.23700>.

9. John Pomfret, *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China 1776 to the Present* (New York: Henry Holt, 2016). This book outlines the role American played in the Century of Humiliation.

10. Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996). This book

provides a very complete account of this complex major internal revolution in Qing China.

11. Kemp Tolley, *Yangtze River Patrol: The United States Navy in China* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1971), 16.

12. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *The Oxford History of Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 91–93.

13. Stewart Lone, *Japan's First Modern War* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1994). This book provides detailed coverage of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 including the aftermath.

14. David J. Silbey, *The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012). This book provides an excellent military history of this conflict.

15. Alfred Emile Cornebise, *The United States Army in China, 1900–1938* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2015), 5–6.

16. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *The Oxford History of Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). This volume begins with a discussion of the Ming Dynasty and provides an overview of China's history through the beginning of the Xi Jinping era.

17. Daniel Kurtz-Phelan, *The China Mission: George Marshall's Unfinished War, 1945–1947* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018). This book details the failed effort by the Truman Administration to broker a peace between Chiang and Mao.

18. John Fitzgerald, "China and the Quest for Dignity," *National Interest* (website), 1 March 1999, accessed 6 January 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/article/china-and-the-quest-for-dignity-632?page=0%2C2>.

19. S. C. M. Paine, *The Wars for Asia, 1911–1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). This book provides detailed information and commentary on the key period of Chinese history from the Revolution of 1911 to Mao's rise to power.

20. "Speech by Xi Jinping at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the CPC," National People's Republic Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2 July 2021, accessed 3 March 2023, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202107/ce62fd23a2f24be7bb96c30b-56c0c111.shtml>.

21. Edward C. O'Dowd, *Chinese Military Strategy in the Third Indochina War* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

22. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *2022 National Defense Strategy*, 4.