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THE ART OF WAR

SUN TZU

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The Art of War by Sun Tzu.

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Preface by Lionel Giles

The seventh volume of *Mémoires concernant l'histoire, les sciences, les arts, les mœurs, les usages, etc., des Chinois*¹ is devoted to the Art of War, and contains, amongst other treatises, *Les Treize Articles de Sun-tse*, translated from the Chinese by a Jesuit Father, Joseph Amiot. Père Amiot appears to have enjoyed no small reputation as a sinologue in his day, and the field of his labours was certainly extensive. But his so-called translation of the Sun Tzū, if placed side by side with the original, is seen at once to be little better than an imposture. It contains a great deal that Sun Tzū did not write, and very little indeed of what he did. Here is a fair specimen, taken from the opening sentences of chapter 5:

De l'habileté dans le gouvernement des Troupes. *Sun-tse dit: Ayez les noms de tous les Officiers tant généraux que subalternes; inscrivez-les dans un catalogue à part, avec la note des talents & de la capacité de chacun d'eux, afin de pouvoir les employer avec avantage lorsque l'occasion en sera venue. Faites en sorte que tous ceux que vous devez commander soient persuadés que votre principale attention est de les préserver de tout dommage. Les troupes que vous ferez avancer contre l'ennemi doivent être comme des pierres que vous lanceriez contre des œufs. De vous à l'ennemi il ne doit y avoir d'autre différence que celle du fort au faible, du vide au plein. Attaquez à découvert, mais soyez vainqueur en secret. Voilà en peu de mots en quoi consiste l'habileté & toute la perfection même du gouvernement des troupes.*

Throughout the nineteenth century, which saw a wonderful development in the study of Chinese literature, no translator ventured to tackle Sun Tzū, although his work was known to be highly valued in China as by far the oldest and best compendium of military science. It was not until the year 1905 that the first English translation, by Capt. E. F. Calthrop, R.F.A., appeared at Tokyo under the title *Sonshi* (the Japanese form of Sun Tzū).² Unfortunately, it was evident that the translator's knowledge of Chinese was far too scanty to fit him to grapple with the manifold difficulties of Sun Tzū. He himself plainly acknowledges that without the aid of two Japanese gentlemen "the accompanying translation would have been impossible." We can only wonder, then, that with their help it should have been so excessively bad. It is not merely a question of downright blunders, from which none can hope to be wholly exempt. Omissions were frequent; hard passages were wilfully distorted or slurred over. Such offences are less pardonable. They would not be tolerated in any edition of a Greek or Latin classic, and a similar standard of honesty ought to be insisted upon in translations from Chinese.

From blemishes of this nature, at least, I believe that the present translation is free. It was not undertaken out of any inflated estimate of my own powers; but I could not help feeling that Sun Tzū deserved a better fate than had befallen him, and I knew that, at any rate, I could hardly fail to improve on the work of my predecessors. Towards the end of 1908, a new and revised edition of Capt. Calthrop's translation was published in London, this time, however, without any allusion to his Japanese collaborators. My first three chapters were then already in the printer's hands, so that the criticisms of Capt. Calthrop therein contained must be understood as referring to his earlier edition. This is on the whole an improvement on the

¹ Published at Paris in 1782.

² A rather distressing Japanese flavor pervades the work throughout. Thus, King Ho Lu masquerades as "Katsuryo," Wu and Yüeh become "Go" and "Etsu," etc. etc.

other, though there still remains much that cannot pass muster. Some of the grosser blunders have been rectified and lacunae filled up, but on the other hand a certain number of new mistakes appear. The very first sentence of the introduction is startlingly inaccurate; and later on, while mention is made of “an army of Japanese commentators” on Sun Tzū (who are these, by the way?), not a word is vouchsafed about the Chinese commentators, who nevertheless, I venture to assert, form a much more numerous and infinitely more important “army.”

A few special features of the present volume may now be noticed. In the first place, the text has been cut up into paragraphs, both in order to facilitate cross-reference and for the convenience of students generally. The division follows broadly that of Sun Hsing-yen’s edition; but I have sometimes found it desirable to join two or more of his paragraphs into one. In quoting from other works, Chinese writers seldom give more than the bare title by way of reference, and the task of research is apt to be seriously hampered in consequence. From the mass of native commentary my aim has been to extract the cream only, adding the Chinese text here and there when it seemed to present points of literary interest. Though constituting in itself an important branch of Chinese literature, very little commentary of this kind has hitherto been made directly accessible by translation.³

I may say in conclusion that, owing to the printing off of my sheets as they were completed, the work has not had the benefit of a final revision. On a review of the whole, without modifying the substance of my criticisms, I might have been inclined in a few instances to temper their asperity. Having chosen to wield a bludgeon, however, I shall not cry out if in return I am visited with more than a rap over the knuckles. Indeed, I have been at some pains to put a sword into the hands of future opponents by scrupulously giving either text or reference for every passage translated. A scathing review, even from the pen of the Shanghai critic who despises “mere translations,” would not, I must confess, be altogether unwelcome. For, after all, the worst fate I shall have to dread is that which befell the ingenious paradoxes of George in *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

³ A notable exception is to be found in Biot’s translation of the *Chou Li*.

The Text of Sun Tzŭ

I have found it difficult to glean much about the history of Sun Tzŭ's text. The quotations that occur in early authors go to show that the "13 chapters" of which Ssŭ-ma Ch'ien speaks were essentially the same as those now extant. We have his word for it that they were widely circulated in his day, and can only regret that he refrained from discussing them on that account.⁸⁰ Sun Hsing-yen says in his preface:—

During the Ch'in and Han dynasties Sun Tzŭ's *Art of War* was in general use amongst military commanders, but they seem to have treated it as a work of mysterious import, and were unwilling to expound it for the benefit of posterity. Thus it came about that Wei Wu was the first to write a commentary on it.⁸¹

As we have already seen, there is no reasonable ground to suppose that Ts'ao Kung tampered with the text. But the text itself is often so obscure, and the number of editions which appeared from that time onward so great, especially during the T'ang and Sung dynasties, that it would be surprising if numerous corruptions had not managed to creep in. Towards the middle of the Sung period, by which time all the chief commentaries on Sun Tzŭ were in existence, a certain 吉天保 Chi T'ien-pao published a work in 15 *chüan* entitled 十家孫子會注 *Sun Tzŭ with the collected commentaries of ten writers*.⁸² There was another text, with variant readings put forward by Chu Fu of 大興 Ta-hsing,⁸³ which also had supporters among the scholars of that period; but in the Ming editions, Sun Hsing-yen tells us, these readings were for some reason or other no longer put into circulation.⁸⁴ Thus, until the end of the 18th century, the text in sole possession of the field was one derived from Chi T'ien-pao's edition, although no actual copy of that important work was known to have survived. That, therefore, is the text of Sun Tzŭ which appears in the War section of the great Imperial encyclopedia printed in 1726, the 古今圖書集成 *Ku Chin T'u Shu Chi Ch'êng*. Another copy at my disposal of what is practically the same text, with slight variations, is that contained in the 周秦十一子 *Eleven philosophers of the Chou and Ch'in dynasties* (1758). And the Chinese printed in Capt. Calthrop's first edition is evidently a similar version which has filtered through Japanese channels. So things remained until 孫星衍 Sun Hsing-yen (1752–1818), a distinguished antiquarian and classical scholar,⁸⁵ who claimed to be an actual descendant of Sun Wu,⁸⁶ accidentally discovered a copy of Chi T'ien-pao's long-lost work, when on a visit to the library of the 華陰 Hua-yin temple.⁸⁷ Appended to it was the 遺說 *I*

⁸⁰ See supra. ("There is every reason to suppose...")

⁸¹ 秦漢已來用兵皆用其法而或祕其書不肯注以傳世魏武始為之注。

⁸² See 宋藝文志.

⁸³ Alluded to in note 32.

⁸⁴ Note 32: 蓋宋人又從大興朱氏處見明人刻本餘則世無傳者.

⁸⁵ A good biographical notice, with a list of his works, will be found in the 國朝詩人徵略, ch. 48, fol. 18 sqq.

⁸⁶ Preface ad fin.: 吾家出樂安真孫子之後愧余徒讀祖書考証文字不通方略亦享承平之福者久也 "My family comes from Lo-an, and we are really descended from Sun Tzŭ. I am ashamed to say that I only read my ancestor's work from a literary point of view, without comprehending the military technique. So long have we been enjoying the blessings of peace!"

⁸⁷ Hua-yin is about 14 miles from 潼關 T'ung-kuan on the eastern border of Shensi. The temple in question is still visited by those about to make the ascent of the 華山 or Western Sacred Mountain. It is mentioned in the 大