CHINA SERIES · BOOK FOUR

Sun Tzu

The Art of War — Strategy, Leadership, and Statecraft for Enduring Success

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Free Sample · Chapter One

China Series · Book Four · Available February 5, 2027

International Publishing Corporation

Washington, D.C.

PART ONE

The World of Sun Tzu

CHAPTER 1

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The Eastern Zhou: A World Coming Apart

The Mandate of Heaven

To understand why a book like The Art of War was written, one must begin not with war but with order, and with the slow collapse of an order that had once seemed permanent. Around 1046 BCE, according to the traditional chronology, the Zhou people of the Wei River valley in the west overthrew the Shang dynasty, which had ruled the Yellow River plain for several centuries. The Zhou justified their conquest with a new and powerful idea: the Mandate of Heaven, or tianming. Heaven, they declared, grants the right to rule to a virtuous house and withdraws it when that house becomes corrupt and cruel. The last Shang king had been a tyrant; therefore Heaven had transferred its mandate to the Zhou. This idea would shape Chinese political thought for three thousand years. It meant that legitimacy depended on virtue, and that a ruler who lost the support of his people had, in a real sense, lost the support of Heaven itself.

The early Zhou kings governed their vast territory through a system that later historians have compared, with some caution, to European feudalism. The king retained direct control of the royal domain around his capital and parceled out the rest of the realm to relatives, allies, and loyal followers, who received the right to rule particular

territories in exchange for military service, tribute, and participation in the ritual life of the dynasty. These lords, ranked by a hierarchy of titles, ruled their own domains with considerable autonomy but acknowledged the Zhou king as the Son of Heaven, the supreme mediator between the human world and the cosmic order. Ritual bound the system together. Ancestral sacrifices, court ceremonies, and the exchange of gifts and bronze vessels created a web of obligation and kinship that held the aristocracy in place.

War in this world was largely an aristocratic affair. Noble warriors fought from chariots, accompanied by retinues of lesser followers on foot. Campaigns were relatively short and governed by conventions of honor. The great ritual texts of the later Zhou describe battles in which commanders exchanged courtesies before engaging, refused to attack an enemy who had not yet formed his ranks, and spared those who had surrendered. How closely actual warfare followed these ideals is debatable, but the ideals themselves reveal a world in which fighting was seen as one expression of a larger social and moral order.

The Move East

That order began to break in 771 BCE. In that year a coalition of rebellious nobles and non-Zhou peoples from the west sacked the royal capital near modern Xi'an and killed King You. The tradition remembers King You as a foolish ruler who repeatedly lit the beacon fires that summoned his vassals to defend the capital merely to amuse his favorite consort, so that when a real attack came, no one responded. Whatever the truth of the story, the consequences were real. The surviving court moved east to a new capital at Luoyi, near modern Luoyang. Historians therefore divide the dynasty into the Western Zhou, before the move, and the Eastern Zhou, after it.

The Eastern Zhou lasted more than five centuries, until 256 BCE, but for nearly all that time the Zhou kings were rulers in name only. They retained their ritual prestige as Sons of Heaven, and no lord openly

claimed the royal title for many generations. But real power passed to the great territorial states that had grown up on the periphery of the Zhou world. These states, originally fiefs granted by the early Zhou kings, had expanded by absorbing smaller neighbors and by pushing into lands occupied by non-Zhou peoples. By the seventh century BCE, a handful of them dominated the political landscape: Qi in the east, on the Shandong peninsula; Jin in the north, in the valley of the Fen River; Qin in the far west, in the old Zhou heartland; Chu in the south, along the middle Yangzi; and, later, Wu and Yue in the southeast, near the mouth of the Yangzi.

The Spring and Autumn Period

Historians customarily divide the Eastern Zhou into two eras. The first, the Spring and Autumn period, takes its name from the Spring and Autumn Annals, a terse chronicle of the state of Lu that tradition attributes to Confucius. By convention the period runs from 770 to 476 BCE. It was an age in which the old forms of the Zhou order still had meaning, even as the substance of power shifted. The great states fought one another frequently, but they also formed alliances, held interstate conferences, and acknowledged certain shared rules.

The most striking political institution of the period was the hegemony, or ba. In the absence of an effective king, the most powerful lord of the day would assume the role of protector of the Zhou realm, convening the other lords, mediating their disputes, and leading them against common enemies, all in the name of the king. The first and most famous of these hegemons was Duke Huan of Qi, who ruled from 685 to 643 BCE with the guidance of his brilliant minister Guan Zhong. Under Guan Zhong's administration, Qi reorganized its government, its economy, and its military, creating a centralized state capable of supporting large armies. Later hegemons included Duke Wen of Jin and, according to some lists, King Zhuang of Chu, Duke Mu of Qin, and the kings of Wu and Yue. The hegemony was an attempt to preserve order through the leadership of the

strongest, and for a time it worked. But it depended on the personal authority of particular rulers, and it could not survive the growing ambition and power of the states themselves.

Within the states, too, the old order was eroding. In many states, powerful ministerial families gained control of government and reduced their nominal lords to figureheads. In Lu, three families descended from a seventeenth-century duke dominated the state for generations. In Jin, six great ministerial lineages competed for power, and their rivalry would eventually tear the state apart. Rulers who wished to escape such domination began to rely on men of lower birth, the shi, who were educated in ritual, administration, and warfare but who lacked independent power bases of their own. These men served as officials, advisors, and military commanders, and they were rewarded according to their ability and loyalty rather than their lineage. Confucius himself belonged to this class, as, in all likelihood, did Sun Tzu.

The Warring States

The second era of the Eastern Zhou, the Warring States period, is conventionally dated from 475 BCE to the unification of China by Qin in 221 BCE. Its name is apt. Over these two and a half centuries, the number of independent states shrank steadily as the strong absorbed the weak, and the scale and ferocity of warfare increased dramatically. A decisive moment came in 453 BCE, when three of the great ministerial families of Jin, the Han, Zhao, and Wei, destroyed their rivals and divided the state among themselves. In 403 BCE the Zhou king formally recognized them as independent lords, an event that many historians take as the true beginning of the Warring States era. Soon afterward, in Qi, the Tian family displaced the ruling house. By the fourth century BCE, the rulers of the major states had begun to call themselves kings, openly abandoning the pretense that they served the Zhou.

Seven great powers dominated the Warring States period: Qin, Chu, Qi, Yan, Han, Zhao, and Wei. Each of them reorganized itself for survival in a world of constant warfare. The most important of these reforms took place in Qin in the mid-fourth century under the minister Shang Yang. He abolished the hereditary privileges of the old aristocracy, divided the population into groups of five and ten households that were held collectively responsible for one another's conduct, rewarded military achievement with rank and land, encouraged agriculture, and imposed harsh and uniform laws. The result was a state of unprecedented efficiency in mobilizing men and resources for war. Other states undertook similar reforms with varying degrees of success, but none matched Qin. In the third century BCE, Qin conquered its rivals one by one, and in 221 BCE its king proclaimed himself Qin Shi Huang, the First Emperor.

The Hundred Schools of Thought

The political crisis of the Eastern Zhou produced an intellectual flowering unequaled in Chinese history. As the old order collapsed, thinkers of many kinds asked how order might be restored, how rulers should govern, and how individuals should live. Because the competing states were eager for talent, these thinkers could travel from court to court, offering their advice to any ruler who would listen. Later historians called this ferment the age of the Hundred Schools of Thought.

The most influential of these schools was that of Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BCE, during the late Spring and Autumn period. Confucius looked back to the early Zhou as a golden age and taught that order could be restored through the cultivation of virtue, the observance of ritual, and the proper conduct of relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger, friend and friend. His followers, especially Mencius in the fourth century and Xunzi in the third, developed his teachings into a comprehensive philosophy of moral and political life.

The Mohists, followers of Mozi, taught impartial care for all people and condemned offensive warfare as the greatest of crimes. Paradoxically, they also became experts in defensive warfare, offering their services to besieged cities. The Daoists, represented by the Daodejing attributed to Laozi and the writings of Zhuangzi, rejected the Confucian emphasis on ritual and conscious effort, teaching instead that the wise person should follow the Way, the spontaneous and effortless pattern of nature, by yielding, emptying, and acting without forcing. The Legalists, represented by Shang Yang, Shen Buhai, and later Han Feizi, argued that order could be secured only by clear laws, strict rewards and punishments, and the concentration of power in the hands of the ruler. The School of Yin and Yang, associated with Zou Yan, developed a cosmology in which all change could be understood through the interplay of complementary forces and the cycle of the five phases.

Military thinkers formed a school of their own, the bingjia, or Military School. Its writers were practical men, concerned with how wars were actually won and lost. But they did not write in isolation. They shared the vocabulary and assumptions of their age, and their works reveal clear affinities with the other schools. The Art of War is the earliest and greatest of the military texts that survive, and, as later chapters will show, it is saturated with ideas that also appear in the Daoist, Legalist, and yin-yang traditions.

A World of Existential Threat

The single most important fact about the world of Sun Tzu is that states could die. In the early Spring and Autumn period there were well over a hundred independent political entities in the Zhou realm. By the end of the Warring States period there was one. Every other state had been conquered, annexed, or extinguished. Ruling families were wiped out, temples destroyed, populations deported or enslaved. In such a world, war was not a sport or an instrument of policy to be used at leisure. It was, as the first line of The Art of War declares, a matter of life and death, a road either to survival or to ruin.

This explains the seriousness, the urgency, and the caution of Sun Tzu's text. He writes as one who knows that a single misjudgment may destroy a state. He insists on careful calculation before war is begun, on the avoidance of unnecessary risk, on the preservation of one's own forces, and on the achievement of victory at minimum cost. He has no patience for heroics or for the aristocratic code of honor that had governed warfare in earlier centuries. A general who allows his pride to be wounded, or who cannot bear to see his men suffer, or who rushes into battle out of anger, is in Sun Tzu's view a danger to the state. The commander's duty is not to win glory but to secure the survival of the people who depend on him.

It is worth noting how directly this concern speaks to readers in other circumstances. An organization facing a competitor that threatens its existence, a community confronting a crisis, a family facing a catastrophe, an individual confronting a dangerous adversary: all of these understand, in some measure, what it means to face a contest in which the stakes are total. Sun Tzu's text was forged in such a world, and its lessons are most valuable precisely when the stakes are highest.

The State of Wu

One more element of this world requires attention, because it is the setting of the traditional story of Sun Tzu's life. The state of Wu lay in the lower Yangzi delta, in the region of modern Suzhou. In the early Spring and Autumn period it was regarded by the central states as a barbarian land, its people wearing their hair short and tattooing their bodies, far from the cultural heartland of the Yellow River plain. Its rulers claimed descent from a Zhou prince, but the claim was perhaps convenient as much as genealogical.

In the late sixth century BCE, Wu rose suddenly to great power. Its rise owed much to the state of Jin, which, seeking an ally against its great southern rival Chu, sent advisors to Wu to teach its people the arts of chariot warfare and the organization of armies. Wu also benefited from the talents of refugees from Chu, the most famous of whom was Wu Zixu, a nobleman whose father and brother had been executed by the king of Chu and who fled to Wu vowing revenge. Wu Zixu helped Prince Guang seize the throne of Wu in 515 BCE; Guang reigned as King Helü until 496 BCE. Under Helü, Wu waged a series of campaigns against Chu that culminated in 506 BCE in an extraordinary victory: the Wu army defeated the much larger Chu forces at the battle of Boju and went on to capture the Chu capital of Ying. Wu Zixu, according to tradition, dug up the corpse of the king who had killed his family and flogged it three hundred times.

Wu's glory was brief. Helü died of wounds received in a war against the neighboring state of Yue. His son, King Fuchai, defeated Yue and humiliated its king, Goujian, but then turned his ambitions north toward the central states, neglected the threat at his back, and ignored Wu Zixu's warnings, eventually ordering the old minister to take his own life. Goujian, meanwhile, rebuilt his state with patient determination. The story says that he slept on brushwood and tasted bitter gall each day to remind himself of his humiliation. In 473 BCE Yue destroyed Wu, and Fuchai killed himself. It was in this dramatic setting, at the court of King Helü, that tradition places the career of Sun Wu, the man whom the world knows as Sun Tzu.

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Book Four available February 5, 2027

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Washington, D.C.

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