



Victor H. Mair, trans. *The Art of War: Sun Zi's Military Methods (Translations from the Asian Classics)*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. Lii +189 pp. \$19.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13382-1; (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-50853-7.

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Another Sun Zi Translation?

Many readers might have asked themselves this question, because translations and elaborations of *Sun Zi Bingfa* (*Master Sun's Military Treatise*) and how to read and apply them to daily life are manifold in the Western and Eastern hemispheres. Presumably Columbia University Press asked Victor H. Mair to set a counterpoint with his translation and save the work attributed to Sun Zi from becoming pulp fiction. Victor H. Mair's work includes not only a translation, but also a glossary and introduction which are fully accessible and intelligible to non-specialists.

The present volume is divided into four parts: the foreword by Arthur Waldron, a glossary of key terms and their explanation, Mair's introductory notes, and finally his translation of the thirteen canonical chapters and the pseudo-biography of Sun Wu. Arthur Waldron compares the two most popular books ever written on war, *Sun Zi Bingfa* and Carl von Clausewitz's 1832 *Vom Kriege* (*On War*). Despite their very different sociocultural backgrounds, both authors agree that the ultimate goal of warfare is victory leading to the submission of the enemy forces and that warfare should be undertaken only as a last resort. The two authors differ greatly in the way to pursue this goal, however. For Sun Zi waging war is a psychological contest, and deception of the enemy is the root of his soldierly methods. Deception is applied not only to gain supremacy in a battle, but to subvert the foundations of the enemy state as a whole. Carl von

Clausewitz writes about war as a general phenomenon, an interaction between politics and fighting and a contest of manpower and technological devices. The foreword is followed by a glossary of key terms, providing the reader with the necessary explanations to understand the translation, and a light introduction to Chinese philosophical thought.

In his introduction, Victor H. Mair focuses on the unusual style and composition of Sun Zi, its Daoist aspects, its historical context, the level of military technology during the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), and its counterparts in world history. *Sun Zi Bingfa* is the earliest extant Chinese volume dealing with military affairs and summarizes all military knowledge acquired up to the Warring States Period. During the closing years of the Warring States Period and the early years of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE -63 CE), a rich military lore attributed to Master Sun was circulated and evaluated by at least 200 commentaries over the centuries. Mair argues that Sun Zi, the alleged single author of the work, is a fictional entity. Sun Zi is often mentioned in one breath with Sun Wu, Sun Bin, Wu Zi, and Wu Sun. Of the four, only Sun Bin is a historical person and probably the initial Sun Zi, as Mair puts it. The remaining three are, he suggests, fictional. Analyzing the content of the thirteen canonical chapters, Mair concludes that compilation of the *Sun Zi Bingfa* began around the middle of the fourth century BCE and was finished toward the end of

that century. His arguments are that the military rank of a general (*jiangjun*), the use of massed infantry, the use of the convex crossbow, and the wide use of war chariots are typical features of the Warring States period. Semantic peculiarities and the different length of the chapters support his arguments (for instance the remarkably high frequency of the word “therefore” marks the work as a collection of military maxims).

In the last two sections of the introduction, Victor Mair briefly touches on the Daoist aspects and translation history of the work. Two editions of *Sun Zi Bingfa* are incorporated in the Daoist canon. Possible reasons for this may be the defensive and minimalist approach to waging war advocated by Sun Zi and his failure to invoke key Confucian terms such as *De* (virtue), or *Li* (etiquette and civility). The enormous popularity of this book is also due to its long translation history, which started in the twelfth century with a translation into Tangut. This initial translation was followed by Japanese, Manchu, French, and English ones.

The present translation is based on the Song dynasty (966-1279 CE) edition and its eleven commentaries. Each of the thirteen chapters of the translation is preceded by a summary of the content and Sun Zi's intentions. The

translation itself is a very elegant rendering of a Chinese classical text known for its difficulty and obscurity. Mair's translation, however, can be read with pleasure by specialists and non-specialists alike, because his emphasis lies on a clear and lucid rendering of the text, without any bias toward the military or philosophical sides. The translation of many passages has the style of a poem or a rhyme. This makes it easier to follow them and highlights the character of the text. In fact the translation is a masterpiece. The design of the book is also elegant and stylish.

There is only one remark left to make. This concerns the foreword by Arthur Waldron. As perspicacious as his arguments are, comparing two authors Sun Zi and von Clausewitz on the basis of similar book titles is not very persuasive. These two authors have one major characteristic in common—they are widely quoted, and rarely read.

The book can be recommended for non-specialists who are interested in the classical literature of ancient China and are willing to invest some time reading the translation and the accompanying notes as well as for specialists of military history and military strategy and students of Chinese philosophy and history at all levels.

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