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**THE *KITSCH* OF WAR:
Misappropriating Sun Tzu for an American Imperial Hypermasculinity**

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ABSTRACT

Sun Tzu seems more popular than ever. The Bush Administration attributes its successful invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq to tactics in *The Art of War* such as “shock and awe” and “decapitation.” However, neither exists in Sun Tzu’s manual. More seriously, this misappropriation reinforces an imperial hypermasculinity in US foreign policy given its neoliberal logic of “conversion or discipline” for Self/Other relations. Rival camps of imperial hypermasculinity arise in reaction, thereby rationalizing the US Self’s resort to such in the first place. Locking the world into ceaseless rounds of hostility between opposed enemies, we argue, contradicts Sun Tzu’s purpose. *The Art of War* sought to transform, not annihilate, the enemy as mandated by the cosmo-moral, dialectical world order that governed Sun Tzu’s time. In misappropriating Sun Tzu, then, the Bush Administration turns *The Art of War* into mere *kitsch*.

THE KITSCH OF WAR:

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INTRODUCTION¹

US interest in *The Art of War* (*sunzi bingfa*, 512 BC) has risen dramatically since 9/11.² Both former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks, who masterminded the Iraq campaign, regularly quoted from Sun Tzu (cf. Macan-Markar 2003).³ The *New York Times* notes that insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan may be learning, also, from *The Art of War* (Bearden 2003).

For its part, the US Defense Department utilized strategies such as “shock and awe” and “decapitation.” Typically attributed to *The Art of War*, “shock and awe” called for an extreme show of force to cower the enemy so war could be shortened; “decapitation,” referred to cutting off the head or leader of enemy forces to enable easier capture. Some scholars have compared Sun Tzu’s teachings with former US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger’s doctrine of war (Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith 2004). Others have asked whether Sun Tzu’s war theory necessitates a certain cultural environment that other societies cannot match (Rosen 1995). Still others note Sun Tzu’s relevance for military professionalism and the role played by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in Chinese foreign policy decision-making (Segal 1981). One pair applied a

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association (ISA) in Honolulu in 2005.

² See, also, Sonshi, a website devoted to Sun Tzu and his principles for US foreign and military policy (<http://www.sonshi.com/sun-tzu-terrorism.html>). Yet, there are many inaccuracies regarding Sun Tzu in the US literature: e.g., he is sometimes confused with Machiavelli, he is cited as from the Warring States (475-221 BC) period when Sun Tzu himself identified with the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BC), and he is dated as from the 5th century BC when he lived during the 6th century BC (544-496 BC).

³ See <http://www.sonshi.com/holmes.html>. Sun Tzu is the Wade-Giles transliteration of the Chinese characters which mean “Master Sun”; Sunzi, the pinyin. We retain the Wade-Giles version here given its familiarity in the West.

game-theoretic model to *The Art of War* (Niou and Ordeshook 1994). This interest builds upon a longstanding recognition of *The Art of War* in US military and foreign policy thinking, especially since the Vietnam War (cf. McCready 2003).⁴

The Art of War has entered, also, mainstream American culture. Some cite Sun Tzu's principles to critique the Bush Administration's conduct of the war in Iraq (Walsh 2006, Bevan 2006). Others use the same to blame the Clinton Administration and Democratic presidential wannabes for weak leadership that, they claim, would jeopardize US national security interests (Henry 2004). Pundits and commentators have evaluated leaders from George W. Bush to Saddam Hussein to Osama bin Laden through the filter of Sun Tzu's principles (Adkins 2002). Businessmen also see value in *The Art of War* (cf. Wee 2005). Even Tony Soprano, a fictional character in the HBO series "The Sopranos," reads Sun Tzu, sparking interest in the 6th-century BC Chinese general and philosopher for another generation of Americans.

This treatment of Sun Tzu, however, is disturbing on three, interrelated levels. It (1) reinforces an imperial hypermasculinity in US foreign policy that (2) projects the same onto all Others, thereby rationalizing its own and (3) provoking, not co-opting, the enemy. Locking the world into irreconcilable opposites that battle each other unceasingly, we argue, contradicts Sun Tzu's purpose. *The Art of War* sought to transform, not annihilate, the enemy. In misappropriating Sun Tzu, the Bush Administration, or any perpetrator of such willful ignorance, turns *The Art of War* into mere *kitsch*.

This paper begins with "shock and awe" and "decapitation." After demonstrating their absence in and distortion of *The Art of War*, we show how they reinforce an American imperial hypermasculinity in world politics. We juxtapose this "modernization" of Sun Tzu with the ontological and epistemological principles that governed Sun Tzu's world-order and for which he wrote *The Art of War*. We conclude with the implications of an American imperial hypermasculinity for world politics.

⁴ The first English translation of *The Art of War* appeared in 1910 (Lo 1991: 21-22).

SHOCKING, AWING, AND DECAPITATING

The Pentagon utilized what it called a “shock and awe” strategy in its second war against Iraq in March 2003. Former US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld supplemented this strategy with “decapitating” the enemy, especially Saddam Hussein. Accordingly, the US dropped 3,000 bombs and missiles on Baghdad within the first forty-eight hours. Civilian casualties mushroomed, Saddam fled, and Iraq collapsed in April 2003. “Shock and awe” followed by “decapitation” won the war in Iraq for the US in less than a month.

Both strategies are attributed to Sun Tzu. Ullman and Wade (2005) describe “shock and awe” as an explicit policy to overwhelm the enemy, rendering it “totally impotent and vulnerable” with no will to resist. Justification for this strategy can be found in Tolan (2003). He refers to photographs of survivors from World War I, their “comatose and glazed expressions” affirm that “shock and awe” in war “transcend race, culture, and history... [This strategy vaporizes] the public will of the adversary to resist and, ideally or theoretically, would instantly or quickly incapacitate that will over the space of a few hours or days” (Tolan 2003).

Utter devastation of the enemy reflects a classical realist approach to warfare. Realists traditionally hail the Melian Dialogue in Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War* as the epitome of power politics in international relations: i.e., the Athenian generals would not consider neutrality for the Melians, as requested by them, for it would signal “weakness” to others. Accordingly, the Athenians killed all the men and enslaved all the women and children. George W. Bush voiced a similar fear when Al Qaeda’s suicide bombers flew those planes into New York’s World Trade Center. “They’ll think we’re soft,” he said (quoted in Miller 2003) if the US did not show immediate and unequivocal retaliation against the terrorists. Since then, Bush has often resorted to this imagery. Note this comment when signing the Defense Appropriations Bill on 10 January 2002: “Today, more than ever, we also owe those in uniform the resources they need to maintain a very high state of readiness. Our enemies rely upon surprise and deception. They used to rely upon the fact that they thought we were soft. I don't think they think that way anymore.”⁵

⁵ (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020110-5.html>).

Nowhere, however, does *The Art of War* advocate “shock and awe” or “decapitation.” Especially non-existent is a warning against appearing “soft” in contrast to being “hard.” If such notions did appear in *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu’s dialectical method, as we will demonstrate below, would have required him to consider the complementarities and contradictions between them. That is, Sun Tzu would have discussed the “softness” within “hardness” and vice versa, such that one condition is neither exclusive nor a negation of the other. Furthermore, Sun Tzu would have pointed to the potential of one condition disrupting or subsuming, thereby transforming, the other.

Instead, “shock and awe” and “decapitation” come from an anecdote first recorded in the *Shiji* or *Records of the Grand Historian* (109-91 BC), authored by Sima Qian. One version popularized in the West goes something like this (Ullman and Wade 1996, Tolan 2003, Macan-Marker 2003): Sun Tzu was conducting a military drill for a group of concubines. Two of the ladies laughed at him; to wit, he decapitated them, shocking and awing the other concubines into compliance. This is why, according to the tale, “decapitation” typically accompanies “shock and awe.” Lo (1991) elaborates upon this story, interpreting it as a morality play on military authority. That is, when a general has been given the authority to lead his army, he takes this responsibility so seriously that even the king could not order him otherwise.

According to Lo (1991: 19-21), the tale unfolds accordingly. After reading *The Art of War*, Ho Lu, the king of Wu, summoned Sun Tzu to court to train the king’s concubines. He wanted them to learn about weapons and war.⁶ Sun Tzu divided one hundred and eighty concubines into two companies and put Ho Lu’s two favorite concubines in command. He taught them how to hold halberds and asked them to follow his orders. He gave the orders three times and explained them five times. But the women only tittered and tattled. Sun Tzu reasoned: “If regulations are not clear and orders not thoroughly explained, it is the commander’s fault.” He repeated the orders three times and explained them, again, five times. This time, the women burst into full, outright laughter. Sun Tzu responded: “If instructions are not clear and commands not explicit, it is the commander’s fault. However, when they have been made clear, and are

⁶ Ho Lu wanted to test the caliber of Sun Tzu’s military strategies by having him train those believed to know least about warfare: women.

not carried out in accordance with military law, it is a crime on the part of the officers.” He ordered the two chief concubines to be beheaded. Ho Lu was astounded. The king feared losing his two favorite concubines and asked for mercy on their behalf.

“I cannot live without these two women!” he impressed upon Sun Tzu. “Please pardon them.”

“Your servant received your appointment as Commander,” Sun Tzu replied, “and when the commander is at the head of the army he need not accept all the sovereign’s orders.”

Sun Tzu continued with both the execution and the drill. The other concubines dared not make a peep. Ho Lu fumed but knew thereafter that Sun Tzu proved himself a capable leader.

Even if we take this story at face value, we note that Sun Tzu did not shock, awe or decapitate the enemy. Rather, these tactics were directed at his own troops, aiming to discipline them, and violence came only when reason failed. This re-reading of the story underscores that for Sun Tzu, such tactics were not a “must” but a last resort.

A feminist inquiry is warranted here. It asks: What does this story say about a man, vested with all the authority of a king’s commander, to “decapitate” two, defenseless women, “awing and shocking” their counterparts into...what, more submission than they must endure already? Kings held concubines in conditions similar to a lifetime of house-arrest, at best, and slavery, at worst: each restricted to her own small courtyard, subject to constant gossip and slander in competition against *hundreds* of other concubines,⁷ waiting for that one night when “the master” might visit, praying for the honor of bearing him a son but usually disgraced forever for failing to do so. The concubines at Sun Tzu’s command, moreover, were not operating in a real war with explicit stakes involved but participating in a drill!

Given such horrific abuse for a triviality, what does it mean to take this tale unquestioningly? One must conclude that such willing ignorance covers for a shameful perversion of power. Mainstream readings of this tale completely ignore the asymmetries that skew power relations between the concubines and Sun Tzu/the king. Similarly, contemporary strategists use “shock and awe” and “decapitation” without considering the

⁷ The Emperor usually presided over a court of 3,000 concubines.

social and power differentials between perpetrators and victims. Note former Secretary Rumsfeld's response to the number of civilian casualties caused by the US bombing of Iraq. Totally ignoring the US role, Rumsfeld thundered against the Iraqi government's inhumanity to its own people by using them as "human shields." Whether the Iraqi government did so or not is not examined. Meanwhile, such "crimes" affirm America's virtue as a beacon of democracy, liberty, and human rights: "[Using human shields] is murder, a violation of the laws of armed conflict, and a crime against humanity, and it will be treated as such" (Rumsfeld quoted in Tolan 2003: 2).

What the act, and the strategy behind it, reveals instead is the hollowness of military might directed against a population that cannot defend itself in kind. Thus US military, like the power of Sun Tzu/the king in the spurious story, punishes the punished, subjugates the subjugated, and exploits the exploited. It is, in short, bullying at its worst.

The previous inquiry motivates another, more general one. *Should* commanders, albeit sanctioned by the king, wield such authority that the king himself cannot retract or check it? For example, Harry Truman demonstrated in 1951 that a working democracy could not allow military authority to exceed or disregard the state's Constitutional authority when he sacked General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in the Pacific. Granted, Sun Tzu neither lived in nor wrote about military-political relations in a democracy. Nonetheless, the principle still stands. Why would any leader – whether king, president, or chief executive officer – permit his lieutenants the ideological *legitimacy* of disobeying a direct order? Sun Tzu himself stated in Chapter VII ("Maneuvering," *junzheng*) that "[i]n war, the general receives his commands from the sovereign" (*fan yung bin zhi fa, jiang shou ming yu jun*).⁸

Even where Sun Tzu's text is followed more precisely, we see that its meaning is understood selectively at best. For instance, Sun Tzu is frequently quoted that "all warfare is based on deception." The Bush Administration, however, has taken this strategy to include deceiving one's own population, not just the enemy. Campbell (2003) shows how the Pentagon and the military have used sophisticated tools of "cultural governance" to prevent the public from distinguishing "the original and the new, the real

⁸ All quotes of Sun Tzu's in English and Chinese are from Lionel Giles, translated in 1910 (<http://www.chinapage.com/sunzi-e.html>).

from the reproduced.” Yet Sun Tzu advocated deception for the enemy only, never one’s own people. To Sun Tzu, the word “deception” included the notion of flexibility. To appear flexible through diplomacy and other means before a war starts is also a kind of deception, according to Sun Tzu (Niu 1996: 47-49).

Misappropriating *The Art of War* would seem trivial were not for its implications. It rationalizes, we argue, an imperial hypermasculinity for US foreign policy. To understand how, we must begin with neoliberalism’s logic for Self/Other relations: i.e., “conversion or discipline.”

NEOLIBERAL SELF/OTHER RELATIONS:

Conversion or Discipline

Neoliberal Self/Other relations stems from classical liberal theory. It assigns to the Self the right to convert the Other through education, religion, civilization, or some other means of salvation. The Other *must* oblige or else suffer the consequences of discipline from the Self. This imperative, liberals believe, ensures an enduring peace for it can come about only when all Others resemble the Self.⁹

These injunctions reflect liberalism’s historical commitment to Christianity *and* capitalism, later transmitted to colonialism and imperialism. Locke, for instance, integrated Hobbesian authoritarianism with Protestant acquisitiveness to condone, ultimately, a “rapacious capitalism” (Dienstag 1996: 499). He also inherited Hobbes’ patriarchal designation of “women, children and chattel,” as property for men to bring into civil society (Pateman 1988).¹⁰ For Mehta (1997), then, classical liberalism is devoted to containing the bourgeois order. From internal Others like women and children, classical liberalism moved easily to subordinating and exploiting external Others, like India, now labeled “inscrutable.” In both cases, liberals utilize “strategies of exclusion” not just to marginalize women/children/Others but also to educate them into

⁹ Note, for example, the argument about a “democratic peace.” This school of thought proposes that warfare will cease when all states convert to liberal democracy (cf. Gartzke 2007).

¹⁰ According to Lloyd (1993), Western intellectual thought never considered women capable of rationality defined as reason – the necessary criterion for entering into the social contract. Only men could transcend the banal shackles of the Body to soar into the heavenly realm of Reason.

the “adult,” “civilized” world of the hard-working, penny-pinching bourgeois. Colonialism, in short, reframes the Hobbesian-Lockean tradition from “spare the rod and spoil the child” to “spare the rod and spoil the Other.”

Rudyard Kipling’s ode to empire, “The White Man’s Burden,” exemplifies classical liberal Self/Other relations. Published in February 1899 in *McClure’s Magazine*, Kipling exhorted the United States to take over where Spain could no longer rule: i.e., the Philippines. (Often, the poem’s subtitle is overlooked: “The United States and The Philippine Islands.”) The poem demarcates clear boundaries between the American Self and its Filipino Other. The American Self, the poem argues, has an obligation to colonize, civilize, and enlighten its Filipino Other. After all, the American Self, like its British counterpart, gains its privileges through a naturally endowed superiority. The Filipinos, in turn, have no role other than to emulate, as best as possible, the Anglo-American Self. Accordingly, the relationship between Self and Other can only be unilateral, hierarchical, authoritative (if not authoritarian), and predictable. In a word: imperial (cf. Doty 1996).

Neoliberalism recasts this bourgeois order as multicultural and fun, if not downright hip. When the Soviet Union disbanded, for instance, neoliberals in the West celebrated with a series of television commercials that showed the former Communist bloc’s dull, grey, uptight command economies finally freed to pursue Western-style capitalism.¹¹ By implication, everyone not only should but also *want* to become like the Western, Christian neoliberal Self. Fukuyama (1989) coined it “the end of history.” Note these advertising slogans from one of corporate capitalism’s enduring icons, the Coca-Cola Company. A sample from the end of the Cold War in 1989 to the present conveys the easy, everyday allure promised by a bottle of Coke:

1990: “You Can’t Beat the Real Thing”

2001: “Life is Good/Life Tastes Good”

2005: “Make it Real”

¹¹ See, for example, this commercial for “Nestles Crunch” made and shown in the 1990s: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=o8T2JQizPaM>.

2006: “Welcome to the Coke side of life”¹²

Updating Kipling, neoliberalism turns his world-weary White Man into an unstoppably-cheerful Cosmo Man who dispenses economic *and* socio-political good wherever the gig takes him. *The Economist*, that tony mouthpiece of the neoliberal world-order, serves as an apt example. It devoted a Special Report in its 14 August 2003 issue to the topic: “America and Empire.” Is America, it asked, as the world’s only military and economic superpower now also an empire? The magazine concluded with a resounding “No” for two reasons: (1) the natives (in Iraq and Afghanistan) don’t like it (“please leave us to get on with our own affairs”) and (2) neither do Americans (“Freedom is in their blood; it is integral to their sense of themselves”).

The Economist understands US history selectively at best. When do “natives” ever welcome an occupying power? And since when does local resentment, even constant insurgency, ever stop colonization? The magazine acknowledged that white settlers in America’s thirteen colonies rebelled against British rule (“Americans know that empires lack democratic legitimacy. They once had a tea party to prove it”). But the magazine conveniently omitted the fact that those same settlers did the same to natives of the land they de-populated, arrogantly called “the New World,” through genocide and other forms of mass killing. As Hunt (1987) demonstrated, American state-building was based historically on the annihilation, domination, and enslavement of the racialized, sexualized Other. Untold millions of native peoples died through a combination of wars, reneged treaties, dislocations, relocations, and, most unexpectedly, germs (Churchill 1998). To erase this history, as the *Economist* did, with a facile gesture toward the rhetoric of American democracy, claiming that it’s in the “blood,” constitutes irony of the highest and most grotesque order.

These are familiar tactics. As Hooper (2001) has shown, the *Economist* has long participated in a neocolonial narrative of the all-conquering, globe-straddling (Western) capitalist ready to take (Third World) “virgin” economies and resources at will, making them “productive” in the image of the Self. Even in this Special Report, *The Economist* revealed its racist, sexist, and imperialist stripes by claiming that “a surprising number

¹² See, (<http://www.2collectcola.com/page/ACC/slogan>).

have welcomed the new role” of America as an imperial power. It named Max Boot, an Englishman transplanted to New York initially as editorial features editor of *The Wall Street Journal* and now Olin Senior Fellow in National Security Studies with the Council on Foreign Relations, a conservative think tank. The title of Boot’s book, *The Savage Wars of Peace* (2002), was a line taken from “The White Man’s Burden,” to underscore his support of this 19th-century approach to world affairs. The book received the Best Book Award of 2002 from the *Washington Post*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Los Angeles Times* and won the 2003 General Wallace M. Greene Jr. Award for the best nonfiction book pertaining to Marine Corps history. They lauded the book for presenting “[t]he U.S. imperial role in the Philippines...as a model for the kind of imperial role that Boot and other neoconservatives are now urging on the United States” (*Monthly Review* 2003).

Hypermasculinity accompanies such arrogance and willful ignorance. Just as the magazine infantilized whole societies and peoples in this manner, so, too, did it sexualize power, especially for the US: “In short, the empire now proclaimed in America’s name is at best a dull duck, at worst a dead duck, unless it is to be a big strong drake that intends to throw its weight around for quite a while.” Such thinking is pervasive. Note this cautionary note from a senior advisor to the draft constitution in Iraq. “Elections,” he declares, “can seduce with the promise of release” (Feldman 2004: 95). His explanation merits quoting at length:

Elections hold out the hope of successful consummation, the seed of democracy implanted and the door opened for subsequent withdrawal. In this troubling vision the occupied people grip the occupier in an embrace both pleasurable and terrifying. In the imagined “successful” scenario, the occupier builds and leaves. When things go wrong, he (sic) cannot get out but is sucked into what American vernacular calls “the quagmire” – a situation from which he cannot extract himself, but in which he cannot remain without suffering unmanly damage (Feldman 2004: 95).

But for the occupied, democracy may be a disturbing wet dream. The occupied could wake up in sweaty disillusion to find no love there, after all, just more anxieties about one's own uncontrollable urges:

From the perspective of the nation under occupation, elections seduce in a different sort of way. On one hand, they promise to give voice to the voiceless...In that same moment of self-creation...the nation being built can throw off the yoke of its occupier and declare its independence, thus breaking free of the humiliating status of being subordinated...On the other hand, people under nation building fear elections for the danger of what they may reveal. Fragmented results may show that there is no nation there at all, just a collection of divergent interest groups who lack the common vision to make a government that will endure. The election of undemocratic forces is also to be feared (Feldman 2004: 95).

Such fantasizing in rhetoric plays out all too gruesomely in reality. A small article in the *New York Times* (5 August 2007) reported on the conviction of a US soldier of a March 2006 rape and murder of a 14-year-old Iraqi girl, including the murders of her parents and younger sister. After raping the girl, the soldier (one of five conspirators) “poured kerosene on her body and set it on fire in an attempt to hide evidence of the crime” (*NYT*, 5 August 2007: 14). Given the history of US military atrocities, especially rape, in locales like Okinawa, South Korea, the Philippines, and other parts of East and Southeast Asia during the Cold War (cf. Ling 2002), it is not hard to imagine why both men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the rest of the Arab/Muslim world, would hypermasculinize in reaction (Ling forthcoming).

Assassinations and bomb attacks in Iraq have only increased, endangering US security forces in the country (Moore and Opiel 2008). Neither has insurgency in Afghanistan abated. “In the spring of 2006,” the *New York Times* reported, “the Taliban carried out their [sic] largest offensive since 2001,” resulting in a quintupling of suicide bombings and doubling of roadside bombings (Rohde and Sanger 2007). “All told,” the report continued, “191 American and NATO troops died in 2006, a 20 percent increase

over the 2005 toll” (Rohde and Sanger 2007: 13). As Osama bin Ladin declared on 7 October 2001: “[w]hat the United States tastes today is a very small thing compared to what we have tasted for tens of years.”¹³

Mutual war seems inevitable for all. “By now,” an article in the 24 February 2008 issue of *The New York Times Magazine* reported, “seven years of air strikes and civilian casualties, humiliating house searches and arbitrary detentions have pushed many families and tribes to revenge. The Americans then see every Afghan in those pockets of recalcitrance as an enemy” (Rubin 2008: 41).

Locked in unending, mindless hostility, the occupiers suffer as much as the occupied. The same article continued:

“I hate this country!” [the young sergeant] shouted. Then he smiled and walked back into the hut. “He’s on medication,” Kearney said quietly to me. Then another soldier walked by and shouted, “Hey, I’m with you, sir!” and Kearney said to me, “Prozac. Serious P.T.S.D. from last tour.” Another one popped out of the HQ cursing and muttering. “Medicated,” Kearney said. “Last tour, if you didn’t give him information, he’d burn down your house. He killed so many people. He’s checked out” (Rubin 2008: 42).

Imperial hypermasculinity, we contend, contradicts the very purpose of *The Art of War*. Let us reconsider Sun Tzu in his own time and on his terms.

SUN TZU:

In His Time, On His Terms

The Art of War is not just a manual on war. It is also a book of philosophy and peace. For Sun Tzu, diplomacy, negotiations, even deception were preferable to war. Sun Tzu’s perfect scenario was to win war without sacrificing blood or treasure.

¹³ http://users.skynet.be/terrorism/html/laden_statement.htm.

Chapter One (“Laying Plans,” *ji*), for example, cites five considerations when planning a war. These are: (1) the moral law (*dao*), (2) heaven (*tian*),¹⁴ (3) earth (*di*),¹⁵ (4) the commander (*jiang*),¹⁶ and (5) method and discipline (*fa*).¹⁷ The first and most important consideration, moral law, is that which “causes the people to be in complete accord with their ruler, so that they will follow him regardless of their lives, undismayed by any danger.” Moral law determines whether the people are willing to die for their sovereign and their way of life. Before waging war, then, the first question should be: “Which of the two [contending] sovereigns is imbued with the moral law?” (*ju shu you dao?*)

Sun Tzu advised that only when the attacking sovereign has the superior moral law should the campaign proceed. Put in contemporary terms, waging a war could not be based on technicalities like the size or number of weapons, soldiers, or monies. Such considerations cannot outweigh the “hearts and minds” of the people for it is only the latter that will determine the war’s outcome. This maxim pertains to both invaders and those being invaded.

Chapter Three (“Attack by Stratagem,” *mou gong*) prioritizes submission over destruction. Whether the enemy’s or one’s own, costs should be minimized:

In the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy’s country whole and intact (*quan guo wei shang*); to shatter and destroy it is not so good (*puo guo ci zhi*). So, too, it is better to recapture an army (*jun*) entire than to destroy (*puo*) it, to capture a regiment (*lu*), a detachment (*zu*) or a company (*wu*) entire than to destroy them. Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence (*shi gu bai zhan bai sheng, fei shan zhi shan ye*); supreme

¹⁴ This refers to “night and day, cold and heat, times and seasons.”

¹⁵ This refers to “distances, great and small; danger and security; open ground and narrow passes; the chances of life and death.”

¹⁶ “The Commander stands for the virtues of wisdom, sincerely, benevolence, courage and strictness.”

¹⁷ “By method and discipline are to be understood the marshaling of the army in its proper subdivisions, the graduations of rank among the officers, the maintenance of roads by which supplies may reach the army, and the control of military expenditure.”

excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting (*bu zhan er qu ren zhi bin, shan zhi shan zhe ye*).

Most distinctively, war should be a last resort only. Once it is inevitable, then the prince/general should pursue war cautiously (*shen zhan*) by minimizing its costs. One way is to battle in sequence. First apply strategy; if that fails, then offer diplomacy; if that fails, then attack; if that fails, as a last resort, “storm cities and seize territory.” Again, from Chapter Three:

Thus the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans (*fa mou*); the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces (*fa jiao*); the next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field (*fa bin*); and the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities (*gong cheng*).

Sun Tzu aimed to transform (*zhuanhua*) the enemy, not simply defeat him (Ho 2002). Rulers and generals, he emphasized, must have a sense of moral obligation (*dao yi*) toward those who pay the highest price on the battlefield: soldiers. “Regard your soldiers as if they were your children,” (*shi zu ru ying er*) he wrote, “Regard your soldiers like beloved sons” (*shi zu ru ai zi*) (quoted in Lu 2006: 741). This principle extended to enemy soldiers as well. Prisoners of war, Sun Tzu instructed, should be treated with kindness and nurtured (*zu shan er yang zhi*) just as *all* people should be protected and allowed to live in security and prosperity (Lu 2006: 742). Hence, caution in war includes preserving the lives of friend and foe alike, not to enslave or oppress them to serve the new regime, but to transform them into new allies and supporters.

Sun Tzu drew on dialectics to warrant such caution. The prince/general should never undertake war from a position of anger or indignation, he wrote, for it blinds one to a situation's *inherent* possibilities for change. Every assumption, Sun Tzu stressed, has the potential of being overthrown by the dialectical forces operating within. Such instability stems from the interaction of seeming opposites, ranging from physical conditions¹⁸ to social roles¹⁹ to point of action²⁰ to type of action²¹ to time constraints,²²

¹⁸ For example: soft/hard (*ying yang*), hot/cold (*han shou*).

and much more (cf. Ho 2002: 3-4). Each element must be evaluated with its supposed opposite in mind. Only in this way could the prudent ruler/general anticipate and manage crises.

As Yang (1999: 227) notes:

Sun Tzu found contradictions everywhere in the world. Everywhere, everything was in mutual contradiction yet also in mutual reliance, leading to the possibility of transformation. Because everything in the world was undergoing a thousand changes, he advocated using different methods to deal with different situations. One could never be fixed, rigid, or doctrinaire (*qian pian yi lu*).²³

Here, Sun Tzu was not just advocating a prudent, humane approach to war. He was drawing, also, from a larger worldview.

TIANXIA:

Ren, Xianghua, Huairou

A relational ontology, *tianxia*, governed Sun Tzu's time. Known as all-under-heaven, it bore three meanings: (1) "the universe" or "the world," (2) the "hearts of all peoples" (*minxin*) or the "general will of the people," and (3) "a world institution, or a universal system for the world, a utopia of the world-as-one-family" (Zhao 2006: 30). This latter signified not an empire in the usual sense but a universal state of world-ness: i.e., a world composed of many worlds. Only from the interaction of these many worlds could mankind realize *tianxia*.

Put differently, *tianxia* reflected systemic fluidity and dynamism. It accepted instability as the norm not only due to shifts in geopolitical circumstance but also the

¹⁹ For example: big/small (*da xiao*), brave/cowardly (*yung qie*), host/guest (*zhu ke*), foe/friend (*di wuo*).

²⁰ For example: up/down (*shang xia*), left/right (*zuo you*), horizontal/vertical (*zung heng*).

²¹ For example: smooth/difficult (*shun ni*), dead/live or fixed/mobile (*si sheng*), victory/defeat (*sheng bai*)

²² For example: past present (*wang lai*).

²³ Authors' own translation.

provisional and contingent nature of the *social relations* that constituted and constructed borders, territories, nations, identities, and roles. Ling (2003) notes, for instance, how Chinese elites felt Japan had “betrayed” or “transgressed” the Confucian world-order in the 19th century when the Meiji Restoration embarked on full-scale Westernization. No borders had changed physically but Japan was no longer China’s cultural cousin based on “speaking through brush-strokes” (*bi tan*).

Historically, the Emperor used rituals (*li*) and tributes (*gong*) to “center” (*shizhong*) social relations (Hevia 1995). Applying a mean helped to balance social relations precisely because they constantly fluxed and rotated. Even the Emperor, to whom all would perform the *koutou*, would prostrate himself, on hands and knees, before his parents or the Temple of Heaven. *Tianxia* as empire, though, “could only be an exemplar passively *in situ*, rather than positively become missionary” because of its foundational concept in *ren* (Zhao 2006: 36).

Ren accounted for *tianxia* both structurally and ethically. Identified as Confucian practical humanism, *ren* operated as a normative standard even during Sun Tzu’s time. (Sun Tzu and Confucius were contemporaries.) Typically translated as “universal virtue,” “benevolence,” “golden rule,” “love,” or “compassion,” *ren* conveyed a fundamental sense of “sociality or reciprocity in the everyday action of man [that produced] an all-encompassing network of social relationships” (Jung 1969: 193-194). A compound of two ideograms – “person” (also pronounced *ren*) and the number “two” – *ren* underscored that “[m]an [sic] is involved in mankind and lives his everyday life in relation to others, i.e., in the family, in the community, and in the nation” (Jung 1969: 193-194). Zhao (2006: 35) notes the oldest rendition of *ren* defines it as “thousands of hearts”: “Reciprocity understood in the Chinese way has less to do with the reciprocal utilitarianism or balance in commercial exchange and much more to do with the *reciprocity of hearts*.” Literally and figuratively, *ren* could not allow or even concede that an individual (whether person, group, society, or state) could be alienated from another. One was *necessarily* enmeshed with others. As “the primary index of man’s existence,” writes Jung (1969: 195), *ren*’s sociality “entail[ed] morality and [was] regarded as the highest moral norm attainable by man.”

Ren's radical sociality stipulated a multiple understanding of subjectivity. An event or character, for example, could be described "from different perspectives in different parts of the narrative" or be recognized in "the plurality of human existence, which rise above immediate considerations of success and failure," or reflect the notion that "truth is apprehended through plurality" (Li 1994: 395, 399, 400). Sima Qian, the Grand Historian, utilized this principle of "mutual illumination" (*hujian fa*) when recording, for example, an assassin as a "romantic avenger" in one passage, and a "bandit" in another (Li 1994: 400).

In *ren*, there could be no Self vs Other. There was only "other-ness" – and many kinds, at that. Zhao (2006: 35) describes it thus:

The Bible's golden rule, 'do unto others as you would have them do to you' sounds promising, but it would encounter challenges and difficulties when other hearts are taken into account. The other-ness of the other heart [as understood in *ren*] is something absolute and transcendent, so the other heart might reasonably want a different life. In terms of other-ness, the Chinese ethical principle thus runs: 'let others reach their goals if you reach yours'.

With its fluidity and flux, other-ness allowed for "transformation" or *xianghua*. Such transformation usually took hold uni-dimensionally: i.e., from the periphery to the center, the barbarian to the "way," and in Sun Tzu's case, foe to friend. Transformation never involved both parties simultaneously turning toward each other. In this sense, *xianghua* was not unlike classical liberalism's penchant for "education" or neoliberalism's for "conversion." But unlike these Western counterparts, *xianghua* did not advocate "discipline" or other forms of punishment as the only option should transformation fail or not take place.

One policy, for example, was to "cherish men from afar" or *huairou yuanren* (Hevia 1995, Xu 2003). It usually came in the form of bribery with gifts in goods or people, the latter through the Emperor ceding a concubine or sister in marriage to a tribal chief. With co-optation by greed or blood or both, *huairou* aimed to integrate other-ness into a familial relationship. In this way, *huairou* policies helped to approximate *tianxia*'s

ideal of the world-as-one-family. This strategy lasted from Sun Tzu's time until well into the 18th century as demonstrated by the Qing court's reception of England's first embassy to China. Note this instruction from the Qianlong emperor to his officials, written in 1793, on how to receive Lord Macartney and his mission:

The way of cherishing men from afar is also lost when not enough is done...When foreigners turn toward transformation, We simply consider their intentions in coming. If they are reverent, obedient, humble and respectful, then we increase Our grace. If they do not understand aspects of the rite, then We guide them by means of ritual practices (Qianlong Emperor cited in Hevia 1995: 186).

From this passage, we detect the social relations behind *huairou*. The Qianlong Emperor clearly represented "the center" to the Englishmen's "periphery" and all the attributes associated with such hierarchy: e.g., "high grandeur" to their "lowly supplicant status," "didactic teacher" to their "naive student," "wise parent" to their "callow youth." Nonetheless, the Qianlong Emperor sought greater education, not punishment, should the transformation fail to take place.

Granted, *huairou* drew on patriarchal relations to solidify alliances. It treated women as a means only to realizing transformation. The Chinese emperor historically related to the King of Siam, for instance, as a "younger uncle" to his "nephew" (Ling 2003). *Huairou* was clearly a gentlemen's agreement. Still, these patriarchal relations did not feminize other-ness into sexual prey for the center's hypermasculine adventures. Parental governance under *tianxia* was explicitly a family affair, supervised by both parents. Their title as "father-mother officials" (*fumu guan*) reminded representatives of the state that their moral obligation to society was analogous to that of parents to children: i.e., firmness combined with kindness, authority balanced with love (Ling 1994).

CONCLUSION

In sum, Sun Tzu instructed on war but taught peace. *Tianxia*'s relational ontology compelled a radical sociality in *ren* so that Sun Tzu's first consideration had to be a moral law: i.e., whether the war was justified. Should it be justified *and* unavoidable, rendering war a last resort, Sun Tzu's dialectics called for transformation (*xianghua*), not annihilation, of the enemy. Not simply a Lockean frugality to save on resources, Sun Tzu believed that rulers and generals had a moral obligation to protect and care for life, in general, and their soldiers, in particular. This accounted for *huairou* and other policies of co-optation whether through bribery or marriage. Though patriarchal in content, *huairou* policies instilled a sociality of family relations that had no role for hypermasculinity.

The Art of War in neoliberal hands, however, strays far from these origins. In plucking Sun Tzu's maxims out of context, and inserting them into a dichotomy of Self vs Other, neoliberals repudiate both the relational ontology of *tianxia* and its dialectical epistemology. Indeed, Sun Tzu would have objected strongly to the damage done to soldiers in Iraq, both local and US. He might have applauded the ability of neoliberal commercial hip to "transform" or co-opt Others into the US hegemonic fold. But he would have advised against fixing on "discipline" as the only alternative to "conversion." The conversion/discipline dichotomy tends to turn Others into reactionary versions of the hypermasculine Self, reducing the world to Hobbes' scary State of Nature where there a perpetual state of "warre of all against all" prevails. Sun Tzu would blanche.

Ironically, many think this misappropriation of Sun Tzu clever. They rationalize it as using the Other to defeat the Other. Explanations range from the speculative to the libelous, as evidenced by two random yet representative sources below:

Although there is no evidence to suggest that al Qaeda's top leaders base their battlefield strategies directly on this ancient Chinese text, there are some clear parallels between their "art of terrorism" and the principles of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* (Bartley 2005: 237).

Both Sun Tzu and his ancient Chinese commentators say success in battle sometimes depends on placing soldiers in positions where they must fight or die. This is not part of the American way of war. Nonetheless, we should recognize that for other cultures this is standard procedure, and it will affect the tactics of US units facing such enemies (McCready 2003: 87-88).

Some in China are beginning to react with an imperial hypermasculinity of their own. Yes, they affirm, Sun Tzu was a realist (Li 2007) who saw “power” as key (Wei and Jing 2007); therefore, his strategies are more applicable than ever to contemporary international relations (Yang 2006). Ho (2002: 30-31, 40) argues that Sun Tzu *would* deceive his own soldiers by rallying or brainwashing them, for example, so they’d be willing to die for the cause. Neoliberal Self/Other relations, it seems, have been globalized.

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