

SUN TZU

Team: Imperial Dragons

Position: Silly mid on

Status: Unconfirmed



THINKER
IN
BOXES

Sun Tzu (sometime in the Land that Time Forgot) may have never existed or he may have been another philosophically inclined time traveler. Supposedly, he wrote *The Art of War*^a around 500 BC, but scholars argue that many of the details of warfare that Sun Tzu describes, such as the use of the crossbow, did not exist or did not appear in China until at least 50, and possibly as many as 250, years later. Others argue that certain historical details indicate that *The Art of War* had to have been written before 474 BC, when the Wu kingdom was destroyed, and that makes the 500 BC date a pretty good approximation. Regardless of when *The Art of War* was actually written, it is notable that Sun Tzu was supposedly a great and distinguished general, but the histories of this period do not mention him—thus, the questions of whether he ever existed at all arose. Various scholars have suggested that Sun Tzu was actually a fictitious character invented for storytelling purposes, that he existed but a later disciple actually wrote the book, that he merely collected and edited together existing anecdotes and stories, or that he was actually a teenage girl pretending to be the son of a warrior, who with the assistance of a tiny talking dragon accidentally won a war and then hired Walt Disney to ghostwrite her memoirs in cartoon form.^b

Nevertheless, the discussions of the philosophical and political foundations of war that are attributed to Sun Tzu have had an extensive and lasting effect on everything from business to international politics. Notable in *The Art of War* is the very clear argument that war is essentially a political activity, and as a result, the politics involved affect the way in which a war must be fought. One of the clear corollaries of this line of reasoning is the argument that destroying the enemy's ability to fight is not the only way to win a war. In fact, it may be one of the most inefficient and costly ways to win. Destroying an enemy's will to fight is often a better way to win a war and better still is maneuvering your opponent into a position that convinces the opponent to concede without fighting.

This emphasis on winning the political side of the battle as the key to waging war has been argued to be a defining aspect of an Eastern, or perhaps Asian, philosophy of war, exemplified by the Vietnam War. The vastly outgunned North Vietnamese defeated the U.S. superpower not by winning battles but by constantly attacking the U.S. will to fight. The Tet Offensive is the best example of winning the politics. By any reasonable measure of military and tactical accomplishment, the offensive was a failure, but it dealt a devastating blow to U.S. morale, and its effect on the U.S. desire to continue fighting is often cited as the turning point in the war. Similarly, demoralizing the United States and forcing it into immediate negotiations over trade embargoes was one of the primary objectives of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The tactic backfired, but the Japanese strategy to damage the U.S. will to fight reflects the impact of Sun Tzu.

^a Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, translated by Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).

^b Except for the Disney part, discussions of these arguments about the authenticity of *The Art of War* and the identity of Sun Tzu are common features of published versions of the text, and the details of these and a variety of other aspects of the work can be found there. See, for example, the Griffith translation cited here.