



DELPHI
CLASSICS

The Art of War

Sun Tzu



EASTERN TREASURES

The Art of War by

SUN TZU

(544-496 BC)



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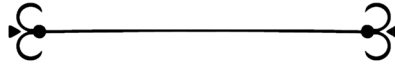
SUN TZU



By Delphi Classics, 2025

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The Art of War by Sun Tzu



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The Translations



Zibo, a city in Shandong province, eastern China; the site of ancient Linzi — Sun Tzu's traditional birthplace according to some sources



A model of ancient Linzi, the capital city of the Chinese Qi state



Ancient ruins at Linzi

Brief Introduction to ‘The Art of War’



Sun Tzu was a sixth century BC Chinese military general, strategist and philosopher, who flourished in the Eastern Zhou period (771–256 BC). He is traditionally credited as the author of *The Art of War*, an influential work of military strategy that has influenced both Western and East Asian philosophy and military thought.

The oldest available sources disagree as to where Sun Tzu was born. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* and Sima Qian’s later *Records of the Grand Historian* state that he was born in Qi. Both sources also agree that Sun Tzu was born in the late Spring and Autumn period and that he was active as a general and strategist, serving King Helü of Wu in c. 512 BC. Reportedly, Sun Tzu’s victories inspired him to write *The Art of War*. One traditional story illustrates Sun Tzu’s temperament, explaining how, before hiring the strategist, the King of Wu tested his skills by commanding him to train a harem of 180 concubines into soldiers. Sun Tzu divided them into two companies, appointing the two concubines most favored by the king as the company commanders. When Sun Tzu first ordered the concubines to face right, they giggled. In response, Sun Tzu explained that a general, in this case himself, was responsible for ensuring that soldiers understood the commands given to them. Then, he reiterated the command and again the concubines giggled. He then ordered the execution of the king’s two favored concubines to the king’s protests. He explained that if the general’s soldiers understood their commands but did not obey, it was the fault of the officers. Sun Tzu also explained that, once a general was appointed, it was his duty to carry out his mission, even if the king protested. After both concubines were killed, new officers were chosen to replace them. Then, both companies —well aware of the costs of frivolity and insubordination — performed their manoeuvres flawlessly.

The first century BC historian Sima Qian claims that Sun Tzu later proved on the battlefield that his theories were effective, for example in the Battle of Boju, and that he enjoyed a successful military career. However, the *Zuozhuan*, a historical text written centuries earlier, provides a much more detailed account of the Battle of Boju and does not mention Sun Tzu at all.

The Art of War presents a philosophy of war for managing conflicts and winning battles. It is accepted as a masterpiece on strategy and has been frequently cited and referred to by generals and theorists since it was first published, translated and distributed internationally. There are numerous theories concerning when the text was completed and the identity of the author or authors. Archaeological recoveries show that the text had taken its current form by at least the early Han period. As it is impossible to prove definitively when it was completed, the differing theories about the work’s authorship and date of completion are unlikely to be resolved. Some modern scholars believe that it contains not only the thoughts of its original author but also commentary and clarifications from later military theorists, including Li Quan and Du Mu. The text employs language that may be unusual in a Western text on warfare and strategy. For example, the eleventh chapter states that a leader must be “serene and inscrutable” and capable of comprehending “unfathomable plans”. The meanings of such statements are clearer when interpreted in the context of Taoist thought and practice.

Revered in Asian culture as a legendary historical and military figure, Sun Tzu mastered the military science of ancient China and created the military doctrine of asymmetrical warfare. According to his theories, an attack on the enemy should begin

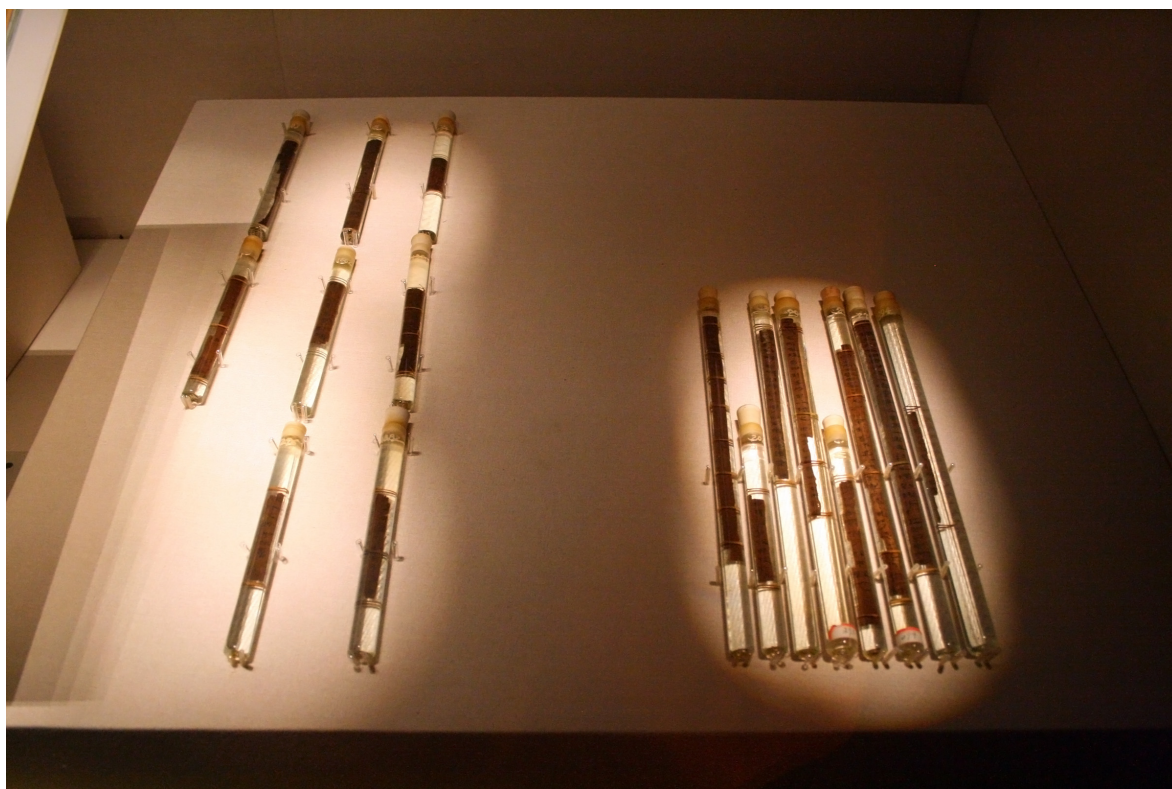
only after the enemy has no opportunity to either defend or counterattack. This doctrine was used in the wars of the Warring States (c. 475-221 BC). Despite its title, the treatise addresses strategy in a broad fashion, touching also upon public administration and planning. It outlines theories of battle, but also advocates diplomacy and the cultivation of relationships with other nations as essential to the health of a state. As such, *The Art of War* has also become popular among political leaders and those in business management. Comprising 13 chapters, it stresses the importance of accurate information about the enemy's forces, dispositions and deployments and movements. This is summarised by the axiom, "Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat." The treatise also emphasises the unpredictability of battle and the use of flexible strategies and tactics. The text's insistence on the close relationship between political considerations and military policy went on to influence modern-day strategists across the world. Mao Zedong and the Chinese communists took from *The Art of War* many of the tactics they used in fighting the Japanese and, later, the Chinese Nationalists.

The book first appeared in Europe in a French translation that appeared in 1772, executed by the Jesuit priest Jean Joseph Marie Amiot. A partial translation into English was published by the British officer Everard Ferguson Calthrop in 1905 under the title *The Book of War*. The first complete English translation was printed by Lionel Giles in 1910, annotated with numerous notes and detailed explanations. Both English translations are provided in this edition, as well as a simplified text version with Giles' annotations removed.

During the twentieth century, *The Art of War* grew in popularity in the West. It remains influential in many contemporary competitive endeavors across the modern world beyond military strategy and warfare, including espionage, culture, governance, business and sports.



A Qing era representation of Sun Tzu, c. 1800



Fragments of 'The Art of War' discovered as a part of the Yinqueshan Han Slips, showing the version that was popular in Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD)

Chinese plain in the late Spring and Autumn period (5th cent)



The Spring and Autumn period (c. 770 – c. 481 BC) was characterised by the gradual erosion of royal power as local lords nominally subject to the Zhou exercised increasing political autonomy. The period's name derives from the Spring and Autumn Annals, a chronicle of the state of Lu between 722 and 481 BC, which tradition associates with Confucius (551-479 BC).



Mao Zedong in 1959. Chairman Mao founded the People's Republic of China and led the country from its establishment in 1949 until his death in 1976. He is just one of the many politicians to be inspired by Sun Tzu's writings.

Ferguson Calthrop Translation, 1905



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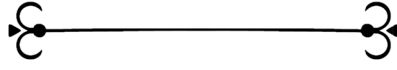
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Statue of Sun Tzu in Yurihama, Tottori, Japan

INTRODUCTION



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