

Linguistic Martial Analysis of the Sunzi bing fa

If brushing your teeth with the left hand, then be certain to relax your right shoulder.

The above advice could easily have come from Master Sun's *bing fa*. I will not refer to it as "The Art of War", and in fact this will be the only time mentioned as such. Western translator's Machiavellian contamination of the title has persisted since Napoleon read the first French translation in the early 19th century. Sun Tzu's war manual, or guidebook for warfare, or military tactics or principles for attacking, are merely different translations of the *bing fa*. Countless 'guidebooks for armies' were written during China's Warring States period (circa 500-221 BC), yet Sun Tzu's *bing fa* has become the most internationally recognizable. (For this analysis, I have attempted to use the Pinyin transliteration whenever possible and have *italicized* the Chinese words, sometimes followed by the Chinese character in parenthesis. Some names, such as Sun Tzu, are well known in the Wades-Giles and are thus used. I am indebted to Professors D.C. Lau, Roger Ames, J. H. Huang, Henricks, Bibby and the eternal Matthews. All of these personal reflections are inspired by their research). Ultimately, any translation is a failure and only by peering into the original language can one gain true understanding. The *bing fa* of Sun Tzu is written in a fluid, world-in-process unspecific language that could be easily viewed as a manual for warring armies, a deceptive guide for personal martial entanglement or even a Daoist dental hygienic outline for immortality.

First, an examination of the Classical Chinese characters is important in understanding the nature of the Sunzi text. Why is the character *bing* (兵) used and not *wu* (武)? *Bing* is

employed because it indicates the general term of military. *Wu* is used to specifically mean war. War is meant to protect people, cities, farms and culture. The military is the means by which this protection is extended, and war is the manner in which the military conducts itself. *Bing* is a process word whereas *wu* is a success word. Gilbert Ryles makes this linguistic distinction in an attempt to explain the Oriental world from the Occidental. "To study" is a process word and "to learn" is the success word. Essentially, it is the process or the task versus the success or the outcome. *Bing* is the task, the soldiers marching along the dusty road. *Wu* is the war, the inevitable outcome. Thus, success words are detrimental to the understanding of ancient texts that contain a world-in-process syntax.

Next, and more intimately involved with Kenpo, is the character *fa* (法). Is that not the same character as found in Kenpo's namesake which emblazons our work-out gi?

ch'uan fa gung shou also *ch'uan fa san shou*

Ch'uan fa loosely translates as 'the science of boxing'. *Ch'uan* is "fist". *Fa* is "law" and is the same *fa* as in the title of Sun Tzu's *bing fa*. Therefore, "fist-law" would be a good rendering for *ch'uan fa*, but it placed on our gi as *fa ch'uan* which means something else entirely. *Fa ch'uan* has a Buddhist connotation and could possibly mean "Buddhist palm". Ha! As for *gung shou*, I take the *gung* to be the same as the character in kung-fu. *Gung-fu* (or *kung-fu*) means "ability, work and service". *Gung* is "merit and achievement" and *shou* is "hand" (but not fist). Therefore, in English it could have a meaning like the study or proficiency of unarmed, open-hand fighting. I have also heard *ch'uan fa san_shou* for Kenpo. The *san* translates as "disperse,

scatter, separate” and changes the inherent meaning of the combination. “Scattering palms” or “intercepting open-hands” (as in Jeet Kun Do) would be appropriate for understanding what we do in Kenpo. Yet, all this is merely speculation that has little to do with Sun Tzu. So, where does the brushing of one’s teeth come in? To better answer this question, allow me to state a major point of contention I have with Master Sun.

There is no Sun Tzu! He did not exist for he is only a mythical figure. The bamboo strips compiled as the ‘great war manual’ of Sun Tzu were merely a compilation of generations of martial concepts from military advisors during the Warring States period. To add to this, the name of Sun Tzu was later slandered. His encounter with the King of Wu never happened as recorded and was later used during the Han period as political slander against the Wu state. To clear up my bold argument, a loose synopsis of the tale of Sun Tzu from the Records of the Grand Historian Sima Qian is given below:

Sun Tzu visited the King of Wu in search of employment as a military tactician. To prove his skill, Sun Tzu ordered the King’s concubines to assemble. He ordered them into military formation but they only giggled. “If the soldiers do not obey, then it is the fault of the commander.” He clearly stated his orders again but their girlish response was again repeated. “If the orders are clear, then it is the fault of the soldiers.” Sun Tzu then had the King’s two favored concubines beheaded. Afterward, he again issued his orders and the ladies obeyed flawlessly.

Does this classic re-telling of Sun Tzu prove that he could train any type of soldier into becoming fearless and obedient? If not, then what is the purpose of this story except to slander Sun Tzu’s name because it appears to be completely false! This story was written by

the Han chronicler, Sima Qin, hundreds of years after the *bing fa* was compiled. At that time, the Han was at war with Wu and used this as propaganda against the Wu state. What better way than to attack one of its legendary heroes. More importantly, this story directly contradicts the *bing fa*, Chapter 9. It is written, "If you punish troops who are not yet devoted to you, they will not obey . . . therefore, bring them together by treating them humanely and keep them in line with strict military discipline" (Ames, 114). In the story, Sun Tzu delivers capital punishment, thus not acting humanely, towards the concubine soldiers. This type of military discipline is not in agreement with Sun Tzu's advice.

Of the 13 chapters compiled as the *bing fa* (the bamboo strips attributed to Sun Tzu were not written by any one individual), two require the utmost concentration and study. Chapter 1 contains a linguistic structure that can be used as a guide while reading this "war manual". Should not a book on the art of warfare begin with a chapter dedicated to waging battle? Yet, this is the title of the 2nd chapter. The first chapter is devoted to terminology and employs the "if...then" structure common in Classical Chinese texts. When a condition is given, followed by the consequence, this is known a conditional sentence. Like patterns in the Matrix, the er () . . . zhe () formula is readily apparent. Even the Grand Historian's tale of Sun Tzu (see previous page) contains this grammatical structure. The latter half of the first chapter, entitled "On Assessments" or "Surveying", is filled with conditional sentences directly after the line that is perhaps the heart of the text, "Warfare is the art (*dao*) of deceit/deception". What follows is specific advice as conditional sentences given in an opposing and seemingly contradictory manner. "If the enemy seeks some advantage, then entice him with it. If he is

incensed, then provoke him. If he is humble, then encourage his arrogance". The key to understanding lies not in interpreting this advice as deception, but instead as the *dao* of warfare. Thus, comprehension of the terminology is necessary, which is the reason for introducing both the chapter as well as the book with integral definitions.

The beginning of the first chapter offers the key to Sun Tzu's text by defining certain terms necessary for the other 12 chapters. The entire text can be summed up as follows: Think before you fight. Now that a great disservice has been committed, I shall state another. The planning of action before a battle is of the utmost concern. Once a battle begins, the outcome is already determined. "To gauge the outcome of war we must appraise the situation based on five criteria".

1. Dao – () This concept is impossible to translate. It just is.
2. Tian – () Heaven, climate, environment, seasons.
3. Di – () Earth, terrain.
4. Jiang – () Leader, command, wisdom, and humanity of the rulers
5. Fa – () Regulations, rules, logistics, laws, plan.

Determining which side has an advantage over the other in relation to these five criteria will indicate the obvious victor in an armed conflict. Can we take this advice from warring armies and narrow it into a self-defense encounter between two individuals?

Before an engagement, the mind must be clear of emotion. This allows one to clearly analyze the five criteria. It matters not if one is the attacker or defender since both are based

on perspective [The inward block becomes a hammer-fist strike to the radius bone. Does one step instinctively right-side back or instead left-side forward? The result is identical]. Firstly, one contemplates the *dao* of the situation. Are you confronting this moment without any misgivings about life and death? Why are you defending the self and which self are you defending? Are you willing to fully commit to dying in the process which seems counter-intuitive? This is not the *Dao* but a way to approach the conflict without attachment. Secondly, one must consider the natural surroundings, the elements, the dry air in your throat, the wall behind you, the tree branch within reach. Thirdly, the conditions of the terrain like the wet, slippery ground and the slope of the asphalt. Fourthly, command of the situation and of one's courage as well as command over by-standers watching. Can you gain allies in your fight? Does your opponent limp and can you make them injure themselves? Can you lead them into a position where you have the advantage? Does your opponent show humanity when pushed and can it be used against them? Fifthly, the rules of engagement. Every fight has rules. You need to know what rules your opponent is fighting by and quickly break them.

In a clichéd conclusion, the best way to win a conflict is not to fight. You survive, which is the ultimate outcome. There is no point in killing men and women when conquering the state is the objective. A leader should not attack the opponent's army just like we should not attack the body in a fight. Instead, attack strategies first, and then attack their alliances. Or you could just say to your adversary in a bar fight: "Your strategy is transparent; your alliances are dispersing as we speak; I am a walled fortress. No need for this soldier (*pointing to him*) to die." Then offer him or her a drink.

At last, the brushing of one's teeth can be addressed. How does this strategy relate to Sun Tzu? The conditional sentence format offered as the opening line of this reflective essay should now be apparent, as well as the opposing nature of physical duality. The hand guides the shoulder as the left follows the right. And being relaxed when taunt is always sound advice. Finally, what is "it" that Sun Tzu's final line grandly gestures to by stating, "it is what the armies depend upon in their every move". Obviously, it must be . . . Stillness in Motion.