

Introduction

Sun Tzu and His Art of War

Before, I wanted to marry a millionaire. Now I want to become one.” So read the billboard for a career placement agency that caught my eye recently.

What struck me is how universal this sentiment has become—it is not just American women who want to become successful in business. You and the same attitude among women in Canada, Germany, France, China, and England. It is an international phenomenon, a bond of womanhood that cuts across and beyond cultures and national boundaries.

For most of the twentieth century, people thought it was impossible for a woman to achieve everything she wanted; women were told that our attempts to “have it all” were causing us to become physically and mentally frustrated and overwhelmed. That was nonsense.

In order to compete in a male-dominated world, we women have always had to be twice as good at our jobs—while taking home a fraction of the pay.

Regardless of how much men think they know women, only a woman knows how difficult it is to be a woman. British economist Herbert Spencer could have been referring to the silent strength of women when he coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.” But now that we have survived thousands of years of second-class citizenship, it’s time for us to thrive—in business and in our lives. And this book can help us do that.

Ancient (but Eternal) Truths

Sun Tzu’s wisdom may be ancient, but it is eternal. The Art of War draws from Taoist philosophy, which is based on observing the rules that exist in nature. By studying nature for more than 2,500 years, Taoist philosophers have created a series of principles that they believe govern every living thing, including humans.

Since Master Sun based his book on universal principles, it is not surprising that it can be applied to every aspect of our lives, including our careers. In fact, I am surprised that no one—until now—has written a book that teaches women how to apply the strategies in The Art of War to their careers and lives.

After all, Sun Tzu believed that the best strategy is to win without fighting. Now, what in that wouldn’t appeal to every woman?

The strategies that you will read about in these pages are a perfect match for women’s greatest natural strengths. For thousands of years, women living in male-dominated societies have learned the value of appearing more submissive than we really are. We have learned to allow men to think they are in charge and how to get our way by pretending to go along with them.

Intuitively, women have always used some of the Chinese art of war strategies when negotiating with our husbands, lovers, children, bosses, friends, customers, and clients. We just didn’t know we were actually strategists in disguise. It is about time that we build on our natural abilities and learn how to use the full spectrum of the strategies and tactics that are contained in Sun Tzu’s Art of War.

Why this particular book? Because among all the

ancient strategy treatises—and many were written in ancient China— Sun Tzu’s Art of War, written before 512 B.C., is currently the most popular in business—and for good reason. It is infinitely adaptable to today’s work environment.

Because the lessons are so powerful, let’s take a step back and see where this wisdom comes from.

Meet Sun Tzu

Where there is power, you will likely find Sun Tzu—on Wall Street, on Capitol Hill, on bookshelves in the poshest corner offices. During congressional hearings, staffers—and even the occasional congressman or senator—pull out their paperback editions of *The Art of War* and flip through the pages wondering “Which strategy should I use now?”

But while almost every statement in the book seems relevant, few readers seem able to find the specific strategy that will turn the tide in their favor. Invariably, they end up frustrated.

It is a common reaction.

One Sunday morning I received a phone call from Japan. A U.S. Marine colonel stationed there had telephoned to tell me how much he enjoyed studying *Thick Face*, *Black Heart*, one of my previous books. As one topic led to another, he began speaking more candidly with me, opening up.

Finally he confided, “As a Marine officer, it is part of my training that I study Sun Tzu. To tell you the truth, I have read Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* many times but I still do not really understand it.”

This is the most frequent complaint I have heard from clients, friends, and readers. They tell me

they have not really been able to assimilate, understand, and apply Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, even after many readings. This is not due to a lack of intellect, but rather because Master Sun didn’t write *The Art of War* to create a bestseller. He wrote it because he was looking for a job.

How Sun Tzu’s Art of War Came to Be

Sun Tzu was not a military man when he wrote his art of war treatise. A farmer by profession and a self-taught philosopher, Master Sun descended from a Chinese scholar-military family.

Because his grandfather was a military general, Sun enjoyed the unique advantage of having full access to rare military books.

This is no small point. In the days before both paper and the printing press, each copy of a book needed to be created by hand on bamboo or wood strips. As a result, there were very few books in circulation, and military books—given their specialized nature—were even rarer. It was not uncommon for those who possessed a copy of an art of war book—as all books about military strategy were known—to safeguard the almost sacred object with their lives.

You can clearly see Sun’s background reflected in *The Art of War*. His strategies draw both from previously successful military campaigns and an understanding of nature, something that comes naturally to a farmer.

He spent a lot of time looking for extraordinary strategies in the ordinary world around him. He noticed, for example, how water will change its course when confronted with an obstacle and yet still will have the ability—over time—to erode everything in its path. Or how the most deeply

rooted tree will crack, in the face of strong winds, while a seemingly fragile blade of grass will simply bend—and survive.

In addition to his agrarian background and the exposure to military strategy, there is another factor that makes Sun Tzu unique.

Around 532 B.C., Sun, then in his late teens, escaped to Wu (south of today's Shanghai) after his father—a warrior himself— rebelled against the ruling royalty. Sun Tzu hid out for twenty years. During those two decades, he experienced firsthand the suffering and daily experiences of the common people and the underprivileged. He understood the pain of real life.

Sun Tzu had no distinguished teacher, nor did he hail from a highly distinguished or royal family. His wisdom emerged from his keen power of observation, his personal studies, the challenges he faced, and his contemplation of the unfolding of nature and the world around him.

As a young man, he wrote his Bing Fa (bing means soldier, fa means skill; the combination has been translated throughout the centuries as The Art of War) as a resume in the hopes of getting a job as the King of Wu's military commander.

Even given his humble background, his goal isn't as strange as it first sounds. Sun Tzu lived in the midst of the 550 years of China's civil war. Anyone who could provide to the kings and feudal lords strategies that would insure domination over their rivals would be guaranteed employment, regardless of their humble circumstances. Anyone who could present strategies that would help a king achieve his aim would leap from commoner to superstar overnight.

Tempted by the promise of fame, wealth, and

glory, over two thousand military strategy books were written, Sun Tzu's among them. The King of Wu, intrigued by Sun Tzu's Art of War, hired him as his military commander and put his strategy to the test. During one battle, with an army of only 20,000 men, Master Sun defeated the Kingdom of Zhou, which had a contingent of 200,000 men.

In 1772 Sun Tzu's Art of War was translated into French. It is widely believed that Napoleon read and adopted many of Master Sun's strategies. During Operation Desert Storm (the first Iraq war in 1990–91), as well as the Iraq war that began in 2003, officers in the U.S. Marine Corps were issued copies of The Art of War as standard battle gear.

Sun Tzu Wanted The Art of War to Be Difficult

The difficulty that the Marine colonel—and many others—have in understanding what Sun Tzu was trying to say has very little to do with the reader and very much to do with the author himself.

For one thing, Sun never intended the book to have a wide audience. From the language, form, and construction of his writing, I believe he was—in large part—writing the book not only for his employer, but also for himself, worrying more about his insights than his prose.

Writers understand well why someone might take this approach. You gain a deeper, more profound understanding of a specific subject by writing it down. Capturing your observations on paper allows you to easily revisit the thought and delve deeper into its meaning.

The fact that Sun Tzu wrote in such a cryptic,

abstract fashion supports the argument that he intended his work to be read only by himself—and his employer. History tells us that the King of Wu didn't completely grasp the essence of the book because Sun was turned down seven times before the king agreed to see him. Furthermore, during his job interview, he asked Sun Tzu to demonstrate his art of war. Also, if the king had understood the power of Sun Tzu's book the first time he read it, he would not have repeatedly refused to employ Sun despite strong recommendations from his foreign minister.

But I believe there is a second reason the original text is so difficult to understand. To safeguard his knowledge, Master Sun deliberately made it obscure, so that the king would be forced to rely on him for interpretation, once he was hired.

This tactic had three benefits. First, it ensured that Sun Tzu would remain employed. The king could not simply read *The Art of War*, implement the strategy, and fire Sun (or execute him, as was so common in those days). He needed the author around to explain exactly what the text meant and how to best implement it.

Second, by making the text difficult to parse, Sun Tzu did not have to be overly concerned about losing his secrets, in the event the enemy got hold of his manuscript. (One of the reasons Gen. George S. Patton was able to defeat German general Erwin Rommel in Africa during World War II is that Patton had studied Rommel's book on warfare and knew the moves Rommel was likely to make in certain situations.)

Third, by keeping the knowledge obscure, Sun Tzu could protect himself against threats from others in his own army. His decision not to make all his knowledge immediately accessible calls to mind the kung fu master who never teaches his final, deadliest move to his students. If he taught

them everything he knew, they could use those moves one day to eliminate him. His indiscretion could mean his death.

If Sun Tzu had wanted to open a school to teach or pass down his wisdom for posterity, as Confucius did, he would have provided examples as to exactly how he intended these strategies to be used. Master Sun made himself mysterious and indispensable by providing no examples, no anecdotes, nor sufficient historical references to show how he intended his knowledge to be employed.

Thus, the search to understand Sun Tzu has continued evolving, keeping westerners and Chinese alike intrigued for more than 2,500 years.

Scholars have delved deep into Chinese history to divine exactly how to apply Sun Tzu's theory, and each, it seems, has their own take. There are more than two hundred English versions of Sun Tzu's *Art of War* that are more or less translations and adaptations, while Chinese scholars have created thousands of versions with commentaries, examples, and interpretations for more than two millennia, trying to solve Sun's riddle. And yet in all that time there has never been a version of his work written strictly for women—until now.

Throughout the book I have included my translations of excerpts of *The Art of War*, which you'll recognize by the different typeface. Additionally, you will find boxes that include my own observations about Sun Tzu's philosophy. I have also provided space to allow you to reflect on how to adopt these strategies as your own. This book will not only instruct but also reflect like a mirror, revealing where you are, where you are going, and what you have to do to get there. It will also serve as a blueprint for your own one-of-a-kind resume.