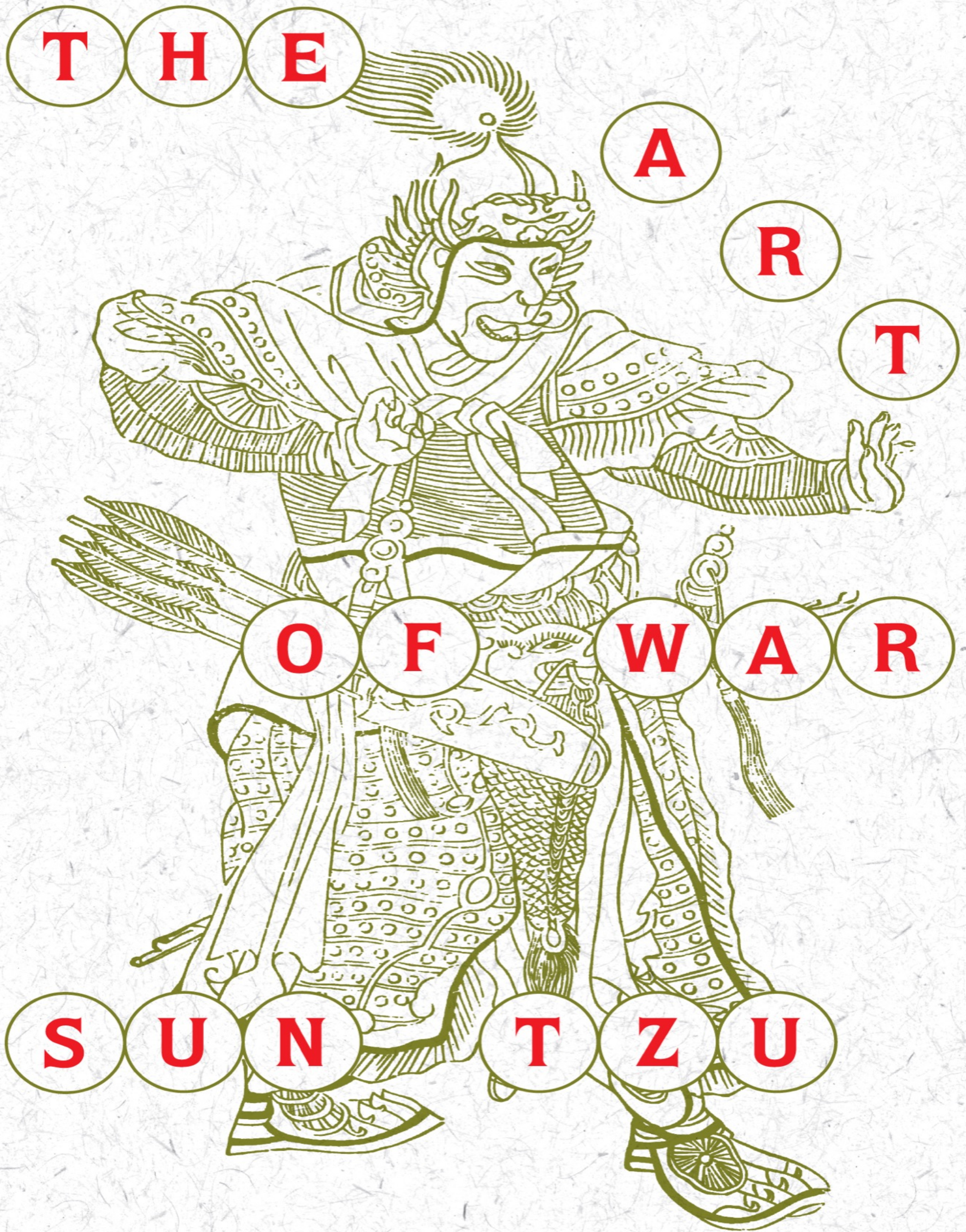
THE ART OF WAR

SUN TZU



TRANSLATED AND INTRODUCED BY PETER HARRIS

Sun Tzu

THE ART OF WAR

Sun Tzu was a Chinese general, military strategist, and philosopher who lived in China in the sixth century BCE. Sun Tzu is traditionally credited as the author of *The Art of War,* a widely influential work of military strategy that has affected both Western and Eastern philosophy. Sun Tzu is revered in China as a legendary historical figure. His birth name was Sun Wu; the name Sun Tzu by which he is best known is an honorific that means "Master Sun."

SUN TZU

THE ART OF WAR

Translated, Edited and Introduced by Peter Harris

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To Vicky, Max, Ben and Alexis—
for being such wonderful people
P. H.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A phrase often used to describe the dangers inherent in the rapidly changing relationship between the United States and China is the 'Thucydides trap'. Even the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, has alluded to it, if only to express the hope that it can be avoided. The phrase is used to refer to Thucydides' remark, when considering the origins of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the late fifth century BCE, that 'what made the war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta' – Sparta being the United States in today's world, of course, and Athens being China. (In fact the phrase 'Thucydides trap' is misleading for several reasons, not the least being that Thucydides never wrote about a trap as such. But this is not the place to dwell on that.)

Thucydides' remark about the inevitability of war between Athens and Sparta reflects his determinedly realist view of the world, with its steady focus on power and self-interest. The Athenian historian would have been surprised to learn that as he applied this realism to his *History of the Peloponnesian War,* another arch-realist halfway around the world had been making his mark (or would soon be doing so, depending on which dates for his life we accept) with his own penetrating discussion of interstate rivalry and power. This was the Chinese general Sun Tzu, or Master Sun.

Sun Tzu (or Sun Zi, if written with the romanisation now used in mainland China, *zi* meaning 'master') was a military man and a strategist, rather than a military historian. But he shared Thucydides' sense of realpolitik, built in his case on an acute appreciation of the uses of deception in the pursuit of military success. And like Thucydides, he has a reputation today at least as great as it was well over two millennia ago.

We know a certain amount about Thucydides from what he tells us about himself in his *History*. About Sun Tzu we know almost nothing. Indeed, some people doubt whether he even existed, arguing that his writings may have been no more than an amalgam of old military saws. Given the peculiarly personal acumen and insight that informs Sun Tzu's brief, sometimes enigmatic, but always practical *Art of War,* this is not a point of view that it is easy to come to terms with. As we read Sun Tzu we tell ourselves that we are surely reading the words of an acutely intelligent military man with a subtle, original mind and a wealth of experience all his own.

This is certainly the attitude adopted towards Sun Tzu by many of his admirers. To take just one recent example, the respected writer on political affairs Martin van Creveld has no qualms about treating Sun Tzu as a historical figure. In his 2017 book *More on War,* Van Creveld calls Sun Tzu one of two giants among military theoreticians, the other being the early nineteenth-century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz. He describes both men as 'standing head and shoulders above the rest' – a suitably solid metaphor for someone assumed to be a real figure from the past.

The view that Sun Tzu really was a living person dates back to the first substantial source of information we have about him, his biography in the *Records of the Grand Historian.* These *Records* were a wide-ranging history of ancient China written early in the first century BCE by two men often described as the founding fathers of Chinese history, Sima Tan and more especially his son Sima Qian, who completed the work after his father died. Sima Qian was a careful though sometimes uncritical record-keeper, known for his utter dedication to his great work – after offending the emperor, he chose to stay alive by suffering the humiliating punishment of castration so that he could complete it. There is no particular reason to think that he doubted Sun Tzu's existence, or the fact that – as he writes in the *Records* – Sun Tzu was a military adviser to King Helü of the state of Wu, who reigned from 514 until his death in 496 BCE. (Sun Tzu himself has

traditionally been thought of as having been born in 544, and having died in the same year as King Helü, 496.)

All the same, as many have pointed out, Sima Qian's biography of Sun Tzu is disappointingly thin, and far from satisfactory as a historical source. Here is the text of the biography, in which we learn Sun Tzu's full name, Sun Wu:

> Master Sun Wu was a man of Qi state. He showed his *Art of War* to King Helü of Wu state, who said, 'I have read all thirteen chapters of your work. Can we have a little trial run at drilling troops?' 'We can,' Sun Tzu replied. 'Can it be done with women?' the king asked. 'It can,' said Sun Tzu.
>
> So the king had a hundred and eighty beauties come out from the palace. Sun Tzu divided them into two companies, put two of the king's favourites in charge of them, and ordered them all to take up halberds. 'Do you all know your front, back, left and right?' he asked them. The women replied, 'We do.' 'When I say "front",' he went on, 'go forward. When I say "left", go left. When I say "right", go right. When I say "back", go back.' The women agreed to do so. Having issued these instructions, he set out hatchets and battle-axes and repeated his orders several times.
>
> But then when he drummed the command 'right' the women broke out in laughter.
>
> 'If instructions are unclear or orders are not properly understood,' Sun Tzu said, 'it is the fault of the general.'
>
> He then repeated his orders several more times, and drummed the command 'left'. The women again broke out laughing.
>
> 'If instructions are unclear or orders are not properly understood,' said Sun Tzu, 'it is the general's fault. If they are clear but not obeyed, it is the fault of the officers.'
>
> He then made to behead the women in charge of the two companies. The king was watching this from a terrace, and when he saw that his two favourites were going to be executed he was greatly alarmed. He

hastily sent a messenger down to say, ‘General, I know now that you are capable of deploying troops. If I lose these two young ladies I will quite lose my taste for food. Kindly refrain from beheading them.’

But Sun Tzu replied, ‘I have received the command from Your Majesty to be his general. When a general is with his army, he does not always follow his ruler’s commands.’

He then executed the two women in charge of the companies as an example to the others, and appointed the next in line to replace them. When he again drummed his commands, the women all followed the rules exactly, going left, right, forward and back, kneeling and standing up, not daring to make a sound.

Then Sun Tzu sent a messenger to the king to tell him, ‘The troops are now in good order. I suggest Your Majesty comes down and see them. Come fire or water you will be able to deploy them in whatever way you want.’

The King of Wu’s response was, ‘You may take a rest, general, and go to your quarters. I do not wish to come down to see them.’

Sun Tzu replied, ‘Your Majesty just likes talking, rather than being someone able to do things.’

At that point the king understood Sun Tzu’s ability in deploying troops. He ended up making him a general. In the west he destroyed Chu, entering its capital Ying; to the north he overawed Qi and Jin states, and became renowned among the various rulers. The power he gained from all this Sun Tzu shared.

Another version of this biography was among the writings on bamboo strips unearthed from tombs on Silver Sparrow Mountain (Yinqueshan) in Shandong province in 1972 – a find I will come back to later. This bamboo strips version, earlier by decades than the version recorded by Sima Qian, is incomplete; but what is left of it suggests a fuller and slightly more plausible story than the one related by the Grand Historian. In the bamboo strips version the King of Wu starts by describing himself as having a dilettante interest in warfare, which Sun Tzu decries, emphasising the

importance of warfare as a means of securing gains. When it comes to showing the king how to drill troops, Sun Tzu agrees only reluctantly to drill court ladies rather than noblemen or others, and appoints as field officers – and later, it seems, executes – two of his own men, rather than two of the king's female favourites. And towards the end there is a sketchy reference to the king studying with Sun Tzu for six days before he understands what the Way of warfare really means.

Even with these embellishments, however, the two versions of Sun Tzu's biography tell us next to nothing about the man or his life. Nor do we learn much about his strategic thinking or his views on generalship. We gather only that he believed in strict discipline, and in the vital importance of a general having full control over his affairs once he was in the field. These are both points made in *The Art of War*, though in a far more nuanced way. Discipline, in particular, is portrayed in *The Art of War* as the counterpart of the care, consideration and consistency with which the rank and file have to be treated if they are to give of their best. Other than that, we are left puzzled as to whether the biography has any point at all. As for the drilling of concubines, that just seems to be a piece of gratuitous whimsy.

It is not surprising, then, that many scholars and commentators have dismissed the biography as being without value. And I am not just referring to people in modern times. The nononsense scholar and philosopher Yan Shi, writing in southeast China in the thirteenth century CE, described Sima's account of Sun Tzu as no more than a fiction arising from scholarly debates, and the story of the women being drilled and disciplined as 'bizarre and incredible'.

Before moving on from the biography, we should note that there is another way to look at it, as the Danish scholar Jens Petersen has persuasively argued. Immediately preceding the biography of Sun Tzu in *The Records* is the biography of another early general, Sima Rangju, who is also depicted as handing down harsh punishments for apparently trivial offences. General Sima Rangju has one arrogant senior officer executed for arriving late for a meeting, and threatens another with execution for riding

too fast through his military camp. Again, the story of Sima Rangju contains scant information about him as a man. Petersen suggests that the intention in both cases may well have been to demonstrate the generals' methods, rather than to provide real-life individual histories. According to this view, stories like these (not uncommon in early Chinese literature) are used to illustrate particular points or 'morals' of the kind Victorian children's tales end with. The moral of the two generals' biographies is presumably that military authority derives from exemplary punishment, even of privileged people.

Having cast doubt on the value of Sima Qian's biography, we are left searching for other sources of reliable information about Sun Tzu. There is not much to be found. He is mentioned a few other times in Sima Qian's *Records*, but despite the comprehensive nature of this work these other references are even thinner than the biography. Interestingly, they connect him with another early military figure called Wu Zixu, who in contrast to Sun Tzu seems more likely to have been a real-life figure. According to Sima Qian, Wu Zixu was, like Sun Tzu, a military strategist on the staff of King Helü of Wu. These two men, Sun Tzu and Wu Zixu, pooled their strategic insights to advise King Helü, enabling him to crush his rival the state of Chu, which he did in 506 BCE, and to strengthen his rule more generally.

One intriguing thing about Wu Zixu is that he was a refugee from another state – in fact from Chu, the same state he helped King Helü crush. It is intriguing because well over a thousand years later, in the official *New Tang History* completed in 1060 CE, Sun Tzu himself is described as a refugee, a fugitive from his home state of Qi. (It is not at all clear why it took a thousand years for this piece of information or hearsay to come to light. Perhaps it had been included earlier in other historical materials since lost to us.) In a novel line of thought, Jens Petersen argues that this common attribute of the two men, Sun Tzu and Wu Zixu, suggests that Sun Tzu the refugee may have been no more than a double created out of nothing, a kind of *doppelgänger* or shadow of the refugee Wu Zixu, one that became potent enough over time to figure in illustrative stories. Even Sun Tzu's name may

be illusory, since one meaning of the word used for his family name, *sun*, is ‘fugitive’, while *wu* means ‘warrior’, so that like some of the fancifully-named characters in other early Chinese fables, Sun Tzu may be no more than a fabulous Fugitive Warrior.

Scepticism about Sun Tzu’s existence would be easier to rebut if he were to feature significantly in other early sources, apart from Sima Qian’s *Records*. But up until now – pending further tomb excavations or other unexpected discoveries – this has not been the case. He is, it is true, mentioned in several texts dating back to the third century BCE, but only briefly. For example *Han Fei Zi*, the foundational text of the brutally authoritarian Legalist school of thought, remarks that at the time it was written everyone was talking about warfare, with many families having copies of the works of Sun Tzu and another famous strategist called Wu Qi. *Xun Zi*, a book about the Confucian philosopher of that name, makes a passing reference to Sun Tzu, as does *Huainan Zi*, a set of essays collected around 139 BCE. And the bamboo strips unearthed from Silver Sparrow Mountain include an account of a conversation between Sun Tzu and a king of Wu, presumably Sun Tzu’s patron Helü, about the proper division and taxation of land. But that seems to be all that is left to us.

What is particularly troubling is the lack of any mention of Sun Tzu in *The Commentary of Zuo*, a lively narrative account of Chinese history from the eighth to the fifth century BCE, including the period King Helü of Wu reigned. Putatively written by an otherwise unknown historian called Zuo Qiuming, perhaps in the fifth century BCE, *The Commentary of Zuo* has served for well over two millennia as an essential source for the early history of China. It is a reflection of its status that it crops up frequently in the various commentaries on Sun Tzu that are included in this Everyman’s Library edition. The complete absence of Sun Tzu himself from this venerable history is a startling omission, even if we assume, as some do, that Sun Tzu was a self-effacing sort of general. It is rather as if Pericles were missing from Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War.*

As if all this were not enough, there is one other issue to consider. That is the possible significance of another general called Sun Bin, allegedly a

descendant of Sun Wu. To understand why he matters, a little background information is needed. According to Sima Qian, Sun Bin was a relative of Sun Wu who lived some hundred years after Sun Wu's death. (A millennium or so later the *New Tang History* was more precise, and in an account of the Sun family genealogy describes Sun Bin as Sun Wu's grandson, a claim that incidentally makes the traditional date of Sun Wu's death, 496 BCE, improbably early.) Sun Bin, Sima Qian tells us, was also a military strategist, and played a major role in Qi state, his ancestor Sun Wu's home state, alongside a general called Tian Ji, particularly in two important battles that took place around 354 and 341 BCE. Like Sun Wu, Sun Bin had an unusual name. In Chinese *bin* means 'kneecap' or 'amputation of the kneecap', the latter being an ancient form of punishment. Sima Qian tells us that Sun Bin did indeed have his kneecaps amputated as a punitive measure early in life. Sun Bin's given name was clearly, therefore, an assumed name or nickname, rather than his proper name, which has been lost.

Lost, too, for over two millennia was an *Art of War* that Sun Bin, like his forerunner Sun Wu, was supposed to have authored. Sima Qian refers to this work, although the way he does so leaves it somewhat unclear whether it was a book or a set of military methods. That it does seem to have been a book was borne out by the discoveries made in the tombs on Silver Sparrow Mountain in 1972, which included not only a substantial part of Sun Wu's *Art of War* along with part of his biography, but also fragmentary bamboo strips that seem to constitute part of another *Art of War*, the one associated with Sun Bin.

It is not all that easy to disentangle these two books, as a careful analysis of their contents by the American specialist Roger Ames and the Hong Kong translator D. C. Lau has shown. The historical context of some of the chapters clearly relates to Sun Bin; other chapters are less easy to categorise, and may even form a lost part of the work attributed to Sun Wu. A further complication is that in both books the name Sun Tzu or Master Sun is used throughout, without any mention of either man's full name, or anything to show which of the two Suns the term Sun Tzu actually refers to.

But the Silver Sparrow Mountain materials certainly suggest that Sun Bin existed, and was responsible for writings that could be construed to be Sun Bin's *Art of War.*

In this respect the Silver Sparrow Mountain find is illuminating. But it fails to clear up earlier doubts about who exactly Sun Wu and Sun Bin really were. Indeed it has added to speculation in some quarters that Sun Wu and Sun Bin might really have been the same man, rather than two different people – a single strategist surnamed Sun, perhaps from the fourth century BCE, around whom various historical stories and military precepts accumulated.

Various scholars have tried to interpret this conundrum in various ways, none of them entirely convincing. Here is one view, put half a century ago to the American military scholar Samuel Griffith by the respected Chinese historian Gu Jiegang:

> It can be presumed that when Qi in 341 BCE launched a punitive exhibition against Wei…Tian Ji was the general and Sun Bin was the strategist. Tian Ji later on fled to Chu and Chu made Tian Ji a feudal lord in Jiangnan [in central-south China]…It might be that Sun Bin had followed Tian Ji to the Jiangnan area and there wrote his *Sun Tzu's Art of War.* Later the people made a chronological mistake and described him as having lived during the Spring and Autumn Period [i.e. in the sixth century BCE] and, furthermore, created a Sun Wu who helped Helü in his invasion of Chu, and this story was adopted by Sima Qian.

What can we conclude from all this? If Sun Wu really was a strategist who inspired *The Art of War*, he is at best a shadowy figure. Perhaps he lived in the sixth century BCE; perhaps he lived later – as late even as the fourth century BCE – and had a sixth-century identity grafted on to him. In any event it is tempting to compare him to other early masters such as Homer, Zoroaster or the Daoist sage Lao Zi, people whose personal histories and identities have been drawn from the sketchiest of early outlines, and have been embellished later to give them flesh and blood.

So much for Sun Tzu the man. When we turn to the text of *The Art of War* we find ourselves asking yet more questions. When and how was it written? How was it handed down to us, and how complete is it in its present form?

The first thing to remark on is that Sun Tzu (meaning, for the sake of argument, Sun Wu) is unlikely to have written his *Art of War* himself. This is apparent from the method of presentation – lengthy comments by Sun Tzu, preceded by the phrase 'the Master said'. The same format is used in the *Analects* of Confucius (whose traditional dates, 551–479 BCE, overlap with those of Sun Wu), which Confucius almost certainly did not write, and is found in other early works of Chinese philosophy.

Otherwise the style, layout and content of the book suggest that it is not a single, coherent whole. The style of writing varies, with some sections consisting of reasonably well-connected and well-argued prose, and others made up of short statements or maxims, sometimes in a rhythmic and even rhyming form. The text is linked throughout by the term *gu* or 'therefore' (translated in this edition as 'so'), which paradoxically tends to be used when the logical connection implied by the word is in fact absent, suggesting that it has been added by an editor keen to make the text seem more coherent than it really is.

The chapter headings appear to date back quite early, since some of them are in the *Art of War* materials buried on Silver Sparrow Mountain; but they rarely convey fully or accurately the contents of the chapter concerned. The only real exceptions to this are the final chapter, on spies, and to some degree Chapters Nine (on the army on the move) and Chapter Twelve (on fire), whose contents stick more closely to the subject-matter of the chapter headings than those of other chapters do. Elsewhere important topics such as the uses of deception, the effect on warfare of terrain, and the qualities of a general are given scattered coverage, and crop up in different parts of the book. All this seems to indicate an anthology of sayings and comments, or else an initially well-structured composition that over the first two or three centuries of its existence was broken up and reconstructed less coherently, or possibly both of these.

As for its authorship, we can do no more than state the obvious – that *The Art of War* was either put together during the lifetime of Sun Tzu or whoever inspired it, or after it, or perhaps both. No original or ur-text is extant, so we can only guess from the rhythmic, condensed, enigmatic style of presentation of much of the text that at least parts of the book may originally have been learned and handed down orally.

Statements in the text do give an occasional pointer as to when it may have been first created, but if, as seems likely, it is a composite text we cannot set too much store by these, since they may simply predate or postdate other parts of the text. For example in Chapter Six it is asserted that the size of the army of Yue state will not benefit it in battle – a remark Sun Tzu is assumed to be making to reassure his patron the King of Wu, Yue's longstanding enemy. And in Chapter Eleven Sun Tzu refers to the enmity between the people of Wu and the people of Yue. These references have been taken to suggest that *The Art of War* was composed some time before Yue state annexed the state of Wu, which it did in 473 BCE. But they could just as well have been inserted later on, perhaps to give the text a spurious air of antiquity. To take another example, mention is made in Chapter Six of the constant replacement, one by another, of the five elements, a theory that did not develop until relatively late, and did not flourish until the Han dynasty (that is, from the third century BCE onwards). This is sometimes taken to suggest a late date of composition; but again, this part of the text could have been a later addition.

In more general terms the contents of *The Art of War* do help with dating, since from the sixth to the third century BCE, and particularly during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), political and military conditions in China changed markedly, and the types of warfare described in *The Art of War* reflect some of these changes.

The changes took China – or the inner regions of what we now call China – from a style of warfare that was small-scale and aristocratic to one that involved massed troops and mass destruction. From the eleventh to the fifth century BCE, a period in which the inner regions of China were loosely united under the overall rulership of the Zhou dynasty (founded around

1045 BCE), small armies of charioteers and foot soldiers led by noblemen fought wars of limited duration. But from the fifth century BCE onwards, following the collapse of the Zhou political order, a group of independent states began vying with one another for overall supremacy, and warfare grew much more brutal and pervasive. Massed troops participated in much larger and more ruthless engagements, many of them clad in armour and wielding weapons and tools of iron. Crossbows and cavalry came into use, and siege warfare became more common. Rulers of states no longer took to the field themselves, but hired generals to lead their armies. In search of success in war and governance these rulers sought the advice of military strategists such as Sun Tzu (assuming he existed), Wu Qi and Sun Bin, and listened to the high-minded ideas of itinerant philosophers such as Confucius' disciples Mencius and Xun Zi, as well as the more practical advice of men like Mo Zi, the leader of another school of thought that offered guidance on the defence of cities. The rivalries among contending states, which steadily diminished in number, culminated in the massive and bitter battles fought in the fourth and third centuries BCE, when by one estimate 1,800,000 losses were suffered by defeated states, excluding the casualties of their conquerors.

The Art of War was evidently written while some of these changes were occurring or had occurred. The difficulty when trying to date it is deciding when exactly the various conditions it describes came to prevail.

One important factor is the absence from the text of any reference to horsemen. Cavalry is never mentioned – horses are referred to three times, but evidently as animals hauling chariots and wagons, not carrying men. (Sun Bin, on the other hand, was familiar with cavalry, and Sun Wu's eleven commentators discuss the use of cavalry quite often.) Cavalry seems to have come into being in the mid- to late fourth century BCE. Its spreading use was typified by King Wuling of Zhao state, who had his men wear trousers rather than robes and shoot arrows while on horseback like nomads. The absence of cavalry from the text thus suggests a date of composition some time before the late 300s BCE.