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Sun Tzu: The New Translation of the Art of War

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H. G. Rickover

“More Than Just Semantics”

Huang, J.H., trans. *Sun Tzu: The New Translation of the Art of War*. New York: William Morrow, 1993. 299pp. \$10

THE STUDY OF SUN TZU'S *The Art of War* began a renaissance of sorts after the discovery in 1972 in an ancient tomb near Linyi in Shandong of a text of that classic that antedated, by perhaps a millennium, the versions previously known. Although the discovery has confirmed the historicity of much about Sun Tzu that had previously been doubted, the new text has also provided impetus for new translations.

One of the new translations has been produced by J.H. Huang, a California-based scholar whose previous book, written in Chinese, explored the origins and changing meanings of Chinese characters. For those accustomed to the standard version of *The Art of War* by General Samuel B. Griffith, USMC, published in 1963, much in Huang's translation will be striking, even disconcerting. To give just one example, the key term *shi* 勢 (used in the title of the fifth book): Griffith read it as “energy,” but Huang translates it as “combat power.” To make things even more confusing, another new translation, by Professor Roger Ames of the University of Hawaii, with whom Huang is bound to be compared, renders the same character as “strategic advantage.”

This disagreement is more than a matter of philological or semantic quibbling. It brings us to one of the fundamental questions about Chinese “strategic culture.” Some interpreters are impressed by the differences between Western and Chinese ways of thinking about war. They note that the lack of attention to force (*li* 力 a character that occurs only nine times in the thirteen chapters of the book) emphasizes the extent to which Sun Tzu makes warfare a matter of psychology. Broadly, they place him in the world of Taoist philosophy, with its

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conviction that only by moving with “the way” can human success, including military success, be secured. More narrowly, they look at his emphasis on intelligence, assessments, and deception (*gui 詭*), based on psychological insight.

But many people (military specialists not least) are reluctant to accept the idea that war is really all that different from culture to culture. They would argue that force is force and violence is violence, whether one is in Sun Tzu’s China or Napoleon’s Europe. Huang manifests some sympathy for this line of interpretation in his rendition of *shi* as “combat power.” He is, furthermore, on solid ground philologically: usages contained in the ancient etymological treatise the *Shuowen* and other classics show the word meaning something like force or power as understood in the West, whether latent (as in a set crossbow) or unleashed (as in a flood so powerful as to sweep boulders along).

Nonspecialists in Chinese will probably be impatient with this sort of close linguistic analysis, but it has a real point. The choice of translation for *shi* is only one of a number of possible examples that mark Huang’s Sun Tzu as, in modern terms, a rather “realist” reading. Whether, as such, it can capture all the implications and resonances of the text is a matter for scholars to debate. For the general reader, however, it has one great advantage: the realist approach to Sun Tzu helps to dispel the air of exoticism that sometimes envelops Oriental military classics. It is probably not coincidental that Huang is the son of a Republic of China air force colonel and presumably did military service himself.

Huang presents his text in double columns, in modern English; on the right are the translated words of Sun Tzu, and on the left is Huang’s analysis. An introduction and extensive notes further clarify the text. However, Huang’s publishers have done him a real disservice by omitting Chinese characters in his work—Ames’s publishers saw fit to include them. A desk-top computer can now handle Chinese graphics, so there is no excuse for a leading publisher not to provide them in a book of this quality.

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Castex, Raoul. *Strategic Theories*.
Eugenia C. Kiesling, editor and
translator. Annapolis, Md.: Naval
Institute Press, 1994. 438pp. (No
price given)

In the history of strategic thought, few
theorists have demonstrated the sweeping

command of broad concepts that char-
acterizes the work of Raoul Castex.
Nevertheless, while Clausewitz,
Jomini, and Mahan retain prominent
positions in the strategic pantheon, Cas-
tex remains obscure, though he is every
bit their equal, and more contemporary.