The Divine Skein: Sun Tzu on Intelligence

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Scholars of ancient China and students of military strategy have devoted considerable attention to Sun Tzu’s The Art of War. Intelligence experts, in contrast, occasionally cite his chapter on ‘The Use of Spies’ but do not seem to engage his text. Part of the problem is the difficulty of translating his oracular adages; Western experts in Chinese history rarely understand the arcana of espionage, while intelligence scholars usually know no Chinese. Sun Tzu amply repays an effort to study his text, however, as he presents one of the oldest extant descriptions of an intelligence system — one that is, moreover, still insightful in our modern age.

‘Sun Tzu’s essays on “The Art of War” form the earliest of known treatises on the subject, but have never been surpassed in comprehensiveness and depth of understanding’.

B.H. Liddell Hart

Many people read Sun Tzu, for many reasons. This ancient Chinese author is considered a master of strategy, and so his classic The Art of War is read by scholars of international relations and military science, and assigned at war colleges around the world. His adages about war and statecraft seem applicable to a wide variety of competitive situations, moreover, and a growing selection of books and articles seeks to apply his doctrines to somewhat more peaceful pursuits, such as business leadership. A major defense conglomerate recently ran full-page newspaper ads explaining how its computer networking services harmonize with Sun Tzu’s purported emphasis on information superiority. Even lawmakers cite him; Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) invoked Sun Tzu in floor debates over the bill that would soon become the landmark Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.

Sun Tzu found espionage and related matters important enough to merit consideration in his brief treatise. Students of intelligence thus occasionally ponder The Art of War, but surprisingly his chapter on spies has not inspired
much commentary from the standpoint of intelligence history and theory. It merits a closer look, for it is no mere artifact. Sun Tzu presented a marvelously concise treatment of espionage that gives us a window on the nature of intelligence writ large. He is not modern; he is not Western; he is about as far from us in history as he can be. Something that is common to his understanding of intelligence work and to our own can therefore be presumed to be pretty close to an ‘essential’ element of the trade – one that might be practiced and recognized 2,300 years from now, as it was 2,300 years ago.

WHO WAS SUN TZU?

The treatise we typically call Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* consists of roughly 6,000 characters arranged in 13 chapters. It was probably not written by its namesake, a famous fifth-century BC commander and contemporary of Confucius named Sun Wu, but apparently dates from as many as two centuries later. Its anonymous author (or authors) appropriated Sun Wu’s name and reputation, writing in a then old-fashioned style, as if a modern essayist calling himself Wellington were to compose in the manner of Boswell or Carlyle. *The Art of War*, or more properly the *Sunzi bingfa*, has long been considered a classic in the East; a tomb discovered in Shantung province in 1972 yielded what is by far the oldest extant copy of the work, written on thin bamboo strips and buried with its owner before 118 BC. By that point, Chinese writers had already been citing the *Sunzi bingfa*’s laconic adages for generations.

The fame of the *Sunzi bingfa* reached the West with a dubious French translation in 1772, but the work appeared in English less than a century ago. Only with the publication of Brig. Gen. Samuel B. Griffith’s (USMC-ret.) perceptive and well-annotated translation of it in 1963, however, has the *Sunzi bingfa* received sustained attention from military thinkers and been taken into the canon of classic military texts in the English-speaking world. Indeed, intelligence experts reading the chapter on espionage have particularly benefited from Griffith’s inclusion of Chinese commentaries on the text written over several centuries; these in many cases offer pithy examples to illustrate ‘Master Sun’s’ points.

What the *Sunzi bingfa* conveys has been much debated in the West by students of ancient China and of military strategy. The treatise has long been cited as one of ancient China’s ‘Seven Military Classics’, but it is unlike the rest in being the least Confucian in orientation and little concerned (at least on the surface) with the subject of governance. The *Sunzi bingfa* is ostensibly about war – how to conduct it, and how to win it. Its chapters discuss war from many angles, offering advice on estimating
the enemy, calculating costs, judging terrain, maneuvering and marching, and even telling the general how to conduct incendiary attacks. The final chapter out of its 13 concerns the use of spies, but this closing portion of the treatise is no afterthought. Indeed, the chapter on spies is the rhetorical climax of the *Sunzi bingfa*, and its lessons were apparently intended by its author to pertain well beyond the sphere of military intelligence.

**COMTEMPORARIES AND COMPARISONS**

The *Sunzi bingfa* was by no means the only or even the first ancient work to discuss spies. Indeed, they appear in most or perhaps even all ancient literatures, but are largely taken for granted by ancient authors, seemingly regarded as almost a force of nature. It is rare to find an explanation of how they actually functioned. They play important roles in several Old Testament incidents, for instance, but the Bible has other concerns and makes little attempt in these passages to explain how Moses or Joshua oversaw the activities of their operatives. They were also described in ancient Greece, but more as informants at home or as quasi-diplomats or registered agents of influence abroad, and are not systematically discussed by Greek thinkers. The *Sunzi bingfa* is one of the handful of discussions of espionage as a discipline available to us from the ancient world.

The *Arthasastra*, an Indian work of comparable antiquity, might be considered the closest rival to the *Sunzi bingfa* when it comes to explaining the use of spies. This remarkable book has traditionally been attributed to a figure named Kautilya or Chanakya, an advisor to the emperor Chandragupta Maurya, who halted the heirs of Alexander of Great at the borders of the subcontinent before 300 BC and founded an empire stretching from the Indus to the Bay of Bengal. The *Arthasastra* ranks with Machiavelli’s *The Prince* as a treatise on the art of rule, a practical manual to teach the king to be virtuous, energetic, and ruthless. He is to consult the new science of governance, and not to watch for omens in the stars or traditional oracles. As part and parcel of this ethos, the *Arthasastra* advocates the use of spies on virtually all occasions. Spies in every conceivable disguise are omnipresent in the *Arthasastra*. They listen for dissent in high and low places; they penetrate the councils of enemies foreign and domestic; they sow dissension wherever necessary – and they sometimes practice the art of assassination by dagger and poison. Kautilya even mentions an ‘institute of spies’ to manage their affairs; this unit collates and verifies the reports of ‘wandering’ spies by means of its own secret investigations.
In comparison with the *Arthasastra*, Master Sun’s discussion in Chapter 13, ‘Employment of Secret Agents’, seems to be almost crude in its simplicity and its rhetorical excess. Partly that is the result of the chapter’s brevity and obscurity; it is only about 500 characters long, and is written in an oracular and allusive style. The chapter makes claims for the efficacy of espionage that rarely if ever seem justified. Another problem that even scholars have with Chapter 13 arises from the difficulty of intuiting exactly or even approximately what it was that an author who is so distant from us, both temporally and culturally, was trying to say. The *Sunzi bingfa*’s discussion of espionage nonetheless repays careful study. Despite its brevity, by the standards of the ancient world it is most insightful on precisely certain facets of spycraft that the *Arthasastra* leaves largely to the reader’s imagination.

Chinese expressions can be tricky to translate into English, and thus the translators of the *Sunzi bingfa* have produced widely various renderings of the same few characters. Consider Samuel Griffith’s rendering of a passage of 17 characters on the five kinds of spies: ‘When these five types of agents are all working simultaneously and none knows their method of operation, they are called ‘‘The Divine Skein’’ and are the treasure of a sovereign’. What could Master Sun possibly have meant by a ‘Divine Skein’? A skein is literally a length of yarn or silken thread coiled loosely on some sort of reel. Some translators seem to have thrown up their hands over this phrase, setting aside the effort to provide a literal translation in favor of conveying what they believe the *Sunzi bingfa* was intended to imply. Lionel Giles, who in 1910 gave readers the first reliable English translation, called it ‘divine manipulation of the threads’. Roger T. Ames translates the expression as ‘imperceptible web’. Ralph D. Sawyer calls it ‘spiritual methodology’. Tang Zi-Chang offers ‘secret service’. The translation provided on the Sonshi website (‘Largest Sun Tzu The Art of War Site’ <http://www.sonhshi.com>) uses ‘divine organization’. Finally, in what seems to the closest approximation to Griffith’s version, Andrew Meyer and Andrew Wilson tell us that the phrase means ‘spirit web’.

At any rate, what seems to be implied in that passage of the *Sunzi bingfa* is some sort of blessed or otherwise valuable net or line that is cast and then perhaps pulled to move an object, or reeled in with something (presumably information) in tow. It is the frequency of similarly elliptical expressions like this in the *Sunzi bingfa* – and the divergence among translations – that make the chapter on spies (and the work as a whole) a difficult one for even specialists to grasp.

At this remove we can only speculate on the motivation behind the *Sunzi bingfa*, but it seems clear that Master Sun wanted to assert the authority of
military expertise against both the traditional modes of war-making and the assumption that fate or the spirit world decided the outcomes of battles. Rather like Machiavelli in *The Prince*, Master Sun pitched his rhetoric at an elite audience capable of following his subtleties, and saw himself as opposing the aristocrats who had always controlled warfare in ancient China and the heavenly forces which allegedly determined their fates. War for these worthies was a stage for acting out the martial destinies of their honorable ancestors and noble families. Modern notions about Nature’s autonomy from supernatural influences were outside the ken of Master Sun’s audience. The outcome of a conflict was in the hands of fate or heavenly forces, and the rise and fall of regimes and the fortunes of their thousands of lowly foot-soldiers made up merely a backdrop on the stage of history. In contrast to this conventional wisdom, the *Sunzi bingfa* suggests that the warrior class did not correctly understand warfare, and that the erroneous notions of these aristocrats had long hastened the downfall of dynasties and deepened the misery of the humble peasants who did much of the fighting.

The implications of a mistaken notion of conflict are on full view in the *Sunzi bingfa*’s chapter on spies. A commander who loses a battle because he is too cheap to pay agents for information has practiced a false economy and squandered the lives of his troops and the fortunes of their families. ‘Such a man is no general; no support to his sovereign; no master of victory’, Master Sun contends. No, ‘the reason the enlightened prince and the wise general conquer the enemy whenever they move and their achievements surpass those of ordinary men is foreknowledge [emphasis added]’. This the commander gains from knowing the capabilities of his enemy and of his own forces and allies. ‘Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril’, Master Sun states at the end of his chapter on strategy (3:31).

The *Sunzi bingfa* emphasizes the value for rulers and commanders of information on one’s enemies. Chapter 9, on ‘Marches’, offers several adages that we might call useful indicators and signatures. ‘When his troops lean on their weapons, they are famished’ (9:32), Master Sun notes, and likewise ‘When the envoys speak in apologetic terms, he wishes a respite’ (9:27). The foreknowledge gleaned from such signs ‘cannot be elicited from spirits, nor from gods, nor by analogy with past events, nor from [astrological] calculations’. It also comes in part from ‘men who know the enemy situation’ (13:2–4). Ironically, gaining such foreknowledge, since it is more reliable than divination or sorcery, implicitly makes the successful general almost god-like in his control of events.

The people who provide foreknowledge must be handled with skill. ‘Delicate indeed! Truly delicate!’ is the craft needed by the commander who employs spies. How is that to be done? ‘He who is not sage and wise, humane
and just, cannot use secret agents. And he who is not delicate and subtle cannot get the truth out of them’ (13:13–14). One of the Sunzi bingfa’s final passages drives the point home: ‘And therefore only the enlightened sovereign and the worthy general who are able to use the most intelligent people as agents are certain to achieve great things’ (13:23).¹⁵

Spies come in five varieties in the Sunzi bingfa, and in their own fashions they are useful in many ways:

Native agents are those of the enemy’s country people whom we employ.
Inside agents are enemy officials whom we employ.
Doubled agents are enemy spies whom we employ.
Expendable agents are those of our own spies who are deliberately given fabricated information.
Living agents are those who return with information. (13:7–11)

These classes of spies can learn about the enemy, thus acting as the army’s eyes and ears (13:16). They can be used for action as well as for gathering information. They can wittingly or unwittingly deceive the enemy about one’s own situation or intentions, causing divisions in the enemy’s councils (13:10, 19).¹⁶ They can also recruit other spies (13:18). All these agents complement one another’s work in subtle ways: ‘It is by means of the doubled agent that native and inside agents can be recruited and employed. And it is by this means that the expendable agent, armed with false information, can be sent to convey it to the enemy’ (13:18–19).

These five types of agents must work in harmony, and they must work in secret, even from each other. To ensure both harmony and secrecy, the commander ‘must have full knowledge of the activities of the five sorts of agents’ – i.e. he must understand the principles underlying their work and coordinate the ebb and flow of their activities (13:21). Together these agents comprise a thing greater than the sum of its parts, a ‘spirit web’ or ‘divine skein’ that is a ‘treasure for the ruler’ (13:6). In our modern terms such an entity or ‘spirit web’ is intelligence writ large, for there must be a system by which the sovereign power coordinates, secures, and exploits the findings of its agents.

The Sunzi bingfa is almost bloodthirsty in its emphasis on the secrecy that must surround the work of these operatives. ‘Of all those in the army close to the commander none is more intimate than the secret agent’, and ‘of all matters none is more confidential than those relating to secret operations’ (13:12). The ‘spirit web’ can only function when ‘none knows [the spies’] method of operation’ (13:6). Security breaches merit the ultimate penalty: ‘If plans relating to secret operations are prematurely
divulged the agent and all those to whom he spoke of them shall be put to death’ (13:15).

Finally, the *Sunzi bingfa* holds an even deeper teaching for discerning readers. Its author implicitly warns that the skill and secrecy required for running spies are vital not only for offensive and defensive war, but for the very preservation of a commander and a regime. Victory begins with sound security measures at home and in the field. Master Sun advises generals to deploy their troops ‘without ascertainable shape’ so that ‘the most penetrating spies cannot pry in’ (6:24). Most important, ‘It is essential to seek out enemy agents who have come to conduct espionage against you and to bribe them to serve you’ (13:18). In this way the ruler defends his own against foes who use the clandestine arts against him and his domain.

Neglecting such matters, as Master Sun hints at the close of the *Sunzi bingfa*, can have fatal consequences. Trusted insiders with their own agendas can and have brought about the downfall of dynasties: ‘Of old, the rise of the Yin was due to I Chih, who formerly served the Hsia; the Chou came to power through Lu Yu, servant of the Yin’ (13:22). I Chih and Lu Yu were apparently well-known figures among the rulers, commanders, and scribes reading the *Sunzi bingfa* when it was new. Master Sun’s contemporaries would have grasped his point that the fall of one state and the rise of its successor – transitions of great secular import for thousands of people, and holding profound spiritual implications as well – could be brought about through the use of foreknowledge and inside agents.17 Espionage is a matter with ‘national’ as well as ‘tactical’ import; of the greatest moment not only for generals, but for rulers, too.

For rhetorical effect, Master Sun exaggerated the precision with which spies can be managed, the clarity of their reports, and the impact of their activities, but his message is not diminished by his flourishes. The *Sunzi bingfa* might seem simplistic, both in saying that foreknowledge is possible and almost easy, and in saying that it assures victory. We modern students of intelligence know better than that, and so we might wish to set aside Chapter 13 with an amused smile and call it an artifact that gives us little more than a clue to how spies were viewed in ancient China. Foreknowledge is not easy, or even possible in some cases, and it does not assure victory, as authors such as John Keegan have eloquently argued.18 Yet Master Sun would surely agree. Everything about the *Sunzi bingfa* emphasizes that battles are costly and dangerous, and that winning through spies and stratagems is safer and surer, even if a commander must resort to a fight in the final test. Spies may not guarantee victory – but they increase its probability. Not using spies, on the other hand, puts one at a disadvantage that, while not necessarily fatal, is costly to overcome. To neglect foreknowledge, however acquired, is a false economy and actually inhumane to one’s own subjects who must bear
the costs of prolonged warfare and perhaps even defeat: ‘He who lacks foresight and underestimates his enemy will surely be captured by him’ (9:46; see also 13:1–2).

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON SPIES AND STATEHOOD

What can we learn from the Sunzi bingfa? Its message can be inferred by the simple trick of juxtaposing the first and last sentences of the work. Master Sun begins by saying: ‘War is a matter of vital importance to the state; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin’. Thirteen chapters later his last sentence reads: ‘Secret operations are essential in war; upon them the army relies to make its every move’. There you have it: spies are indispensable to success in perhaps the most momentous and consequential activity that a state undertakes.

Whether or not any ruler or commander in ancient China actually ran a Divine Skein or ‘spirit web’ agency, the Sunzi bingfa urged the rationalization of secret activities and their employment for a variety of purposes that we moderns call intelligence disciplines, namely foreign intelligence, counter-intelligence, and covert action. He even offered a glimpse of what the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency likes to call ‘analytic tradecraft’. Master Sun shows how activities in these fields interact and bolster one another when working in harmony. They can only do so, however, when the ruler or commander consciously and prudently manages them as a secret entity or network.

The antiquity of the Sunzi bingfa reminds us that espionage began at the dawn of history, and its text suggests a reason why it did. As soon as nomadic chieftains settled down and became local warlords with courts and armies, they wanted spies. Espionage is mentioned in accounts dating back thousands of years, and thus pre-dates the modern nation-state. It may well be practiced as long as rival sovereignties fight one another, and as long as treason carries the harshest penalties. That last point is key. People who control territory – or who will kill to gain political power or to deter traitors in their midst – are in a competitive environment different from that of an entrepreneur or a football coach. The penalties for failure are the harshest possible; a losing general or conquered prince pays the ultimate price. In ancient times the cost of defeat was typically death and devastation for one’s entire family and community. The costs have only escalated in our nuclear age.¹⁹

Espionage would grow in the twentieth century to become ‘intelligence’, with entire systems and agencies dedicated to its various disciplines, but the mission to protect sovereignty remains, and the stakes for sovereigns remain as well. Intelligence, for nation-states or sovereign entities, is not just the summary of reconnaissance reports. It is qualitatively different than
intelligence for business enterprises, local governments, or private individuals. One might go farther still and say that secrecy is of the essence not just of espionage but of intelligence itself, at least as practiced and pursued by sovereign powers. What is different about states is that for them the stakes are life and death. That is why the rules of espionage became the rules for intelligence writ large, which is sovereign and secret just as espionage was in the time of Master Sun. The Sunzi bingfa was written at a time when states as we know them did not yet exist. And yet the treatise describes intelligence as we know it. Its author subtly depicts it as a source of information, as a spring of activity, and as a locus of secrecy. Intelligence is all three.

NOTES

Michael Warner serves in the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. The views expressed in this article are his own and do not represent views of that Office or any other branch of the US Government.

3 Johnston, Cultural Realism (note 2) p.94.
4 See Numbers 14 and Joshua 2.
8 The Chinese term for secret agents that the Sunzi bingfa uses is one that meant spies, spying, or espionage, and it was the same word that meant a space between, a division or cleavage, or to divide. It is inherently something insinuated and maybe insinuating, hints Griffith, Sun Tzu (note 1) p.144 n. 1.
9 My quotations from the text of The Art of War are taken from the Griffith translation (ibid.), mainly for its familiarity and accessibility for students of military and intelligence affairs. Roger Ames’ translation (note 2) should be consulted as well on all points.
11 Ames (note 2).

14 Andrew Meyer and Andrew Wilson, “‘Inventing the General’: A Re-appraisal of the *Sunzi bingfa*’ (forthcoming). I am indebted to Andrew Wilson of the Naval War College for his thoughts on the *Sunzi bingfa* and help with various passages of the text.

15 Johnston notes that this passage is the *Sunzi bingfa*’s only concession to the Confucian ideal of the righteous or enlightened ruler; it would seem a backhanded one at best. See Cultural *Realism* (note 2) p.142.

16 Remember the *Sunzi bingfa*’s adage: ‘When he is united, divide him’ (1:25). This applies to his deliberations as much as to his formations. Roger Ames translates this passage thus: ‘If he is internally harmonious, sow divisiveness in his ranks’.

17 For more on I Chih and Lu Yu, see Ames’ footnote 227 in *Sun-Tzu* (note 2) pp.296–7.

18 See, for instance, the Conclusion to John Keegan’s *Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2003) p.334.

19 I would add that proto-national organizations, such as terrorist cells or even crime syndicates, that seek to control some patch of territory and are willing to kill those who divulge their plans, are practicing intelligence. Certainly states use intelligence against them.