



# Some Chinese Thoughts on War

By BGen Samuel B. Griffith, USMC. (Ret.)

☛ ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING PROBLEMS NOW CONFRONTING western Intelligence organizations is to acquire fundamental information on which to base reasonably realistic estimates of Red Chinese military capabilities. This formidable task is not likely to grow any easier in the foreseeable future. Probably it will become even more difficult and frustrating. Hence it is of paramount importance that we exploit every possible open source which may contribute to a better knowledge of military developments and a more correct understanding of military thought on the Chinese mainland.

Some of the more obvious of such sources are press articles, radio broadcasts (particularly those designed for internal propaganda purposes) and speeches and reports delivered by political and military personalities on both national and provincial levels. No matter how rigorously such sources are censored or controlled, a considerable amount of valuable information relating to technical progress in arms, deployment of forces, organization and command can be culled from them. Published works of leading Communists must also be consulted. Systematic collection and comparative analysis of these materials is—and will remain—an essential part of the often tedious routine from which the elements of any valid appreciation of the military situation in Red China can be produced.

Another important area, and one that has in the past been almost completely neglected, is doctrine. Only



**Red China Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-Tung (left) with Gen Chu Teh, Defense Vice-Chairman. Mao is a keen student of military strategy and our author has long been a keen student of Mao**

fairly recently has this situation been partially rectified. In respect to Russia at least, valuable contributions have been made by Garthoff and Dinerstein, among others. But very little work has yet been done in this field with respect to China. As doctrine is a matter to which the Chinese leadership devotes considerable attention, it should prove rewarding to examine the subject at least briefly.

The sources of current doctrine are directly traceable to remote antiquity, to the age of the almost legendary Sun Tzu and the famous early fourth century general, Wu Ch'i (executed in Ch'u State in 381 B.C.). Sun Tzu and Wu Ch'i, particularly the former, were pioneers in the field of military thought, but they were by no means the only Chinese writers on the military arts. As early as the eleventh century of our era seven such works were designated "Martial Classics." In this canon, Sun Tzu's *Art of War* was given pre-eminent position.

Whether this Sun Tzu was indeed a celebrated general of the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. or whether the *Art of War* ascribed to him was written by a general known as Sun Pin, who lived several centuries later, is a problem that will never be settled to the satisfaction of scholars. Indeed the question of authorship

of this cryptic masterpiece is of little importance. The perennial attraction of Sun Tzu lies not in who he was, but in what he had to say on the subject of war.

In the course of a long and frequently sanguinary history scores of Chinese statesmen and generals have devoted a staggering amount of time and energy to thinking, talking and writing about war. Sun Tzu's work was but the first of many that have been studied for centuries in China. It is true that there have been times when the viability of China's military tradition was in a precarious state. Their leading philosophers universally condemned war. Confucius, although not an active pacifist, considered war an avoidable evil; Mencius opposed the use of force, and Motzu castigated princes who waged aggressive war.

Neither Buddhists nor Taoists had any time for militarists and united in excoriating them and their activities. In the hierarchy of Chinese Confucian society the professional soldier always stood on the bottom rung of the ladder—below scholars, farmers, artisans, and tradesmen. Good iron was not used for making nails and good men did not become soldiers. Nevertheless, war has always interested the Chinese. Even in the third century B.C. a celebrated statesman testified to this



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when he observed that the works of Sun Tzu and Wu Ch'i were "found in every household." And even during long periods of peace there were always some intellectuals who maintained an active interest in their military heritage.

But it remained for the Communists to resuscitate the ancient martial tradition. Chairman Mao, a poet and scholar of no mean attainments, has for many years been profoundly interested in military theory. Since his youth he has been a keen student of Sun Tzu and Wu Ch'i, whom he constantly quotes. The speeches of his generals are liberally sprinkled with pungent bits from the ancient texts which again, as in the Imperial era, are required reading for officers of the armed forces.

Renewed interest in their martial inheritance is by no means confined to leading Chinese political and military figures. In the last several years government publishing houses have brought out five new editions of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. One of these, a "translation" from the classical idiom into the colloquial, is designed to appeal to a wide audience on the soldier-student level. It sells for the equivalent of a few cents. At the same time, historians and scholars are busy analyzing the early texts in a major attempt to restore them to their pristine state. Cartoonists have been pressed into service to design colored booklets which depict the exploits of famous generals of antiquity. The accompanying comment is written in the most elementary language. These strips, avidly read by children as well as by adults who have recently mastered a few hundred basic characters, flood bookstalls over the country. The intent is, of course, to foster a renaissance of national pride and national spirit, two qualities that for the past century have been moribund in the Chinese people.

This lack of national spirit was reflected in the chaos that characterized the modern scene in China until the Communist assumption of power. And it produced in Western countries a completely mistaken opinion of the martial qualities and abilities of the Chinese. Even the defeats suffered by the US Army in Korea did not suffice to dispel the illusion that the Chinese lack the essential characteristics of the good soldier. This opinion, like all those based on emotion or ignorance, is extremely dangerous. In the perspective of history, the Chinese

military record is excellent. In terms of imaginative generalship in the conduct of arduous and distant campaigns there are Chinese commanders who need not yield to Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Belisarius, or Napoleon.

But substantial military success is not to be ascribed to personalities, however brilliant. To a greater degree this depends on theory and doctrine. And as early as the second century B.C. the Chinese had developed a sophisticated theory of war and effective strategic and tactical doctrines. Moreover, in organizational, administrative and technological terms, the Chinese took good care to be generally superior to the enemies they faced. They were occasionally beaten, but they won their wars. It is no exaggeration to say that in 100 A.D. Chinese shock infantry equipped with magazine-fed crossbows and cavalry armed with composite reflex bows would have had little difficulty coping with the ponderous legions of Imperial Rome.

The Chinese were overcome by the West in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not because their theory of war was inferior—it was in fact superior—but because of the preposterous corruption and unbelievable inefficiency which characterized the Imperial administration. The court, torn by factional intrigue, was never able to cope (except hesitantly and ineptly) with the foreign forces intent on despoiling the country. As well, there was a tremendous technological disparity, comparable almost to that which existed between Conquistadores and Aztecs, between the "foreign devils" and the Chinese. It is doubtful that even an effective government could have stood its ground, particularly against the insatiable rapacity of the Russians and the Japanese.

#### **No Reason for Complacency**

Today there is in China a vastly improved administration, little corruption, and only occasional evidence of minor schisms. To be sure, major technological disparity exists between China and the West in the fields of electronics, nuclear weapons, and missile delivery systems. But there is no reason for complacency here. This gap will be closed. In intellectual terms, it may be we who have to close a gap. Such a neolithic approach to war as the doctrine of massive destruction finds no great favor in Chinese eyes. The Chinese have always believed that war can be conducted within a rational framework consistent with the immediate object of military action—"to defeat the enemy and preserve one's self."

It will be apparent that Chinese concepts have a closer relationship to those of Machiavelli than to those of Clausewitz. It will be obvious, too, that in some respects this pattern is a more subtle one than that with which we are familiar. Subtlety is considered by the Chinese as a virtue, not a vice.

Admittedly, it is asking for trouble to attempt to produce a list of principles which should serve as guides to military action. No such list could be universally satisfactory. It is therefore with some trepidation that I present the summary which follows. The principal purpose in doing so is to generate discussion. The "principles" listed are all to be found in Sun Tzu's *Art of*

War or may be directly inferred from it, and are as relevant today as they were 24 centuries ago.

### Morale

All Chinese military writers devote a great deal of attention to morale: "That which causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders so that they will accompany them through life and unto death without fear of mortal peril." The morale of the people is high when government is humane, benevolent, just, and righteous. The morale of the army is high when the general is wise, sincere, humane, courageous, and strict; when his orders are sensible and consistent; when his rewards and punishments are honest and equitable. The good general treats his soldiers as "his children," as "his own beloved sons"; they share every peril and every hardship and march together "into the deepest valleys."

Morale is the foundation of national life and the fundamental requisite to victory. Only when both the state and the army are in harmonious accord will "superiors and subordinates go forward with united purpose." The Communists won the empire essentially because they sustained their morale at a consistently high level. It was a positive, driving force. Chiang K'ai-shek lost the empire because Nationalist morale disintegrated.

### Deception

"All warfare is based on deception." This is a substantive concept. Deception is always legitimate in the promotion of national self-interest or national defense. Deception is active. The enemy must be deceived, deluded, and mystified. He must be led to believe what one wants him to believe so that his action will contribute to the attainment of one's own aims. "Create an uproar in the east, decoy him to the west, distract him to the front, strike him in the rear." The application of this cardinal principle is by no means confined to action on a tactical level.

### Surprise

"Go forth when the enemy does not expect you; catch him unaware." To achieve surprise it is usually necessary to proceed by a devious route—"to make the indirect the most direct." Deception and distraction contribute decisively to the attainment of surprise and multiply its effects.

Surprise is most frequently achieved on the tactical level, but should be sought on all levels of action in terms of time, place, doctrine, and technology. It is interesting that the Chinese have frequently achieved surprise in combat by sudden shifts in commanders; for example, the secret replacement of a cautious com-

mander by a daring one. They are also adept at "turning misfortune to advantage," as they proved during the Korean war when they used difficult terrain and extreme weather as allies.

### Mobility

No matter how successfully the enemy may be deluded and deceived as to one's true intentions, all potential advantages of surprise will be lost if forces are not mobile. Mobility translates readiness into action. The ability "to move like the flash of lightning" that leaves the enemy "no time to shield his eyes" is the only valid criterion of mobility. A strategic force is of no value unless it can be moved to the scene of action with speed, secrecy, and efficiency.

Rapid maneuver on political, strategic, operational, and tactical levels is essential to make the enemy react. It is only by observing the enemy's reactions that his pattern can be established. This concept is sometimes expressed as follows: "If no maneuver, then no reaction. If no reaction, then no pattern-establishing."

### Timing

"The hawk breaks the back of its prey because of its timing." Timing is complementary to surprise. To time action in relation to ever-changing circumstances requires the ability to recognize the fleeting opportunity and the will to grasp it. Timing is particularly important in terms of political action.

"Opportunism" has an unsavory connotation in the West; it is used generally as a term of disparagement. To describe a man as an opportunist is not considered to be in good taste, even if he is one. Historically the term has in Chinese eyes a complimentary connotation rather than the reverse.

### Disruption

It is essential to unbalance the enemy, to dislocate him, to throw his plans into disarray, to confuse his leadership. This is frequently accomplished by an entirely unexpected maneuver which the enemy is too inflexible mentally or too ponderous physically to counter with effective rapidity. The enemy is to be worn out, plagued, bothered, harassed, irritated, and given no rest. Disruption initiates a chain reaction with cumulative effects on the enemy's state of mind and thus on his morale and on his ability to plan.

The creation of cleavage between allies, between segments of a people, between the ruler and his counselors, or a general and his advisers, is a method of disruption described as "wedging" or "wedge-driving." The West is particularly susceptible to "wedge-driving."

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Clausewitz . . . "The hawk breaks the back of its prey because of timing" . . . "All warfare is based on deception . . ."

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We may be sure that the Chinese, who are masters of the art, will miss no opportunity to widen rifts, both international and domestic.

Fifth Columns are standard equipment in the Chinese armory. An extensive literature is devoted to discussion of successful Fifth Columns and to the types of people who may most effectively be employed to provoke internal cleavages and to encourage "those within to incline to those without."

### Flexibility

As used by the Chinese this term refers to a quality of mind and will; that is to say, to adaptability and the expedient use of available resources under changing circumstances. The less mature Western concept of flexibility relates primarily to the ability to shift forces.

### Concentration

Sun Tzu said: "In war, numbers alone confer no advantage." The enemy must be divided; "many must strike few." He who cannot divide his enemy is no master of the art of distraction. We distract; he disperses his force to meet our threats; we direct our concentrated power against selected weak points. Power embraces superior planning, superior generalship, superior troops, better use of weather and of the ground. "Concentration" thus embraces intellectual, physical, and psychical elements. It is thus decidedly more comprehensive than the same word as used in the West, where it is ordinarily equated with "mass."

### Momentum

"The momentum of a victorious army is like that of a cataract plunging into a bottomless abyss." Momentum must be sustained, or the effects of disruption will be dissipated.

### Freedom of Action

Classical writers make it clear that the sovereign and the commander must gain and retain freedom of action (the initiative). Contemporary leadership regards this as the *sine qua non* of all political-military action. If initiative is momentarily lost it must be regained. Here it is important to note, however, that all withdrawals from advanced or exposed positions, be they political or military, are not necessarily abdications of initiative. They are frequently made to re-group forces or to lure an unwary enemy to move.

These factors are comparable to what we describe as the "principles" of war, but there is a fundamental difference both in conception and application. Chairman Mao (paraphrasing Clausewitz) has said that war is the continuation of political action, political action is the continuation of war. We do not define political action in these terms. But the Communist Chinese do.

Consequently it is safe to assert that the factors listed will be operative both in time of peace and during war.

The framework suggested above rests on four pillars: (1) Intelligence; (2) Estimates; (3) Planning; (4) Prudence.

We all know why Stalin smiled and talked of lighter things at Potsdam when Mr. Truman told him of the atomic bomb. The irony of the situation was that the Dictator probably knew almost as much about the bomb as the President did.

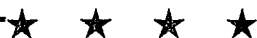
Estimates are based on intelligence. Whether an objective estimate on the national level is possible within the rigid limits prescribed by Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism-Maoism is doubtful—but dialectic is never permitted to influence estimates of enemy operational capabilities.

The primary meanings of the Chinese character usually translated as "plan" are, in fact, "plot," "scheme," "device," "ruse," or "stratagem." Every great Chinese commander has had a "stratagem officer" whose duty was to devise schemes that would lead an unwary enemy to destruction. "Planning" thus usually involves features which are not customarily considered in the West.

Prudence is an attribute often confused with hesitancy, especially by generals, admirals, and politicians in the United States. A prudent man is not a hesitant one. The hesitant man will never get around to going into the tiger's den "to get the tiger's pups"; the impulsive man will rush into it recklessly and be devoured in the process. The prudent man will get the pups and keep his skin. The prudent man weighs the situation, then moves. He acts within the limits of the feasible. He knows his enemy, he knows himself, and "in one hundred battles is never in peril."

It is perhaps a coincidence that the pattern outlined is consistent with conventional Soviet Communist theories of action. On the other hand, perhaps it is not coincidence at all. The interesting and as yet unsolved problem is to determine to what extent the fundamental concepts of Soviet action derive from this age-old Chinese pattern, and to identify the channels (as devious as they have hitherto been unsuspected) by which it was transmitted. The evident similarity between Soviet and Chinese military theory can scarcely be attributed entirely to the blind operations of chance.

Conflict between an expanding Soviet Russia and an expanding Communist China is probable. But we can derive no present solace from this, for it will take place in a later historical era. Conditions are not yet ripe. When they are, those who are still around may derive a qualified satisfaction from observing the preliminary maneuvers of these two experts in the arts of deception, duplicity, and opportunism as they struggle for the hegemony of Asia. US & MC



### It's All in Your Point of View



☛ A TRUCK DRIVER FROM BN CP, caught by an alert platoon leader with an unexploded Chinese 76mm shell in the front seat of his cab, explained his souvenir this way: "I played it safe, sir. The nose of that thing was pointed away from me all the time."

Capt W. W. Grant