

Lessons in Individual Combat from *The Art of War*

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1. Summary

The Art of War, an ancient Chinese manual discussing the strategies of combat and engagement, is primarily written as a war manual for generals and commanders. While some of the lessons contained within its pages certainly apply to war scenarios exclusively ("Armies must know there are adaptations of the five kinds of fire attack, and adhere to them scientifically." Chapter 12, p.165), the advice given within is often broad enough to be equally valuable to apply in single combat situations. Why not, then, an exploration of the passages that can be directly applied by individual fighters to attain victory? Victory in combat is a matter of assessment, correct use of force, defense of weaknesses, strategy, and deception. Only when all of these factors are employed simultaneously can victory be assured. Sun Tzu, the master attributed to this work, expounds on all of these aspects of combat in ways that are as beneficial today as they were c. 500 B.C.

2. Introduction

The Art of War is a treatise on strategies and tactics for waging war from approximately 2500 years ago (500 B.C.). It is attributed to a Chinese war strategist named Sun Tzu, also known as "Master Sun." Although written as a strategy manual for army-based, large-scale warfare, the 13-chapter manuscript contains information and strategies directly applicable to one-on-one engagements, providing an individual combatant a veritable wealth of information to aid in assessing conditions and abilities, creating and avoiding deception, planning, utilizing strengths, and demoralizing through manipulation of attitude and emotions. Although some of the advice given would not be considered honourable in the context of SCA combat, it is nonetheless valuable for study in the context of tactics, and can be made more applicable if adapted slightly to fit SCA sensibilities.

There is some controversy whether the manual was written by a man named Sun Tzu, Sun Wu, or Sunzi directly, or whether it was written from the perspective of a fictitious Sunzi, based on a real authority on military strategies named Sun Bin. Regardless, the text has been edited and commentated on to an unknown extent over the centuries, by eleven or more other war generals and strategists with various experiences and philosophical and political leanings. Add to this the multitude of meanings each pictorial Chinese word can have, and commentaries and translations create almost a telephone game of adjustment, where each translator and commentator tries to interpret accurately by adding their own understandings of the meaning. As a result, our current beliefs about its meaning may be quite different than originally intended, but we have no evidence beyond the texts currently in our possession to indicate meanings intended by the original author.

The translation I used to aid me in the creation of this paper was done by Thomas Cleary, published by Shambhala Publications of Boston, Massachusetts, USA, in 1988. The page numbers listed beside quotes used throughout this paper are based on this edition. In his attempts to create more complete translations of ancient works, Mr. Cleary appears to have

become one of the leading translators of this work and other Taoist and Buddhist works in our language and time.

The thirteen chapters of the original treatise are as follows:

- 1) Strategic Assessments
- 2) Doing Battle
- 3) Planning a Siege
- 4) Formation
- 5) Force
- 6) Emptiness and Fullness
- 7) Armed Struggle
- 8) Adaptations
- 9) Maneuvering Armies
- 10) Terrain
- 11) Nine Grounds
- 12) Fire Attack
- 13) On the Use of Spies

Some of the chapters, such as maneuvering armies and fire attack, will have little to no value in one-on-one combat. In order to more concisely summarize the advice given in the manual as it pertains to only single combat, I have compiled and divided this advice into ten categories of my own (independent of the chapter classification above):

- Assessing the Land and Physical Conditions
- Assessing the Opponent
- Assessing When to Attack
- Planning and Preparation
- Strategy
- Using Your Strengths
- Speed
- Attitude and Emotion
- Discerning and Overcoming Deception
- Deception, Misdirection, and Controlling Movement

In creating this analysis of the text, I have also chosen to quote only the words directly attributed to Sun Tzu, rather than comparing the similarities and differences between the texts of the various translators and commentators. This is both for simplicity and ease of understanding. Many of the statements in the text attributed to Sun Tzu already repeat themselves with minor variations of wording throughout the treatise; the idea of analyzing multiple commentator's statements, all similar but sometimes utilizing different metaphors and wording, seems an exercise in semantics rather than utility. I have also, on occasion, chosen to point out alternate useful meanings to Master Sun's original comments, even when his original meaning was clear.

How are battle strategies important to individual combat? Before proceeding to the individual groups of advice from the text, there is one important passage we should review:

"Military action is important to the nation - it is the ground of death and life, the path of survival and destruction, so it is imperative to examine it. Therefore measure in terms of five things, use

these assessments to make comparisons, and thus find out what the conditions are. The five things are the way, the weather, the terrain, the leadership, and discipline." (Chapter 1, p.41-42)

If we don't examine what we and our opponents are doing on the field of battle, or the list, we are not giving ourselves the best chance of survival. Leadership and "the way," or convincing people to have the same views as their leadership, are not necessarily applicable to the individual fencer, but the other "things" listed are. The sun's position and wind can affect the fight, as can the terrain. The method with which your opponent fights and the discipline (or lack of) with which they hold to those techniques which they apply is also important to note, because it is easier to counter that which has already been seen or predicted and understood. It is important to assess these things, if at all possible, before the fight begins, so that one can be as prepared as possible to counter them or arrange them to one's own advantage.

Throughout the text, Master Sun has a strong focus on only entering into situations in which you know you can win. While this may be applicable to fencing in melee situations, it is not applicable to individual fencing when real lives are not on the line. As such, the focus of our analysis must shift from avoiding unwinnable situations to adjusting these situations to provide a greater chance of victory.

Medieval fencing and swordplay manuscripts focus on the same principles as *The Art of War*, often with movements attached to these concepts for specific application within the context of a certain style of fighting. These ideas are the basis of our understanding of combat at all levels.

3. Assessing the Land and Physical Conditions

Before one can prepare to face an opponent, it is important to take into account the conditions of the terrain to allow for provisions to be made for favourable or unfavourable factors. Master Sun has a lot to say about positioning, light, terrain, and targets:

"The contour of the land is an aid to an army; sizing up opponents to determine victory, assessing dangers and distances, is the proper course of action for military leaders. Those who do battle knowing these will win, those who do battle without knowing these will lose." (Chapter 10, p.145)

If you don't know critical factors about the lay of the land and your opponent, you will lose. All of your assessment, preparation, and movements must be taken with these factors in mind.

"The terrain is to be assessed in terms of distance, difficulty or ease of travel, dimension, and safety." (Chapter 1, p.44)

Knowing the distance from oneself to one's opponent and to the sword of one's opponent is a key tenet in fencing study. The lay of the land in terms of elevation and footing will affect what techniques can be safely employed. Look out for holes, changes of elevation, change of ground cover, and anything else that stands out.

"Act after having made assessments. The one who first knows the measures of far and near wins - this is the rule of armed struggle." (Chapter 7, p.119)

If you do not keep track of the distances in the fight - between yourself and your opponent, between their extended sword and yours, and between yourself and their lunge, and your opponent does know these things, you will lose. Know these conditions early and consider changing conditions frequently.

"Watch the light, stay on the heights. When fighting on a hill, do not climb. This applies to an army in the mountains. Where there are hills or embankments keep on their sunny side, with them to your right rear." (Chapter 9, p.130,132)

"So the rule for military operations is not to face a high hill and not to oppose those with their backs to a hill." (Chapter 7, p.122)

Place yourself with your back to any hills before the battle. Use the high ground to your advantage, but do not climb higher during the fight, lest you tire or trip. Make sure the light is positioned in a way that hinders your opponent's sight and not your own. Be aware of the lay of the land, including any holes or barriers, and turn it to your advantage.

"Wherever the terrain has impassable ravines, natural enclosures, natural prisons, natural traps, natural pitfalls, and natural clefts, you should leave quickly and not get near them. For myself, I keep away from these, so that opponents are nearer to them; I keep my face to these so that opponents have their backs to them." (Chapter 9, p.133)

Avoid trapping yourself due to the nature of the land or list ropes. Face barriers or corners so that your opponent will have their back to them. The uncertainty of not knowing how far you can safely retreat can also distract your opponent.

"The lowest [form of attack] is to attack a city. Siege of a city is only done as a last resort." (Chapter 3, p.70)

It is least beneficial or strategic to attack a well-guarded and fortified target. Aim for the areas of least resistance. For example, if your opponent has a large shield or is on their knees, do not attack their legs or areas protected by the shield. Instead, focus on the areas simplest to hit: Arms and the top of the head. Attacking the legs of an opponent holding a large shield will cause the target to become smaller and even more entrenched in their position, and thus is not advisable.

The physical conditions of the land, including features, ground cover, and spaces, play a key part in safety, and choice of strategy, and should be one of the first things reviewed when entering a fight. For the best chance of success, stick to the high ground, be aware of distances between you and your opponent, and don't allow yourself to become trapped.

4. Assessing the Opponent

While assessment of the land cannot occur until you have physically viewed the conditions, assessment of your opponent can begin long beforehand. Getting to understand your opponent's frame of mind and how they have reacted in the past can be very telling about how they may react in the future. *The Art of War* has this to say:

"So it is said that if you know others and know yourself, you will not be imperilled in a hundred battles; if you do not know others but know yourself, you win one and lose one; if you know others and do not know yourself, you will be imperilled in every single battle." (Chapter 3, p.82)

To know your own strengths and weaknesses and how to act is important, but if you want to be successful you must also know your opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Once you know both your own strengths and weaknesses and those of your opponent, you can begin to strategize, capitalizing on how your own strengths can be used directly against your opponent's weaknesses, and protecting your own weak areas from your opponent's strengths.

"So it is said that victory can be made. Even if opponents are numerous, they can be made not to fight. So assess them to find out their plans, both the successful ones and the failures. Incite them to action to find out the patterns of their movement and rest. Induce them to adopt specific formations, in order to know the ground of death and life. Test them to find out where they are sufficient and where they are lacking." (Chapter 6, p. 109-111)

This passage shares quite a lot of information. First, to assess your opponents directly, cause them to act or react through posturing, action, or bluff. See how they respond, and if their responses are consistent from movement to movement. Adopt different stances and movements yourself to see what weaknesses are exposed in your opponent. Watch their fights with others, and see how they move, attack, and defend, and what areas of their bodies they expose at which times.

The second message of this passage is more directly tied to strategy and manipulation, but also to assessment. Watch to see which conditions cause your opponent to hesitate, and which cause them to act. If you can cause them to remain stationary for a period of time, you can use this time to attack without reaction. If you can cause your opponent to stop attacking by putting them on the defense, so can you make your victory by controlling the movements in the fight. Provoke your opponent to react in order to better understand their movements, and to find where they create openings in their defense.

"In ancient times skillful warriors first made themselves invincible and then watched for vulnerability in their opponents. Invincibility is in oneself, vulnerability is in the opponent. Therefore skilled warriors are able to be invincible, but they cannot cause opponents to be vulnerable. This is why it is said that victory can be discerned but not manufactured." (Chapter 4, p.84-85)

Assessment of your opponent cannot be carried out during a fight without first creating a strong defensive position for yourself. From this defense, you can observe your opponent in relative more safely, only then choosing the right time to attack. Observing from a point of vulnerability is folly. Only your opponent can make themselves vulnerable by their own movements and reactions, so watch and wait. Attack when you can see that victory is possible.

"So when the front is prepared, the rear is lacking, and when the rear is prepared, the front is lacking. Preparedness on the left means lack on the right, preparedness on the right means lack on the left. Preparedness everywhere means lack everywhere." (Chapter 6, p.108)

For everywhere your opponent is strongly defending, they will have an equal vulnerability somewhere else. If they appear to defend everywhere strongly, then their weakness can be found anywhere, because divided focus means less focus in each location.

"In general, the pattern of invasion is that invaders become more intense the farther they enter alien territory, to the point where the native rulership cannot overcome them." (Chapter 11, p. 153)

As an opponent enters your space, they will become more intense, to the point where you cannot oppose or attack for all the defense you must mount. Don't allow them to get that close on their terms. Strategic retreat is preferable to constant defense.

"If they brace themselves as they stand, they are starving. When they see an advantage but do not advance on it, they are weary. If their emissaries are irritable, it means they are tired. When they give out numerous rewards, it means they are at an impasse." (Chapter 9, p.136-139)

Know when your opponent is weak or tired. You can know this by how they stand and hold their weapons, how they react to openings, their attitude, their frequency of attack, and the defenses they leave down. When they do this, watch how their responses change.

Understanding your opponent and their style and actions is absolutely key to effectively defending yourself and planning attack. Watch, provoke action and reaction, and observe how your opponent moves. Strike when you are protected and your opponent is vulnerable.

5. Assessing When to Attack

Once you understand the land and your opponent, you must also be able to decide when is the right time to launch an attack. Attack at the wrong time, and at best you will meet resistance. At worst, your opponent will have time to exploit your own vulnerabilities and counter your movement. *The Art of War* says:

"When opponents present openings, you should penetrate them immediately. Get to what they want first, subtly anticipate them. Maintain discipline and adapt to the enemy in order to determine the outcome of the war. Thus, at first you are like a maiden, so the enemy opens his door; then you are like a rabbit on the loose, so the enemy cannot keep you out." (Chapter 11, p.163)

This passage involves both action and deception: Create an unthreatening environment so that your opponent will relax and let down their defenses. The moment this occurs, you should immediately take advantage of the opening and strike. In this way, you will force your opponent's hand and end the fight quickly.

"When they are fulfilled, be prepared against them; when they are strong, avoid them." (Chapter 1, p.51)

Do not bother to launch attacks against a target that is well defended. Instead, use the time to defend and prepare yourself, and wait for an opening.

"Attack when they are unprepared, make your move when they do not expect it." (Chapter 1, p. 54)

Attack during a transition moment or another time when your opponent is not fully prepared to counter you. This will be the time when your opponent is least likely to defend or counterattack.

"Therefore the superior militarist strikes while schemes are being laid." (Chapter 3, p.68)

It is smart to attack while your opponent is still making plans, and thus catch them off guard. If they have not planned an attack, they will be reacting rather than acting with purpose.

"Therefore one who is good at martial arts overcomes others' forces without battle, conquers others' cities without siege, destroys others' nations without taking a long time." (Chapter 3, p. 72)

"Therefore those who win every battle are not really skillful - those who render others' armies helpless without fighting are the best of all." (Chapter 3, p.67)

I approach these passages together because they support one another. If you are a good fighter, you will end the fight swiftly by attacking vulnerable targets and areas of least resistance swiftly rather than engaging in a prolonged engagement. It is not feasible to expect your opponent to back down during a fight in the SCA, but ending the confrontation quickly by striking easy targets will preserve your energy and give you a greater chance of victory. This is the path of the skilled combatant.

"When you do battle, even if you are winning, if you continue for a long time it will dull your forces and blunt your edge; if you besiege a citadel, your strength will be exhausted. If you keep your armies out in the field for a long time, your supplies will be insufficient." (Chapter 2, p. 57)

"So the important thing in a military operation is victory, not persistence." (Chapter 2, p.64)

Again, whether winning or not, you will lose if you extend the fight too long and become exhausted. Do not exhaust your energy on plays you cannot win; conserve energy for openings, and aim to end the fight quickly. Consider strategic retreats. Master Sun goes on to say that when you are exhausted you cannot make things turn out well for you and people will take advantage of your debility. Persistently attacking is not going to win the engagement.

6. Planning and Preparation

Although being able to assess when to attack is important, if the wrong attack is made, the attack will be unsuccessful and you may experience loss. Deciding how to attack requires planning.

"In ancient times those known as good warriors prevailed when it was easy to prevail. Therefore the victories of good warriors are not noted for cleverness or bravery. Therefore their victories in battle are not flukes. Their victories are not flukes because they position themselves where they will surely win, prevailing over those who have already lost. So it is that good

warriors take their stand on ground where they cannot lose, and do not overlook conditions that make an opponent prone to defeat." (Chapter 4, p.89-90)

You don't win because you are smart or make a brave and risky choice, except as a fluke. You win consistently because you made good preparations and plans that controlled the conditions in your favour, and then took advantage of the opportunities already there. You gave your opponent no choice but to act in the way you expected and for which you planned.

"Those who are first on the battlefield and await the opponents are at ease; those who are last on the battlefield and head into battle get worn out. Therefore good warriors cause others to come to them, and do not go to others." (Chapter 6, p.100)

Enter into a fight mentally and physically prepared. Don't rush, but take the time to compose yourself and ensure you are rested. Don't always be the one moving in on your opponent, as you will tire yourself out.

"So the rule of military operations is not to count on opponents not coming, but to rely on having ways of dealing with them; not to count on opponents not attacking, but to rely on having what cannot be attacked." (Chapter 8, p. 128)

Defend with the expectation of being attacked. Stay active and alert. Consider the ways in which your opponent may move, and plan attacks and counters for those movements. Ensure your own defense is impenetrable.

"[The general skilled in military operations] changes his actions and revises his plans, so that people will not recognize them. He changes his abode and goes by a circuitous route, so that people cannot anticipate him." (Chapter 11, p.157)

Do not stick with one set of movements or tactics. Change frequently and by less predictable means so that your opponent cannot immediately anticipate your next move to gain and retain the advantage.

Enter into each engagement composed, defend yourself well, anticipate openings, and change behaviour often to keep your opponent from predicting your movements - these are the keys to success.

7. Strategy

With planning comes strategy. To overcome your adversary, you must find ways to catch your opponent off-guard and choose your movements carefully.

"There are only five notes in the musical scale, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be heard. There are only five basic colours, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be seen. There are only five basic flavours, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be tasted. There are only two kinds of charge in battle, the unorthodox surprise attack and the orthodox direct attack, but variations of the unorthodox and the orthodox are endless. The unorthodox and the orthodox give rise to each other, like a beginningless circle - who could exhaust them?" (Chapter 5, p.95)

You can either be direct and following established movements or sneaky and making unpredictable movements, but there are so many combinations of these available to you to use. You shouldn't limit yourself only to prescribed movement. If you make use of all tactics available to you, and combine them at will, you will never run out of new movements to make.

"The formation and procedure used by the military should not be divulged beforehand." (Chapter 1, p.55)

Don't give away your secrets or your plans to your opponent, either through word or action. Keep track of the small movements you tend to make before an action and work on eliminating them. Don't specifically look toward or away from your target.

"Be extremely subtle, even to the point of formlessness. Be extremely mysterious, even to the point of soundlessness. Thereby you can be the director of the opponent's fate. To advance irresistibly, push through their gaps. To retreat elusively, outspeed them. Therefore the consummation of forming an army is to arrive at formlessness. When you have no form, undercover espionage cannot find out anything, intelligence cannot form a strategy. So a military force has no constant formation, water has no constant shape: the ability to gain victory by changing and adapting according to the opponent is called genius." (Chapter 6, p.104)

"Therefore the consummation of forming an army is to arrive at formlessness. When you have no form, undercover espionage cannot find out anything, intelligence cannot form a strategy." (Chapter 6, p.111)

Following a fixed pattern of movements will make you predictable. Do not advertise or telegraph your movements. Instead remain elusive and subtle in your movements, to prevent your opponent from being able to form plans of attack. Push forward through gaps in defense. If you need to retreat, move quickly. The best fighters will change and adapt according to their opponent.

"In battle, confrontation is done directly, victory is gained by surprise. Therefore those skilled at the unorthodox are infinite as heaven and earth, inexhaustible as the great rivers. When they come to an end, they begin again, like the days and months; they die and are reborn, like the four seasons." (Chapter 5, p.94-95)

You will win by the small movements that catch your opponent unawares, not by the large ones that catch his attention. The large movements should be a disguise or distraction from your true intentions. Following set patterns of movement will allow your opponent to predict and prepare. Those who continue to surprise their adversaries by being unpredictable will fight and win.

"To advance irresistibly, push through their gaps. To retreat elusively, outspeed them." (Chapter 6, p.105)

To push forward without resistance, focus on gaps in your opponent's defense. When they retreat, use your faster forward motion to close distance and attack. When you retreat, make it swift.

"Getting people to fight by letting the force of momentum work is like rolling logs and rocks. Logs and rocks are still when in a secure place, but roll on an incline; they remain stationary if

square, roll if round. Therefore, when people are skillfully led into battle, the momentum is like that of round rocks rolling down a high mountain - this is force." (Chapter 5, p.98-99)

This passage is clearly related to the movement of friendly troops and formation, but it can be applied in a different way. If you can, use the force of your opponent's movement against them. Their momentum will carry them through their movement, and the place in the middle of their movement, before completion, is a wise time to strike. Likewise, be aware that your momentum can be a valuable tool or it can be turned against you. It can be a tool in that the movement made to parry should be carried forward into an attack whenever possible. At the same time, one must avoid large movements which carry the body inescapably toward completion unless safety is guaranteed, because at that point it is no longer a factor of your ability to move well, but of your ability to perform while moving.

"The few are those on the defensive against others, the many are those who cause others to be on the defensive against themselves." (Chapter 6, p.108)

The more you cause your opponent to defend, the less they can attack. Master Sun refers to the ones who are defensive against others as "the few" because they are more likely to die. "The many," or those more likely to survive, are alternately those who cause their opponents to act in a defensive rather than offensive manner. If you are not attacking, you cannot win.

"A surrounded army must be given a way out. Do not press a desperate enemy." (Chapter 7, p. 123-124)

"Put them into a spot where they have no place to go, and they will die before fleeing. If they are to die there, what can they not do? Warriors exert their full strength. When warriors are in great danger, they have no fear. When there is nowhere to go they are firm, when they are deeply involved they will stick to it. if they have no choice, they will fight." (Chapter 11, p. 153-154)

If your opponent can see no way to retreat, they will have nothing to do but attack. As described in the immediately previous quotations, an attacking enemy is a dangerous one, a survivor. Give your adversary a way out of your choosing, and you can draw them into ambush.

"Confront them with annihilation, and they will then survive; plunge them into a deadly situation, and they will then live. When people fall into danger, they are then able to strive for victory." (Chapter 11, p.161)

Although this quote sounds similar to the ones related to an army's foe, Master Sun seems to have intended this piece of advice to encourage a commander to place his troops into enough perceived danger that they are more alert and fight harder. Placing yourself into danger can help to focus your mind, but also endanger your person.

"So a skillful military operation should be like a swift snake that counters with its tail when someone strikes at its head, counters with its head when someone strikes at its tail, and counters with both head and tail when someone strikes at its middle." (Chapter 11, p.155)

Use only one part of your resources when attacking or defending, saving the rest of your resources to strike back when attacked. If you are attacked, use one hand to block while using the other hand to attack. Don't focus on only one movement.

The best strategies are quick movements, imperceptible and unpredictable to your opponents. Never force your adversaries into situations in which they feel trapped, push through gaps, and conserve your resources so that you can act on multiple fronts. Even though there may be a prescribed number of movements available, there are thousands of combinations by which you can randomize your movement.

8. Using Your Strengths

You are already assessing your opponent's strength and weaknesses, but you know that strategy and planning requires knowing and using your own strengths and weaknesses. Master Sun has this to say:

"Invincibility is a matter of defense, vulnerability is a matter of attack. Defense is for times of insufficiency, attack is for times of surplus. Those skilled in defense hide in the deepest depths of the earth, those skilled in attack maneuver in the highest heights of the sky. Therefore they can preserve themselves and achieve complete victory." (Chapter 4, p.86-87)

If you are a strong defender, use that to your advantage and defend as much as possible, only striking when there is vulnerability. If you are skilled in attack, use that to your advantage, attacking to keep your opponent on guard and to keep them from attacking you. Defend only when necessary. When you do not have the strength, speed, openings, energy, or momentum to attack, defend. When you have these things, attack.

"Standing your ground awaiting those far away, awaiting the weary in comfort, awaiting the hungry with full stomachs, is mastering strength." (Chapter 7, p.122)

Part of knowing your strength is preserving it. Don't take unnecessary action - if your opponent wants to come to you, let them.

"Therefore, those who are not thoroughly aware of the disadvantages in the use of arms cannot be thoroughly aware of the advantages in the use of arms." (Chapter 2, p.59)

Pay attention to the strengths and weaknesses of both your and your opponent's weaponry. Knowing that your opponent has two swords and you have two daggers, you can be aware that they function well at a distance and you function well at close range. From this you can devise strategies to stay out of range until there is an opening to move toward your opponent to a distance where their swords are no longer as effective but your daggers are deadly. A large shield removes targets but also impedes vision. A parry device is effective defense but useless for attack, leaving one free to defend only against the opponent's weapon in their other hand.

"Therefore, in a chariot battle, reward the first to capture at least ten chariots." (Chapter 2, p.63)

Where both of you have equal strengths, focus some resources on reducing the opponent's strength, either through removal of a weapon or parry device, or by incapacitating them in some way. Performed successfully, this will lead to an advantage of strength. This does not appear to

be the way Master Sun intended this passage, based on other commentaries, but it is a valuable lesson nonetheless.

Strength is a key component of battle. Know your strengths, preserve your strength and use it. Know the strengths and weaknesses of weaponry in use on the field. If you and your opponent are equal, reduce their strength through strategic attacks.

9. Speed

All the force in the world is inefficient if the opposition does not have the time to muster their strength and act.

"Therefore I have heard of military operations that were clumsy but swift, but I have never heard of one that was skillful and lasted a long time." (Chapter 2, p.58)

No matter how much skill you have, if the battle takes too long or you move too slowly, you will lose. An unskilled opponent can win if they are quick. A skilled opponent will not allow the battle to last for a long time.

"The condition of a military force is that its essential factor is speed, taking advantage of others' failure to catch up, going by routes they do not expect, attacking where they are not on guard." (Chapter 11, p.152-153)

Speed and distance (and thus, again, speed) are key factors. You need to manipulate the movements of the fight to give yourself the advantage of arriving first. Plan movements to misdirect opponents and have a shorter distance or existing momentum to carry your movement through to the true attack. Attack in unexpected locations.

Speed and skill must both exist to win consistently, but speed alone can win the fight. Distance in a fight is related to speed, in that the further one must travel, the longer it will take. Misdirection can help to provide additional time to complete movements.

10. Attitude and Emotion

One way to throw an opponent off guard is to act in a way that causes them to experience strong emotions. At the same time, in order to stay clear-headed, you must control your own emotion. The attitude in which you enter a battle can have a profound impact on the outcome.

"The one who figures on victory at headquarters before even doing battle is the one who has the most strategic factors on his side. The one who figures on inability to prevail at headquarters before doing battle is the one who has the least strategic factors on his side. The one with many strategic factors in his favor wins, the one with few strategic factors in his favor loses - how much the more so for one with no strategic factors in his favor. Observing the matter in this way, I can see who will win and who will lose." (Chapter 1, p.56)

Not only will planning to win from a superior position affect how you respond to movements made by your opponent, it will also allow you to plan superior strategies. If you enter a list expecting to lose, you will most likely lose. If you enter a list expecting to win, you will act in the manner you believe a winner would act and will make better choices.

"A government should not mobilize an army out of anger, military leaders should not provoke war out of wrath. Act when it is beneficial, desist if it is not. Anger can revert to joy, wrath can revert to delight, but a nation destroyed cannot be restored to existence, and the dead cannot be restored to life." (Chapter 12, p.166)

"Use anger to throw them into disarray." (Chapter 1, p.52)

A fight in which emotion controls initiation or movement will not be planned well and is risky. It will not win by design, but only by luck. If your opponent can be flustered or angered, they will attack more heedlessly of the dangers and make more mistakes. By this method you can win. In an SCA context, this is not the most honourable kind of win.

"Using order to deal with the disorderly, using calm to deal with the clamorous, is mastering the heart." (chapter 7, p.121)

If you can maintain a level head throughout a fight, thinking calmly and clearly, you will make better decisions. If you can filter out an opponent's extraneous movements to focus on the true goals, you will defend and attack more effectively.

Attitude and emotion can win or lose a fight before it has begun. If you can cause your opponent to become flustered, they will react more poorly and shift odds in your favour.

11. Discerning and Overcoming Deception

While you are working to assess the situation and your opponent, trying to use your strength and exploit your opponent's weaknesses, your opponent is doing the same to you. To attain victory, you must avoid falling victim to their deception, and create your own.

"Use humility to make them haughty." (Chapter 1, p.53)

If you see an opening where you don't expect to be seeing one, be wary of a trap. If they are about to make their move, bait them with a false opening to trap them.

"Avoiding confrontation with orderly ranks and not attacking great formations is mastering adaptation. Do not follow a feigned retreat. Do not attack crack troops." (Chapter 7, p.122-123)

Know when and where your opponent is strong, and do not attack. Wait until there is a weakness to exploit. Don't follow a retreat that is trying to lure you in to attack.

"When the enemy is near but still, he is resting on a natural stronghold. When he is far away but tries to provoke hostilities, he wants you to move forward. If his position is accessible, it is because that is advantageous to him." (Chapter 9, p.134)

"Those whose words are humble while they increase war preparations are going to advance. Those whose words are strong and who advance aggressively are going to retreat. If half their force advances and half retreats, they are trying to lure you. When forces angrily confront you but delay engagement, yet do not leave, it is imperative to watch them carefully." (Chapter 9, p. 135-140)

Be wary of traps and misdirection. If the opponent seems to give ground, they are likely trying to trap you or cause you to come closer to them, exposing weakness. Bold words disguise weakness, whereas humble words hide strength. If they attack and do not complete the attack but stay within range, they are likely planning something.

Avoiding traps and misdirection laid by your opponents is a matter of understanding the nature of traps and disciplining yourself to recognize schemes and adapt.

12. Deception, Misdirection, and Controlling Movement

If opponents can create deception, you can as well. Master Sun discusses various manners of creating misdirection to control the behaviours and movement of your adversaries.

"A military operation involves deception. Even though you are competent, appear to be incompetent. Though effective, appear to be ineffective." (Chapter 1, p.49)

When you enter into a fight, do not show your strengths. Lull your opponent into a false sense of security by showing weakness to give yourself an advantage.

"Therefore good warriors cause others to come to them, and do not go to others." (Chapter 6, p. 100)

Don't rush in. Take your time and wait for your opponent to create an opening or come to you. You do not need to force an opening, and if you do, you are more likely to lose.

"What causes opponents to come of their own accord is the prospect of gain. What discourages opponents from coming is the prospect of harm." (Chapter 6, p.101)

"Draw them in with the prospect of gain, take them by confusion." (Chapter 1, p.50)

"Therefore those who skillfully move opponents make formations that opponents are sure to follow, give what opponents are sure to take. They move opponents with the prospect of gain, waiting for them in ambush." (Chapter 5, p.97)

Opponents will follow where they see weakness. If you want your opponent to come to you, you must invite them with an opening. Control the fight by creating perceived weakness to lure them in, and then ambush with an attack. Leave targets appearing unguarded open to attack and then strike when the opponent seeks to gain these targets. Displaying a strong defense or especially offence will not bring your opponent toward you. To halt their movement and prevent them from getting to you, attack something dear to them. By this method you can tire them out and yourself stay fresh.

"Tire them by flight." (Chapter 1, p.53)

Do not tire yourself out through flight, but if you can reduce their stamina by strategic retreats, or by repeatedly forcing their retreat, you can gain the upper hand in the fight. When they start to back off and tire, that is when you should make your move.

"Therefore a wise general strives to feed off the enemy. Each pound of food taken from the enemy is equivalent to twenty pounds you provide for yourself." (Chapter 2, p.62)

Master Sun means this literally, but in a figurative sense, if you can use the attack of your opponent by turning your parry into a thrust, you will expend less energy in your attack than if you have to create the initial movement that creates the opening as well as the attack.

"Appear where they cannot go, head for where they least expect you. To unfailingly take what you attack, attack where there is no defense. For unfailingly secure defense, defend where there is no attack. So the case of those who are skilled in attack, their opponents do not know where to defend. In the case of those skilled in defense, their opponents do not know where to attack. Therefore when you want to do battle, even if the opponent is deeply entrenched in a defensive position, he will be unable to avoid fighting if you attack where he will surely go to the rescue." (Chapter 6, p.102-105)

Attack openings, avoid attacking places that are well guarded. If you hide the places in which you are less well defended, making it impossible for opponents to figure them out, you will not be attacked. If you attack your opponent in areas that will result in death you can create vulnerability in peripheral areas. If you attack a key area, you can encourage your opponent to fight even if they seem entrenched in their defense.

"When you are going to attack nearby, make it look as if you are going to go a long way; when you are going to attack far away, make it look as if you are just going a short distance." (Chapter 1, p.50)

"The difficulty of armed struggle is to make long distances near and make problems into advantages. Therefore you make their route a long one, luring them on in hopes of gain. When you set out after others and arrive before them, you know the strategy of making the distant near." (Chapter 7, p.114-115)

Provoking your opponent to movement, make small movements that arrive before and in different locations than expected so that you can catch your opponent off guard. You may also provoke your opponent into movement that brings their own vulnerability within your reach. If you can convince your opponent they have more or less time than they actually have in which to prepare or launch an attack, you can catch them off guard. For example, launching a thrust that falls short and completing it after a pause or appearing to go for a more challenging target and hitting a nearer one instead.

An extremely effective method of bringing victory in battle is to alter the perception of distance. Changing height and adjusting blade orientation can cause your opponent to perceive safety while being inside your reach. If you can create a movement that appears to leave an opening but actually flows into an attack, you will appear to start your defense/attack after your opponent's strike begins, but your movement can arrive first due to momentum.

"Your battleground is not to be known, for when it cannot be known, the enemy makes many guard outposts, and since multiple outposts are established, you only have to do battle with small squads." (Chapter 6, p.107)

If you divide your opponent's attention between multiple targets, they will not know where to expect an attack, and thus their attention will be divided. By this will your opponent be more easily beaten.

Controlling movement is all about creating an urge for self-preservation and perceived opportunity for victory in your opponent. Deception and misdirection can come in the form of causing belief of danger, taunting with hope of gain, and using falsely-initiated movement to your own gain. It can also be achieved by creating the illusion of distance, nearness, or safety.

13. Conclusions

Although *The Art of War* is a book of strategies for military engagement, it is also a rich resource for one-on-one tactics. Assessing the land, your opponent, and when is the right time to attack provides the first key to victory. The second key is using this knowledge, along with speed and knowledge of your strengths, to prepare for the fight and plan strategies. Finally, avoiding the deceptions of others and using your own deception and misdirection to control movement and cause your opponent to create openings in their defense are the remaining keys that will afford you the best chance of victory. No matter who wrote this text, the strategies contained therein are as applicable now as they were 2500 years ago, and to more situations that originally intended. Master Sun, whether real or imagined, has provided the world with a book of military genius that has educated for millennia and will continue to do so as long as we fight for war or sport.

14. References

Tzu, Sun, translated by Cleary, Thomas. *The Art of War*, 1988. Shambhala Publications, Inc, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.