



# The Art of War: Sun Zi's Military Methods (Translations from the Asian Classics)

By Sun Zi

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## The Art of War: Sun Zi's Military Methods (Translations from the Asian Classics) By Sun Zi

Compiled during the Warring States period of 475-221 B.C.E., *The Art of War* has had an enormous impact on the development of Chinese military strategy over the past two thousand years and occupies an important place in East Asian intellectual history. It is the first known attempt to formulate a rational basis for the planning and conduct of military operations, and while numerous editions of the work exist, Victor Mair's translation is the first to remain true to the original structure and essential style of the text.

Mair's fidelity to the original, along with his insightful commentary and reliance on archaeologically recovered manuscripts, breaks new ground in solving *The Art of War*'s difficult textual and contextual problems. He confronts complex questions concerning the authorship of the work, asserting that Sun Wu, a supposed strategist of the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.E.) to whom the text is traditionally attributed, never existed. Instead, Mair claims that *The Art of War* coalesced over a period of around seventy-five years, from the middle of the fourth century to the first quarter of the third century B.C.E.

Mair also reveals the way *The Art of War* reflects historical developments in technological and military strategy in civilizations throughout Eurasia, especially in regards to iron metallurgy. He demonstrates the close link between the philosophy in *The Art of War* and Taoism and discusses the reception of the text from the classical period to today. Finally, Mair highlights previously unaddressed stylistic and statistical aspects and includes philological annotations that present new ways of approaching the intellectual and social background of the work. A phenomenal achievement, Mair's comprehensive translation is an indispensable resource for today's students, strategists, and scholars.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Mair provides insight on how this manual came to exist.

(*Indianapolis Star*)

Lean, clear, all fustian removed.

(Donald Richie *Japan Times*)

Mair's excellent new translation of Sunzi's (Sun Tzu) *Art of War*... brings a new, and extremely useful perspective to the text.

(Peter Lorge *Journal of Military History*)

#### Review

After reading Victor Mair's elegant new rendering of the ancient text, I was left without any doubt that it is an important contribution to our understanding of both the meaning of the text itself and the evolution of Chinese military thought. While some translations in the past have been informed by philosophical studies or the translator's own personal experience of modern warfare and intelligence matters, what Mair brings to bear is a remarkable feel for the Chinese language of ancient times that results in lucid and persuasive renderings of many of the more enigmatic and obscure passages. He steers a judicious course between the free translation and the overly literal, and further aids our comprehension by providing a concise glossary explaining the key terms that appear in the text.

(David Graff, associate professor of history, Kansas State University)

Victor Mair's brilliant translation of the *Sunzi bingfa* is especially commendable for its clarity and elegance. Although this classic text of Chinese military thought enjoys several authoritative English translations, Mair succeeds in providing a novel, insightful, and yet rigorous approach to its history and interpretation. The author's consummate knowledge of Classical Chinese and sensitivity to the nuances of the text shows it in a genuinely fresh way. Mair presents the *Sunzi bingfa* not as an exotic well of wisdom but as a genuine historical product, and Western readers will be able to enjoy it on its own terms and understand better what they are reading, and why.

(Nicola Di Cosmo, Princeton University)

#### About the Author

Victor Mair is a graduate of Dartmouth College, the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, and Harvard University. He is professor of Chinese language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania and is the founder and editor of *Sino-Platonic Papers*, an academic journal that examines

diverse aspects of Chinese language, script, and culture, paying particular attention to historical relationships with other societies in Eurasia. For the past two decades, he has led a major international investigation of the Bronze Age and Early Iron Age peoples of Eastern Central Asia, a project that has resulted in numerous publications and several films. His Columbia books include *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* and *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*.

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