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Sunzi, the Military Classics, and the Chinese way of war by punishment: A strategically defensive and tactically offensive strategic culture

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Sunzi's *Art of War* and the other six *Military Classics* that together form the main corpus of China's ancient strategic thought. Rejecting China's framing of the country being uniquely pacific or defense-oriented historically, and nuancing Sunzi's dictums, the article spells out the core concepts that can be deduced from the classics. Aligning the concepts with China's strategic behavior under the CCP, the article discerns a tactical preference to deliver the enemy a surprise first blow with overwhelming force. Retaining a flexible, low-cost posture, China withdraws after the enemy has been taught a shocking lesson.

Introduction

Drawing on the ostensible historical record, Chinese commentators often portray Chinese strategic culture as uniquely pacific¹ or defense-oriented. Yan, the noted Tsinghua scholar, builds his moral realist theory of international relations on the ancient Confucian philosopher Xunzi's idea of the "righteous" (*yi*) order upheld by a "sage king" (*shengwang*). With China rising relative to the US, China ought to again strive for such a just order because other states will naturally follow their sovereign's (China's) humane authority, or "leadership under Heaven." Although Yan acknowledges that hard power is still needed to buttress the order, he juxtaposes this superior moral order with one grounded in hard power. Yan lists two variants: hegemony, where domination over others is sought without (much) morality, such as, he posits, the current US-led order; and tyranny, an order governed solely by "military force and stratagems."² Similarly, Zhao, of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, advances that in sharp contrast with the Western history of the nation-state, Sino-centrality, where "all under Heaven" (*tianxia*) submit to the leadership of the center, is uniquely peaceful because that "monarchical system," or "world government," "is in charge of universal institutions, laws, and world order," and holds military power "greater than those of large, medium-sized and small sub-states."³ This scholarly narrative echoes the Chinese

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Communist Party's (CCP) official line: Deng, Jiang, Hu, and today Xi have consistently stated that “China *has never and will never* invade or bully others, or seek hegemony (...) the Chinese people [are a people of] *peace, amity, and harmony*.”⁴ By the same token, China's publicly available defense white papers, ostensibly denoting the intent in China's military strategy (*junshi zhanlüe fangzhen*, or military strategic guidelines), have stressed that China's defense policy is strictly defensive in nature:

China's socialist nature, its strategic choice of a path of *peaceful development*, its independent and *peaceful* foreign policy, and its *cultural tradition* of prioritizing *harmony* determine that China will consistently pursue a *defensive* national defense policy.

The military strategic guidelines for [Xi Jinping's] New Era adhere to the principles of *defense, self-defense*, and deterrence, implement *active defense*, uphold the principle of “we will not attack unless attacked, and if attacked, we will certainly retaliate,” emphasize the unity of deterring war and winning war, and the unity of strategic defense and operational and tactical offense.⁵

The way to an order that is peaceful, and where force is used only in defense when it is absolutely necessary, is thus found in Chinese “history” (*lishi*), the Mandarin characters for which themselves express cyclical thinking. As Sterckx observes, “the idea that the essence of all we need is already embedded in the past and that these truths are worth drawing out and preserving unites almost all [classical] Chinese thinkers.” What is more, the classical philosophical notions that are rehashed are expected to instrumentally serve the present sovereign in augmenting his legitimacy.⁶ Both accounts—that history is cyclical and that it must instruct correct behavior in the present—can be found in Marxism-Maoism-Xi'ism too. By 2049, so goes the articulation of Xi Jinping's ambiguous grand strategic end goal, China's “great rejuvenation” (*weida fuxing*) of the “Chinese nation” (*zhonghua minzu*) will be completed. China will then have reached the final historical stage of becoming a “moderately prosperous society in all respects.”

According to Xi Jinping, this is the “greatest dream of the Chinese nation since *modern times*...[a] dream that embodies the long-cherished aspirations of *generations of Chinese*, reflects the *overall interests* of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people, and is the common *expectation* of every Chinese son and daughter.”⁷

The paragraph displays deep historical roots and requires the mobilization of all. It prescribes the (compulsory) pursuit by the collective of a unifying national dream (the propaganda frame) of *restoring* the old (correct) order or way of things. In this restoration, “China's exceptionalism” (*zhongguo liwai zhuyi*), or “uniqueness” (*dute xing*),⁸ should be the driving factor.

In Xi's words, China has “unique cultural traditions, a unique historical destiny, and unique national conditions,” and hence must follow its own path (and not be lectured by unknowing foreigners).⁹

A way of construing what that history-informed path of restoration looks like and testing whether it indeed reflects a uniquely pacific or defense-oriented outlook is to examine China's strategic culture (*junshi wenhua*, or military culture). This conforms well with Xi Jinping's effort to reintroduce “traditional Chinese culture” into the national discourse over the past decade, calling for “the 5000 years of Chinese civilization to

be further explored and studied.”¹⁰ For instance, Xi, besides the expected historical figures, Mengzi, Laozi, and Xunzi, chose to include among his showcased bookshelf the classical texts of *Tai Gong's Six Secret Teachings* and *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, the latter being closely associated with Sunzi's ideas.¹¹ In fact, Xi has reproduced Sunzi's very first dictum that “war is a matter of great importance to the state,” saying that “military affairs are of vital importance to the nation.”¹² Writing in 2018, Ghiselli has also observed a renewed focus on the *Military Classics* in articles published in the authoritative journal *China Military Science* (*zhongguo junshi kexue*), with Sunzi foremost among them.¹³

This leads to the following research question:

Can classical Chinese strategic thought, as represented in the *Seven Military Classics* (*wujing qishu*), be characterized as distinctly pacific or defense-oriented, and to what extent can this classical strategic thought be recognized in how China under the CCP has approached the “military” (*bing*) instrument, using “force” (*quan*)?

Understanding Chinese strategic culture

Strategic culture captures the “set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives [that] determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives.”¹⁴ It forms the cognitive frame of reference that shapes political-military decision-makers' choices, which include decisions “to go to war, preferences for offensive, expansionist or defensive modes of warfare, and levels of wartime casualties that would be acceptable.”¹⁵ Using strategic culture to explain gaps or anomalies in material explanations, neoclassical realists view strategic culture narrowly as something that can be studied as a variable separate from the other dimensions of strategy, such as politics, economy, logistics, technology, and organization. Yet, even so-called “Type 2” neoclassical realists fail to appreciate how the very “range of policy options [decision-makers can] choose from” is constituted by a prior-existing belief system.¹⁶ Instead, the article follows Gray's perspective that regards culture and, derived from that, strategic culture, as something that permeates the realm of behavior to such an extent that ideas and structure can be regarded as inseparable, with the former giving meaning to the latter. The dimensions of military strategy are thus “expressed in behavior by people and institutions that have internalized [the nation's] strategic culture while at the same time [they are] constructing, interpreting, and amending that culture.”¹⁷ Of course, this ontological point matters for how present-day Chinese political-military elites interpret history-based “cultural artifacts,” such as the “argumentation structures, metaphors, languages, analogies, images, and so on” found in the *Seven Military Classics* compiled during the Song dynasty in the eleventh century AD.¹⁸ This also brings us to Scobell's reservation about causal inference, establishing a connection between classic texts and Chinese elites in the center (*zhongyang*), drawing on them, which is desirable but unfeasible to establish in the closed-off Xi era.¹⁹

Although strategic culture is not set in stone, political elites and military organizations typically cling to established doctrine and practices, especially when these buttress their legitimacy. Often, it takes an external shock, such as an invasion by a regional

peer to which an ill-fated response was mustered, for elites to fundamentally rethink their core assumptions on matters relating to war and peace.²⁰ A game-changing shock can also be produced by a military-technological innovation that grants a significant tactical advantage in offense or defense, even when it is demonstrated on a faraway battlefield.²¹ For example, the 1973 Arab-Israeli War made it painfully clear that Mao's millions of lightly armed foot soldiers, trained to fight a guerrilla or "People's War" (*renmin zhanzheng*) deep inland, would stand little chance against Soviet mechanized armor rolling over the northern plains with close air support from advanced air power. Following the 1991 Gulf War, China tried to offset American power projection capabilities in the region and its over-the-horizon reconnaissance-precision strike capacity by developing so-called asymmetric *shashoujian*, or "trump card" means, such as mine warfare.²² The two changes in warfare led to the 1980 and 1993 military strategic guidelines, respectively.²³

Furthermore, the political-strategic calculus of decision-makers extends beyond merely planning against foreign adversaries: rebellion and societal upheaval have been a primary concern for Chinese rulers, an internal security role that the military has fulfilled in dynastic times and since the People's Republic.²⁴ China's particular anxiety lies in the interplay between the foreign and the domestic, captured by the dynastic adage *nei luan wai huan* (internal instability [invites] external disaster). When China was domestically weak during the late Qing, foreign powers intervened, leading to the many strategic defeats that constitute China's "Century of Humiliation" (*bainian guochi*). For CCP elites, the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstrations that almost led to their overthrow are their organizational trauma, which, according to Deng, was abetted by the US.²⁵ As a result, much of the covert and overt domestic security apparatus is tailored around "maintaining social stability" (*weiwen*). For China, perhaps more than other countries, history and the collective memory of "never again" that is derived from it, play an outsize role in defining the "core interests" (*hexin liyi*) that guide China's grand strategy and "national rejuvenation" by 2049, and how China must be protected against threats that may not be immediately apparent from an outsider's perspective.²⁶ The core interests that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) needs to secure are, ranked by importance: political (regime) security, national sovereignty, and economic (and technological) development, with the latter, in turn, enabling the forging of "comprehensive national power" (*zonghe guoli*).²⁷

Master Sun: Indirect, smart tactics, but not pacific

When construing Chinese strategic culture drawn from classical historical thought, the main source, both in China and the West, is Sunzi's *Art of War* (*bingfa*, or military methods). Sunzi is generally understood to prefer indirect or irregular, unorthodox (*qi*) methods that bring surprise through skill or *art* (*yi*): "in fighting, one uses direct methods to engage in battle, but indirect methods to attain victory."²⁸ This can be viewed as the opposite of the direct or conventional (*zheng*) head-on attack, seeking the decisive battle, as is typical in Western strategic thought. To break the enemy's political will, Clausewitz writes, the enemy's country must be conquered by destroying its military power. "The decision by arms lies at the foundation of all combinations," and is "the superior and more effectual" way of war.²⁹ By the same token, Jomini

proposes to “concentrate the mass of the forces” (firepower) at the right time to “dislodge and destroy” the enemy.³⁰ Conversely, Sunzi emphasizes *circumventing* the enemy’s main strength (positioning favorably at the right time, attacking weak points), *shaping* the environment to make it conducive to strategic—not necessarily tactical—gain and do so methodically (*ji*, to estimate, examine, is the keyword in the first chapter, and can mean, is used in relation to careful planning and stratagem based on the best possible intelligence: *knowing your enemy*).³¹ One must also remain level-headed and unpredictable in doing so, and keep in mind the long-term political objective and the strength and dynamism of one’s military force (to avoid falling prey to the primary enemy or a third state when exhausted, the prevention of which is a central concern),³² as well as the long-term health of the polity (avoiding imperial overstretch, impoverishing the population at home, disturbing civil harmony).³³

The superior way, Sunzi posits, is to attack the enemy’s war plans (*famou*) by outsmarting him, using deception (*gui*, also mentioned are tricks *zha*, and cunning *qiao*).³⁴ Ideally, this manipulation approach is achieved at minimal cost. This means keeping one’s own military power intact, retaining its threat for political-diplomatic bargaining power: “If one wants to conquer all under Heaven (the world or regional system), ensure that one’s forces gain advantage without being exhausted.” The benefit of avoiding “lengthy operations in the field” works the other way, too: the better way is to take the enemy’s land and resources intact, which reduces potential popular resistance to postwar pacification efforts (though Sunzi does advocate troops living off the land during a campaign).³⁵ Note here that for Sunzi, this is not about Confucian virtuousness, from which the legitimacy to rule is derived, but an instrumental cost-benefit analysis. The second-best way uses diplomacy-statecraft (*fajiao*) to alter the strategic or tactical equation by isolating the (principal) enemy. Disrupting “diplomatic relations” could be interpreted as thwarting the enemy’s ability to fight as a cohesive, concentrated, and well-commanded force by disrupting their different parts, such as by undercutting the connective tissue that binds the enemy and his allied forces, and thereby his (political-)military effectiveness. Revealing Sunzi’s concern for the culmination point, the major comparative advantage of using politics is that it cannot be exhausted.

Only then is fighting the conventional open battle, the waging of war (*zhan*), ranked as a way to pursue; it must be undertaken only under favorable conditions relative to the enemy, principally in terms of concentrated force strength relative to the enemy’s, as well as the place, timing, and terrain (holding strong points and attacking weak (unprepared) points), and weather conditions (seasons, wet terrain, etc.).³⁶ Here, using the enemy’s psychology against him plays a large role: baiting the enemy, triggering the general’s temper, or feigning local weakness are all meant to entice the enemy to attack under unfavorable conditions. Meanwhile, one must keep one’s own head cool and follow one’s extensive pre-war planning (gaming out the possible scenarios and preparing accordingly) *in accordance with*, while *adapting to* (*yin*) what the enemy does. “Just as water flows in accordance with the terrain, so do soldiers win by adapting to the enemy.”³⁷ The constant and intricate back-and-forth relationship between one’s own moves and those of the enemy is captured in the character *xing*, which in our context means form, or the form as it is perceived by the enemy, fluidity, and adapting to the other.³⁸ One should always keep the enemy guessing as to one’s true

representation and tactical intent. Moreover, if the circumstances change (*bian*), so should the interpretation of what the course of action should be. Here, expedience, initiative, having the flexibility to seize opportunities that emerge in front of you is crucial. This essence of dynamism corresponds with what is known in the West as commander's intent and is the opposite of rigidly executing previously given orders regardless of what the enemy throws at you.³⁹ The worst-ranked fourth way is siege warfare. Attacking cities—in our present-day context, urban warfare—should be avoided because the lengthy deployment of a large army is resource-draining and bad for morale.⁴⁰

Although Sunzi's *Art of War* does indeed devote substantial attention to deception, and to attacking the enemy's harmony—plans and cohesion—and there is a chapter on spies at the end, the majority of the work is on smart (cunning) tactics and maintaining diligence in (preparations for) operations, not on winning without fighting at all. From this viewpoint, it is troubling that Western observers, whether deliberately to paint China as exceptionally pacific or conveniently due to a shallow reading of parts taken out of context, tend to accord inappropriate weight to one particular dictum in the third chapter called "Attack by Stratagem." It reads: rather than "winning a hundred battles" in the open field (winning tactically), it is far better to "subdue the enemy without fighting" (winning strategically). The dictum is brought up as ostensibly capturing the essence of Sunzi's thought, and, by association, China's strategic culture, as kinetic action-avoiding.⁴¹ When we look at the number one and two-ranked ways discussed above, this is clearly not entirely unfounded. Nonetheless, the notion of not fighting at all is better understood as one philosophically phrased ideal or idealized scenario among others. If we translate the dictum to the present, surely, the US would rather deter or compel an enemy, for example, by positioning a carrier strike group off an enemy's coast, or enacting debilitating sanctions together with allies and partners, than embark on a grinding "forever war." In China's case, it correctly assessed that it could get away with taking full control of Hong Kong and "Finlandize" neighboring states such as Cambodia through elite subversion and economic dependency, respectively, at low cost and without a shot fired.⁴²

A manipulation approach (attacking the enemy's plans) might also not be in the cards: the enemy has a say in how they respond. The sovereigns of the competitive state system that existed before the two millennia of Chinese dynasties did not somehow have a magic wand that could forego resorting to interstate violence. In fact, China's Academy of Military Sciences has recorded 3,790 wars in China's history.⁴³ In addition, the sequence (hierarchy) of the text matters in the study of Chinese treatises. The stratagem chapter is one of thirteen and is placed *after* chapters on pre-war planning and the waging of war. In the stratagem chapter itself, and in much of the following chapters, kinetic warfare, or the positioning in relation to it, predominates. Contextually, the book as a whole thus more closely resembles Liddell Hart's indirect approach, which discusses physical and psychological dislocation by bypassing the enemy's strong points in attack, than any pacific inclination,⁴⁴ with one big difference. After some general musings, the closing third part of Sunzi's first chapter elaborates the encompassing dictum in Sunzi's work: "[all, or successful] warfare is based on deception." Although Jomini is also very tactically-minded, stipulating the right time to seize the advantage in battle, and Liddell Hart is also about putting the enemy on

its back foot with unexpected maneuver, the collection of short dictums attributed to the persona of Sunzi that suggests how to outsmart the enemy with deception, trickery, and cunning is what makes the work distinct. This acumen does not negate the need to use military force when deemed necessary, nor does it remove the need to prepare for war well and have and retain (not lose) a strong military, which can also be used for threats and diplomatic maneuver.

This more nuanced, realistic interpretation brings us to what Sunzi sees as true mastery: *combining* indirect and direct methods. It is only when the right conditions are configured (through indirect shaping operations) that the element of *shi*, or momentum in the application of force, can be arrived at through the direct method: “The rushing torrent (the momentum in force that is created) can even dislodge stones (can sweep away an entire army).”⁴⁵ Importantly, shaping operations softening up the (human) terrain can be (should be) in play long before direct force is brought to bear.⁴⁶ An illustrative example of how a range of means work in practice when employed in conjunction can be found in Chinese psychological warfare operations toward Taiwan at present: large, Party-state-directed floating fishing militia obstructing navigation; large-scale naval drills that encircle the island, and come with land-based ballistic missile fires; a domestic agency of China that announces the closing of the airspace around Taiwan, referred to as a province; and the threatening Chinese fighter jet fly-bys, exhausting the Taiwanese fighter jets that scramble in response, are all moves in the real world that serve to amplify the cognition of threat that is instilled in the mind of Taiwanese citizens via online and offline subversion operations executed by the Party’s United Front Work Department and the PLA’s Strategic Support Force. The targeted weak spot consists of so-called identitary “Mainlanders” (*waishengren*) that nostalgically believe in One China: the descendants of the generation of Kuomintang members that fled to the island in the late 1940s.⁴⁷ Altogether, these “quasi-war” (*zhun zhanzheng*) operations⁴⁸—what Hoffman termed “hybrid”⁴⁹—are designed to weaken popular resolve and faith in the island’s democratic leadership over time, and, as such, are *shaping operations*, softening the human terrain to win operations in the future. Achieving national rejuvenation, which must include the reunification of Taiwan with the ancestral land (*zuguo*)⁵⁰ and for which the PLA must be capable and ready by 2027,⁵¹ is likely to require significant kinetic effects before the Taiwanese yield to Beijing’s political demand. In the summer of 2022, Speaker of the US House of Representatives Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan was framed as a “US-Taiwan collusion that provoked [China].” As a result, “China’s [seven-day-long naval blockade and live fire drills around the island] were a legitimate act of self-defense...countermeasures that were firm, forceful, appropriate, and in accordance with domestic and international law.”⁵² Ever since, these joint operations have been recurring when China is displeased. According to PLA sources, the “exercises” that were now “routine” serve as “a correction and punishment for the repeated challenges posed by ‘Taiwan Independence’ forces to Mainland China’s red line. Every time the ‘Taiwan Independence’ separatist forces provoke, the PLA takes a step forward [to alter, cement the altered status quo]; this is the new normal of salami slicing.”⁵³

The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* stresses multi-domain integration in China’s joint operations, which includes the cognitive domain of the enemy’s population and soldiers: “The implementation of public opinion struggles is usually based on force deterrence and

actual combat...The effect of soft killing is realized [by] preemptively releasing information and actively guiding public opinion...creating momentum to control [the narrative] [and] attack [the enemy's] key points [of] spiritual support and public opinion support, and directly attack its shortcomings, pain points, and unknowable places to shock and disturb the enemy, weaken the enemy's command authority, disrupt the combat plan, shake the morale of the army, and defeat the opponent spiritually.⁵⁴

The six other *Military Classics*: Complementing Sunzi

The belief that Chinese strategic culture is defense-oriented or even pacific persists because of cursory references to Sunzi that conveniently support the argument that a Western scholar tries to make—discussed in the previous section—but also because of incorrect interpretations of Chinese history that are promoted by Chinese scholars and adopted into Western discourse by Western scholars. Buzan, for example, calls the core aspect of Sino-centrality (a non-plurality that is antithetical to the state equality of today's Westphalian system) an “issue,” not a fundamental obstacle to general acceptance; acknowledges, with some “coercion” caveats, that an “academic case can be made that China is a basically peaceful culture”; and calls claims that this kind of Chinese scholarship may be “associated with government propaganda” in the all-conforming Xi era a “risk.”⁵⁵ The misguided view of China's strategic culture also persists because a single work remains the main focus of Western scholarship on Chinese strategic culture: Sunzi. Johnston's monograph, *Cultural Realism*, therefore offers a valuable addition by covering the six other major *Military Classics*.⁵⁶ His study finds that non-kinetic ideas corresponding to Confucian ideals and war avoidance exist, but that they are generally “unrelated, or are not directly connected causally, to the security of the state.”⁵⁷ In this light, it is worth returning to the Confucian philosopher Xunzi and Tsinghua scholar Yan, with whom the article started. Evidently, the sovereign in Xunzi acting in accordance with his cultivated humaneness (*ren*, in compassion for, with benevolence toward others) is irreconcilable with Sunzi's misleading of the enemy to enact violent defeat.⁵⁸ This, while it is Sunzi that is the main classical text drawn on by Chinese military scholars.⁵⁹ If we place Yan, an outstanding Communist Party member who dares to struggle for party and country and who has risen to Tsinghua full professor through a long stint at a Ministry of State Security-directed think tank,⁶⁰ in the context of China's desire for international “discourse power” (*huayu quan*, or right to speak), with Chinese “scholars frequently recogniz[ing] the value of Confucianism to legitimize dictatorial rule,”⁶¹ it is thus striking that Yan has labeled the worst order as one dictated by “military force and stratagems,” which copies the title of Sunzi's third chapter: the philosophical work that PLA officers follow. The remainder of this section dissects the key concepts that come to the fore in the other six *Military Classics* that are not already covered in the analysis of Sunzi's *Art of War* above.

A central concept present in most of the *Seven Military Classics* and that is related to the previous paragraph is the morality underpinning the sovereign's authority (*quan*) to lead and attract the allegiance of the people (both those already aligned and those who need to be persuaded to come to one's side).⁶² This comes to the fore most clearly in *Methods of the Sima* (*sima fa*), which connects the choice to launch a just war to

a “benevolent” (correct, humane) prosecution of that war of “rectification” (inevitably reminding us of Mao’s Yan’an ideological and personnel cleansing campaign, though, in this context, it is aimed externally at deposing an unrighteous ruler), which is comparable to the Medieval knightly tradition in Europe. In fact, *Methods of the Sima* gives the examples of honorably waiting for the enemy forces to assemble in the field for the pitched battle, and not opting for the full annihilation of fleeing forces.⁶³ Most of the texts, however, determine whether war and warfare are moral based on the intent that the sovereign imbues the war with.⁶⁴ As the righteous *is forced to respond*—out of *defense*—to the unrighteous’ *actions he is presented with*, the target state becomes an obstacle to the *tianxia* harmonious order that must be removed.⁶⁵

There are plenty of abstract musings for the righteous ruler to justify his case with: “If someone changes or creates new rites, alters what is normal, or contravenes the king’s illustrious Virtue, then in accord with the rites the king can attack them.”⁶⁶

Viewed in this context, the “righteous” war, restoring the correct order of Heaven disrupted by the unrighteous enemy, is best understood as strategic communication (a rhetorical weapon, propaganda): “selling war” domestically and abroad among potentially aligned states (allies, or, in the dynastic setting, tributary vassals), and sowing division among the population of the enemy (attacking cohesion).

A good example from CCP history is provided by the language China used to justify its intervention in the Korean War in the winter of 1950. Then, China responded to US-led forces advancing deep into North Korea and approaching the Yalu River border with China. China’s political-strategic aim was to maintain strategic depth vis-à-vis the forces of US “imperialism” (*diguo zhuyi*). Yet, although it was China that attacked, it was (and still is) sold as “Resisting the US (the aggressor that, according to Mao, “provoked” China), Aiding Korea (the asserted victim that, in fact, launched the war against South Korea—conveniently omitted in China’s discourse—and did so after the US had discarded most of its wartime navy and had fully withdrawn its combat forces from South Korea twelve months earlier).”⁶⁷ Indeed, China’s pacific narratives, such as “China has never and will never bully others,” can exist with ample and vivid evidence to the contrary, such as China’s systematic bullying of fishermen and the weak maritime forces of the Philippines in the South China Sea after Xi came to power in 2012. At the same time, China claims without evidence that it is *the US* that is “the one resorting to coercion and bullying practices in the South China Sea,” a counter-frame to muddle the factual reality that is today known in the context of “disinformation.”⁶⁸ Scobell appraises this seizing of the external narrative as China’s “cult of defense,”⁶⁹ which does not necessarily mean they themselves do not believe their constructed reality to be true (this applies particularly to Marxists).

Ho describes this exceptionalist framing well: “By casting problems in a moral language and consequently, accusing its detractors of moral failures, China is able to gain the psychological upper hand when it comes to negotiations, presenting itself as the victim of aggression.”⁷⁰

As discussed above, when “lengthy operations in the field” were discussed, Sunzi’s understanding of morality is different from the Confucian one. It is a pragmatic, interest-driven notion relating to discerning and then following the right Way (*dao*),

the foundational concept in Chinese philosophy that is featured in most of the *Seven Military Classics*. (Sunzi's work is substantively related to Daoism but is not explicitly part of it.) In Sunzi, as in most of the other Classics, following the Way leads to high morale and is considered a premier factor determining a war's outcome.⁷¹ It concerns forging a congruence of conviction between the general on the one hand, and the soldiers on the other, who need the will to fight well and, perhaps, to die in doing so. "On the battlefield," the Wuzi states, "the soldiers that are committed to fight to the death (who are composed and do not hesitate, and, as such, are "controlled" by the general), they will live (will fight well and thus win the battle), whereas if they seek to stay alive (who are thinking of whether they want to be there to fight), they will die."⁷² Next to nurturing allegiance to the sovereign, Wei Liaozi emphasizes unquestioned obedience and rectitude, deterring cowardly retreat through fear of a punishment harsher than the pain an enemy can inflict.⁷³ Only with high morale among the troops that believe in the command can Sunzi's "rushing torrent" be forged—especially so, one might add, when executing daring operations using deceit. This understanding of morale is very similar to Clausewitz, who notes that the passion to fight must already "have a latent existence." Channeled by the general, it is up to the sovereign to provide a convincing political objective that can be rallied around.⁷⁴ Indeed, the importance allocated to the human factor is no different in the Western strategic tradition. Gray starts his elaboration of the seventeen dimensions of military strategy with people, society, culture, politics, and ethics.⁷⁵

As is the case for morality, Sunzi's *knowing yourself*, looking inward first (think of the Self-strengtheners of the late Qing; Xi's "doing our own thing well"⁷⁶), is present in some shape or form in all *Military Classics*: the nonmilitary civil (*wen*) tool.

Wuzi: A ruler must "first bring [the people] into harmony, and only thereafter embark on great affairs."⁷⁷

Huang Shigong: "A state about to mobilize its army concentrates first on making its benefice ample."⁷⁸

Wei Liaozi: "The state of a true king enriches the people; the state of a hegemon enriches the officers."⁷⁹

This "internal rectification," the strengthening of the state, is what is known in the Western literature as the material and ideational mobilization of domestic resources. In attracting the loyalty of the people, by fostering their material well-being, keeping taxation appropriate, and administering the lands with good officials, a social contract, a bond of legitimacy between the ruled and the ruler is created that makes the state resilient regarding any external threat that may arrive.⁸⁰ This conviction has a long-term horizon that aligns with "strategic patience": "gaining the affection of common people," "not working the people to exhaustion,"⁸¹ and ensuring sufficient agricultural yields for the people's sustenance.⁸² As these ancient texts show, the fear of CCP elites of social instability dates back a long time. Huang Shigong: "When the people are impoverished, then the government and people are estranged. While the enemy attacks from without, the people steal from within. This is termed a situation of 'inevitable collapse.'"⁸³ This inward-looking viewpoint can be contrasted with a short-term focus, attacking the enemy's war plans (Sunzi's first-ranked way) when tensions arise, or

being entangled abroad in an imperial policing role, such as was the case for Great Britain in the late 19th and early twentieth century.

Similar demonstrations of the view, as articulated by Xi: “Remain calm and composed, maintain steadfastness, pursue progress while ensuring stability, take proactive measures, unite as one, and dare to fight.”⁸⁴

Once our strategy is set, we must stick to it in the long term and not change it arbitrarily. We must follow it in principle while showing tactical flexibility.⁸⁵

Huang Shigong’s *Three Strategies* speaks most clearly of maintaining balance in one’s governance and statecraft; a coordination of and between employed “soft” and “hard,” and “weak” and “strong” means. Each ought to be applied to the situation that it warrants.⁸⁶ This has a vivid association with the opposed but complementary *yin* and *yang*: the negative and the positive, water and fire, femininity and masculinity, contracting and expanding, etc.; ideas about natural laws that emerged during the Warring States period (the period between 453 BCE, when the state of Jin was divided up, and 221 BCE, when the state of Qin established the first centralized empire).⁸⁷ Soft power—creating a “lovable” image of China through cultural attraction,⁸⁸ offering trade rights during imperial times and today via the Belt & Road Initiative,⁸⁹ and amicable (public) diplomacy and overseas media (propaganda) operations—can attract people to your side, but being too soft makes one vulnerable to bullying and coercion, and, ultimately, the loss of sovereignty. Meanwhile, one needs the hard to maintain good morale among the troops via (the threat of) punishment for disobedience, and use organized violence to defeat an unrighteous enemy who threatens to disrupt the order. *Methods of the Sima* stresses that forging an allegiance to the sovereign and his cause must come naturally; coercive or abusive officials, or when the burden put on the people is too steep, will not lead to success. At the same time, “administrative measures should be severe”: “Minor offenders should then (after careful assessment and application of civil measures) be executed. If minor offenders are executed, how can major offenses arise?”⁹⁰ Nevertheless, being too hard can make one lose the people, think of Yan’s tyranny, and the theoretical concept of the emperor’s *conditional* “Mandate of Heaven” (*tian-ming*). In the worst scenario, different groups rally against you in an enemy coalition, which in the West would be termed balancing.

Similar to Sunzi, most of the other *Military Classics* are clear-eyed about the need to build a powerful military capacity during peacetime, regardless of whether it is used or whether nonmilitary civil methods are employed simultaneously. Several texts acknowledge the importance of fostering culture and virtue for societal harmony. Nonetheless, reflecting Zhao’s argument, mentioned in the introduction, they come with a crude, realist caveat.

Tai Gong: “Those who submit and accord with you, treat them generously with Virtue. Those who oppose you, break them with force. If you respect the people and are decisive, then all under Heaven will be peaceful and submissive.”⁹¹

Sima: “Authority comes from warfare, not from harmony among men.”⁹²

Wuzi: “When the dead lie stiff and you grieve for [the people], you have not attained benevolence.”⁹³

Related to form—remaining ambiguous in the enemy’s perceptions of your force—multiple *Military Classics* suggest probing enemy defenses, fears, and discipline by launching surprise pinprick attacks, after which is retreated. This is done to learn how enemy troops tend to respond as well as to throw them off balance, leaving them unprepared when the main attack eventually does follow.⁹⁴

Wuzi: “The Way (*dao*) to attack them is to suddenly strike and cause chaos in the encampments. [Creating surprise,] lightly advance and then quickly retreat, tiring and laboring them, never actually joining battle with them. [After several of these instances] their army can be defeated.”⁹⁵

Questions and Replies: “Stimulate [the enemy] to know their patterns of movement and stopping. Determine [the enemy’s] disposition (*xing*) to know what terrain is tenable, what is deadly. Probe [the enemy] to know where they have an excess, where there is an insufficiency.”⁹⁶

Further, *Tai Gong’s Six Secret Teachings*, *Methods of the Sima*, Wei Liaozi, *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*, and Sunzi all place a premium on operational security. Tai Gong: Advancing in a dispersed formation, the forces must stay “quiet,” revealing their “awesomeness” (concentrated power) only at the time it is most effective.⁹⁷ *Methods of the Sima* calls for “secrecy, silence, and great internal strength.”⁹⁸

Methods of the Sima ties built up military means to the ability to deter would-be aggressors, corresponding with the Western understanding of deterrence.⁹⁹ Besides a version of Sunzi’s attacking of the enemy’s war plans, which can lead to “victory of the Way” (*daosheng*), and a straightforward annihilation route, Wei Liaozi uses the term “awesomeness” (*wei*) to describe the overwhelming relative advantage in the potential application of organized violence that a sovereign must desire to have. The force is so formidable in weaponry, training, and morale of the soldiers that this power by itself, without necessarily intent being given to it, can compel the enemy to do our will, resulting in “victory by awesomeness” (*weisheng*).¹⁰⁰ This may provide a rationale for China building up the world’s largest navy in terms of the number of warships,¹⁰¹ which does not necessarily speak of intent to subjugate others with it as European powers did during the era of colonial expansion.

Holding profound implications regarding the perception and misperception by American and Asian decision-makers and policy-makers¹⁰²—China’s military doctrine and capacity is still focused around “winning local (regional) wars”¹⁰³—and therefore worth dwelling on, is the crucial difference with Western strategic thought when it comes to the nature of the indirect unconventional method (*qi*)—swift surprise—and how it works in conjunction with the direct conventional method (*zheng*) to produce Sunzi’s “rushing torrent.” In *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, the direct is expressed as a solid mountain that generates overwhelming force, and the indirect as enabling, delivering this as “lightning that strikes quickly and preemptively with pinpoint accuracy.”¹⁰⁴ Displaying a preference for the tactical offensive, a core tenet in the majority of *Military Classics* stipulates that *if force is used*, it should be used overwhelmingly and preemptively, delivering a surprise first blow.

Wei Liaozi: “‘If you apply the force of [a small tactical unit] to the enemy first, he will not be able to commit in strength. If you apply [a large overwhelming force] first, the enemy will not be able to engage you with his full awesomeness.’ Thus, the army values being first.”¹⁰⁵

Huang Shigong: “For attacking the enemy, one wants swiftness...When the attack on the enemy is swift, they will not have time to prepare.”¹⁰⁶

Tai Gong: “Carefully investigate the enemy’s intentions and quickly take advantage of them, and launch a sudden attack where it is unexpected.”¹⁰⁷

Importantly, this applies to the *Chinese understanding* of deterrence and compellence as well: *actual force* is applied overwhelmingly at an unexpected time or place when the enemy is weak or unprepared with the aim of deterring (expected or further) aggression or compelling the enemy to bring its behavior in line with Chinese interests. To be sure, this is the opposite of the very explicit American bravura in word and deed, such as when Clinton sent two aircraft carrier strike groups to the Taiwan Strait in 1996 to stop China from intimidating Taiwan with missile firings. Moreover, the psychological shock and disarray must be more profound in case of a Chinese deterrent or compellent first strike, as international tensions, diplomatic mitigation efforts, troop buildups to signal credibility of threat, etc.—the typical prelude to war involving a Western power—can be absent in the period immediately before a Chinese preemptive attack.

If we place this in the context of preserving material power by avoiding resource-draining, protracted wars, an imperative that is mentioned in most texts, a Chinese punitive demonstration of military effectiveness, intended to alter the enemy’s (future) calculus, aligns with a preference for limited wars in which China remains in control of the war’s scope, intensity, and duration. Tactical momentum is also a factor at play. Think of Sunzi’s water flowing through a river: the general needs to feel, grasp *the Way (dao)*, and flow along with the current’s direction to be able to use its force. Not only unity within the troops but also between the troops and command is key. As per Wei Liaozi: “Generals, commanders, officers, and troops should be a single body both in action and at rest.”¹⁰⁸ Conversely, if one allows oneself to get bogged down in positional fighting on the enemy’s terms, one cannot maintain a posture of “absolute flexibility” (*quanbian*, which connotes adaptability, expediency in accordance with the changeable situation), a key overarching tenet present in the *Seven Military Classics*.¹⁰⁹ Wei Liaozi: “One who understands the Way of warfare will invariably first plan against the defeats which arise from not knowing where to stop. Why must one always advance to be successful?”¹¹⁰ Not only has one made himself vulnerable to the enemy’s attrition, he also cannot seize tactical advantage by using stratagem in the employment of indirect methods (*qi*).

This brings us to retreating in time before the pendulum of initiative swings to the enemy, who has now mobilized a response. “Quitting while one’s ahead,” when some but not all objectives of a limited war are fulfilled, avoids mission creep or escalation for the sake of secondary goals.¹¹¹ In the logic of Chinese deterrent and compellent attack, China, moving at a rapid pace, withdraws to the status quo ante after significant material or immaterial pain has been inflicted. Three examples involving major battles demonstrate this Chinese Way of war by punishment. In all three cases, China reversed responsibility for starting hostilities by framing its war in moral terms. China argued that it had launched a “self-defense counter-attack,”¹¹² which is only correct insofar as

China *reacted to* an external development that *it deemed* was affecting its security interests intolerably (Mao's constructed "provocation" *xin* for external and internal narrative advantage).

- In 1962, China punished India for its "Forward Policy" that sought to strengthen India's position vis-à-vis the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Himalayas by establishing Indian military outposts. This was *in response to* China building a long road in the area in the years prior, an area that "had been progressively occupied by Chinese troops since 1957."¹¹³ In 1959, there were several border clashes, in one of which nine Indian policemen were killed; India granting the Dalai Lama asylum was seen as undermining China's authority over Tibet, further deteriorating relations.¹¹⁴ (In 2020, in one of the same areas, a small Chinese contingent bearing crude weapons attacked and killed twenty Indian soldiers. After delivering the punishment, they withdrew to their priorly held position).¹¹⁵ In 1962, "New China," which had "stood up" and could no longer be "bullied" and "humiliated," initiated a large-scale two-front surprise attack. Yet, after a month, having "taught India a lesson,"¹¹⁶ China announced a unilateral ceasefire. Instead of keeping the disputed land that it had taken, China withdrew to previously held positions behind the LAC (it did retain possession of Aksai Chin). China's goal was "quickly achieving peaceful, stable borders in the west" by delivering a painful blow that would "compel India to again sit down at the negotiation table" and resolve the border issue.¹¹⁷
- In 1969, China punished the Soviet Union's buildup of troops and armor along the border with hundreds of Chinese troops infiltrating and then ambushing Soviet soldiers stationed on Damansky-Zhenbao Island, which is located in the Russia-China border river, the Ussuri River, after which they retreated to the Chinese side of the river bank. China chose a tactical advantage: not pairing up against Soviet armor on the plains but instead seeking out a weak point to enact a surprising first blow. Two weeks later, with a large numerical superiority, China launched another attack on the same island over the ice, retreating when Russia brought its full firepower to bear on the island.¹¹⁸ According to China's plan, the PLA was to teach the Soviets "a bitter lesson," deterring further Soviet provocations such as the incursion into Qiliqin the year before, but "fight no battle unless victory is certain."¹¹⁹ As for justifying rhetoric, China asserted that the treaties with Imperial Russia were "unequal treaties," and hence void. Mao mentioned that Russia had taken the territory "east of Baikal," for which the Chinese people (meaning the worker class) had not given their "account" yet.¹²⁰
- In 1979, China punished Vietnam for signing a mutual defense treaty with the Soviet Union and invading and occupying Cambodia the month after. China viewed this as a provocation and part of a Soviet encirclement to its south and thus as a threat to China's national sovereignty and security as the region's great power. China said from the start that its operation would be limited in time and scope; the fighting eventually lasted just two weeks. Yet, China suffered an estimated 20,000 soldiers killed, displayed an ineffective army, and its compellence goal was not achieved: Vietnam did not withdraw its forces from Cambodia and Laos.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the Chinese action demonstrated that the Soviet Union did

not or did not have time to directly intervene on the side of its new treaty ally, denting Soviet credibility and signaling Chinese resolve vis-à-vis one of the two superpowers. Again, the limited political aim of the war was to “teach a lesson” to the enemy.¹²²

With respect to China’s cost-benefit calculation regarding whether to employ force, it should be added that the ability of the enemy to impose material cost over time, which is related to escalation risk, is likely factored in. This opportunistic aspect was on display when China moved to occupy islands disputed with Vietnam and the Philippines in the South China Sea when they were in a materially or tactically disadvantaged, unprepared, or weak position (Tai Gong’s *Six Secret Teachings* speaks of “fourteen changes in the enemy” that must be discerned and seized upon),¹²³ or were diplomatically isolated (Sunzi’s divided enemy alliances). In other words, *shi*, here meaning the configuration of the balance of forces, had become favorable; so much so that China did not need the conjunct application of the conventional “solid mountain” of *zheng*. The countries were judged (correctly) to be easy prey and the object of the assault right for the taking, gambling that China’s actions would not lead the enemy to escalate to all-out war.

- In 1974, China occupied the Crescent Group islands of the Paracels when South Vietnam was collapsing politically and militarily, and the US had withdrawn its military support.
- In the period 1984 to 1986, China battled Vietnamese troops on several occasions in the disputed border area when Vietnam was militarily tied down in Cambodia, its economy was on the brink of collapse, and Vietnamese intra-party politics showed divisions.
- In 1988, China occupied Johnson Reef, part of the Spratlys, when the Soviet military and diplomatic commitment to Communist Vietnam was wavering in the context of Gorbachev’s drive to normalize relations with China.
- In 1994, China occupied Mischief Reef when the US economic and trade relationship with China had become more important to Washington, and public pressure in the Philippines had forced out the large American naval presence in Subic Bay two years earlier.
- In 2012, China occupied Scarborough Shoal after the US, still the Philippines’ treaty ally, in effect excluded disputed islands from its treaty obligations by explicitly stating it maintained neutrality, leaving the Philippines’ weak maritime forces exposed. After a US-brokered agreement for both to withdraw from the Shoal, the Philippines did so while China’s now very capable forces remained. This is an example of tactical gain by trickery *zha*.

Note here that these examples are different from China’s gradual encroachment in the Himalayas, building infrastructure and forward-deployed civilian housing on disputed lands,¹²⁴ and in the South China Sea through artificial island building,¹²⁵ both in the Xi era. This falls under long-term *fait accompli* shaping operations. Next to enemy strength and whether it concerns (maritime) territory that China views as having historically always been Chinese, the assigned character of the enemy—whether of

comparable cultural standing or inferior “barbarians”—would likely play a role in the equation of limited versus unlimited (annihilation) war that is embarked on. The concentration camps for political reeducation in Xinjiang in the late 2010s are a case in point in the domestic realm, evoking comparison with the extermination in the same regions during the late Qing (1860s and 1870s).

Conclusion

This article has painted the broad contours of Chinese strategic culture as captured in the *Seven Military Classics* and supported by empirical examples of Chinese strategic behavior. In doing so, it has become clear that China, in history and during CCP rule of the country, has a strategic culture that is “an organic whole that closely combines strategic defense with offense in battle.”¹²⁶ In fact, if we return to the second part of China’s 2019 military strategy white paper put forward in the introduction, this is spelled out in roughly those words, with the caveat that China *does* in fact attack first when it feels that its core interests are threatened, which China rhetorically morally constructs as an attack against which a Chinese preemptive attack in “self-defense” is justified:

*“[China] will not attack unless attacked” and emphasizes “the unity of strategic defense and operational and tactical offense.”*¹²⁷

Thus, in sharp contrast to Chinese officials’ and commentators’ assertions, and flawed, cursory references to Sunzi by Western scholars, China is not pacific and certainly not tactically defensive: quite the opposite. Strategically, from China’s viewpoint, it never seeks trouble; *it is* pacific. That is, as long as—described by Zhao in the introduction—one submits to the leadership of Beijing.¹²⁸ While it can be argued that China does not seek to control with direct methods (maritime) territory that it does not view as historically Chinese, as demonstrated in the South China Sea and toward Taiwan, this is notably different if it does. The *Seven Military Classics*, as well as China today, do not have the illusion that nonmilitary civil (*wen*) methods by themselves can forge an allegiance to China that is sufficient to deter infringement on Chinese “core interests” (*hexin liyi*) or compel a perceived enemy to yield to China’s political demands. Hard power has always been valued as a matter of first principles, ideally employed together with indirect means that prepare the ground (shaping operations). As for matters that do not touch on China’s core interests, China, out of self-interest and historical anxiety for social unrest, looks inward first, adamant that it maintains a strong core domestically. Hence, British and American examples of imperial overstretch should be avoided.

Last, as this research had an important but necessarily not wholly complete focus on the ancient tradition in China’s strategic culture, a note on further research is warranted. The complete Chinese strategic culture that exists, Scobell argues, “is a result of interaction between different strands of strategic tradition,” which, according to him, must also include such “traditions as Legalism and Daoism as well as popular myths and folk traditions.”¹²⁹ He is right. In this regard, the second section of this article addressed issues of collective memory that play a role in Chinese military

thinking, something that deserves more scholarly scrutiny. China's history-laden rhetoric during the 1962 Sino-Indian and 1969 Sino-Soviet border clashes points to past humiliations as drivers of restorative military action.¹³⁰ Ho's quote shows that this kind of emotive language of being wronged is still used to justify Chinese actions today.¹³¹ What is also missing is the incorporation of the revolutionary thought of the Mao era, examining to what extent it contrasts or overlaps with the thought captured in the *Seven Military Classics*, and whether we can recognize certain methods in China's behavior today.¹³² For instance, the resemblance of Tai Gong's *Six Secret Teachings* with Mao's *On Guerrilla Warfare* is striking. Both are written from the perspective of a rebel force that seeks to overthrow an established ruler, and both advocate indirect or unorthodox subversive and guerrilla methods, together with, eventually, a direct force to do so.¹³³ The impetus for this research lies in Xi's reversal of Deng's separation between party and government (*dangzheng fenkai*), a reintroduction of political work (*zhengzhi gongzuo*) that has not spared the PLA.¹³⁴ This should be reflected in the analysis.¹³⁵

Notes

1. "Pacific," meaning mild, peaceful, conciliatory, inclined to *avoid* conflict and the use of violence, and not "pacifist" is used because the latter is usually associated with an ideologically-informed stance against all forms of war and warfare. This is not what China has claimed.
2. Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, eds. Daniel A. Bell and Sun Zhe (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 86–92, 102, 106.
3. Zhao Tingyang, "A Political World Philosophy in Terms of All-Under-Heaven (Tian-xia)," *Diogenes* 56, no. 1 (2009): 8–9.
4. Xi Jinping, "China Will Never Seek Hegemony: Xi," *People's Daily*, September 22, 2021, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2021/0922/c90000-9899193.html>.
5. The most recent military strategy is of 2019. State Council Information Office, "*xin shidai de zhongguo guofang*" [China's national defense in the new era], *State Council Information Office*, July 2019, <https://www.andrewerickson.com/2019/07/full-text-of-defense-white-paper-chinas-national-defense-in-the-new-era-english-chinese-versions/>.
6. Roel Sterckx, *Chinese Thought From Confucius to Cook Ding* (London: Penguin, 2019), 34–8.
7. Xi Jinping, "*chengqian qihou jiwang kailai chaozhe zhonghua minzu weida fuxing mubiao fenyong qianjin*" [Building on past achievements and forging ahead into the future, we strive toward the goal of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation], *People's Daily*, November 30, 2012, <https://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2012/1130/c64094-19746089.html>.
8. Feng Zhang, "The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 2 (2013): 305–28.
9. Xi Jinping, "*xi jinping zai bu lu ri ouzhou xueyuan de yanjiang*" [Xi Jinping's speech at the College of Europe in Bruges], *People's Daily*, April 1, 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0401/c1024-24798043.html>.
10. See a decade of Xi's speeches on this effort. Xi Jinping, "*jiaqiang wenhua yichan baohu chuancheng hongyang zhonghua youxiu chuantong wenhua*" [Strengthen the protection and transmission of cultural heritages and promote excellent traditional Chinese culture], *Qiushi*, April 15, 2024, <https://www.12371.cn/2024/04/15/ARTI1713164888317181.shtml>; Xi Jinping, "Xi Calls for Carrying Forward Fine Traditional Chinese Culture," *Xinhua News Agency*, September 12, 2024, https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202409/12/content_WS66e23b37c6d0868f4e8eadea.html.

11. Communist Party Members Network, “*xi jinping de shujia shang dou you naxie shu zhe fen shu dan dangyuan ganbu qing shou hao gongchandang yuan wang*” [What books are on Xi Jinping’s bookshelf? Party members and officials, take note of this reading list], April 23, 2018, <https://news.12371.cn/2018/04/23/ARTI1524465234063906.shtml?from=groupmessage/and/isappinstalled=0>.
12. Jia Min, “*lianghui neiwai xi jinping: san da guanjian ci fachu qiang jun zui qiang yin*” [Xi Jinping inside and outside the two sessions: Three key words sound the strongest voice for a strong military], *China Military Network*, March 23, 2017, http://www.81.cn/2017zt/2017-03/23/content_7536734.htm.
13. Andrea Ghiselli, “Revising China’s Strategic Culture: Contemporary Cherry-Picking of Ancient Strategic Thought,” *China Quarterly* 233, March 2018, 174–5. Also evincing the thought of Sunzi, see, for example, Xu Sanfei and Wu Siliang, “*jintian, zhanlue weishe bi-anle muyang—shi xi wai jun zhanlue weishe lilun yu shijian de fazhan qushi*” [Today, strategic deterrence has changed its appearance—An analysis of the development trends in foreign military strategic deterrence theories and practices], *PLA Daily*, January 30, 2024, http://www.81.cn/szb_223187/szbxq/index.html?paperName=jfb&paperDate=2024-01-30&paperNumber=07&articleid=924468.
14. Kerry M. Kartchner, “Defining and Scoping Strategic Culture: Promises, Challenges, and Conundrums” in *Routledge Handbook of Strategic Culture*, edited by Kerry M. Kartchner, Briana D. Bowen, Jeannie L. Johnson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), 6.
15. Stephen P. Rosen, “Military Effectiveness: Why Society Matters,” *International Security* 19, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 12.
16. Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 26–31.
17. Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 130, 133.
18. Ghiselli, “Revising China’s Strategic Culture,” 167–9.
19. Andrew Scobell, “Strategic Culture and China: IR Theory Versus the Fortune Cookie?,” *Strategic Insights* 6, no. 10 (November 2005), 5.
20. Ghiselli, “Revising China’s Strategic Culture,” 170.
21. On how strategic culture shaped China’s military innovation choices, see Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Strategic Culture and Military Innovation: From the Nuclear to the Information Age* (PhD dissertation, Tufts University, 2004), Chap. 4.
22. See Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, eds., *zhanlue xue* [Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2005), Chap. 8; Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and William S. Murray, “China’s Mine Warfare: A PLA Navy ‘Assassin’s Mace’ Capability,” *Naval War College China Maritime Studies* no. 3 (2009), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=cmssi-red-books>.
23. See M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), chaps. 5 and 6.
24. Andrew Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 69–72.
25. See “Address to Officers at the Rank of General and Above in Command of Troops Enforcing Martial Law in Beijing” and “We Are Confident That We Can Handle China’s Affairs Well” in Deng Xiaoping, *The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994).
26. See, on grand strategy, Wu Chunqiu, “*guangyi da zhanlue*” [A broad understanding of grand strategy], (Beijing: *shishi chubanshe*, 1998).
27. Xi Jinping, “*xi jinping chuxi jiefangjun daibiao tuan quanti huiyi*” [Xi Jinping attends plenary meeting of the PLA delegation], *People’s Daily*, March 11, 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/0311/c70731-24606968.html>.
28. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Translated by Lionel Giles (New York: Wellfleet Press, 2022), 44. I mostly used the Mandarin characters in the book, which enables a more literal translation.

29. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Translated by J. J. Graham (London: Trübner, 1873), 77, 93–4.
30. Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, Translated by G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Kingston: Legacy Books Press, 2008), 63. The central element of concentration upon the decisive point recurs throughout the text.
31. As per Wei Liaozi: “Not Encountering Difficulty Lies in Foresight and Preparation.” “First evaluate the enemy, move afterward.” In Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, translation and commentary by Ralph D. Sawyer (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 247, 254. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, in the same work, at 535, on knowing your enemy in the context of being prepared for combat, underscores the fluidity between the status of peace and war, defending and attacking: “Attacking does not stop with just attacking their cities or attacking their formations. One must have techniques for attacking their minds.”
32. See, similarly, *Methods of the Sima*, adding that command must keep pace with the forces. Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 131; Wuzi’s *Art of War* in the same work, 212, 214, 215.
33. Sun, *Art of War*, 22, 54, 56, 60. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 338: “Without techniques to govern (the expenditure of the force), how can one direct the army?”
34. Most *Military Classics* refer to it explicitly, whether to enable tactical advantage or subverting the enemy forces’ cohesion from within. See for a mix of smart tactics and deception a segment very similar to Sunzi called “The Unorthodox Army,” in Tai Gong’s *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 52, 70–2. This can also be found in Wuzi’s *Art of War* in the same work, 208. *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*: “Spread false words and cause him to make errors. Set out your net to catch them.” In the same work, 294. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, in the same work, 325, 344, 346, 351, refers to the “Way (*dao*) of deceit” several times. “When [your men] flee, do not punish them, but observe whether the enemy advances to take the bait.” See also Lisa Raphals, “Sunzi versus Xunzi: Two Views of Deception and Indirection,” *Early China* 39 (2016): 193–4.
35. Sun, *Art of War*, 28, 30–1. *Methods of the Sima* makes a similar point: after executing a select group of unrighteous top elites, the others can be redeemed and brought to one’s side “by sharing misfortune with them, by sharing benefits with them.” In fact, *Methods of the Sima* explicitly states that being generous to the vanquished, providing good governance, is an important “method” in winning the war, something that in the West would be called post-war “nation building,” “winning hearts and minds.” In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 128, 136. Wuzi’s *Art of War*, in the same work, 208, states: “Being victorious in battle is easy, but preserving the results of victory is difficult.” *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, in the same work, 347–48, on sparing the lives of the conquered, evincing (projecting) superior morals: “The civil (*wen*) is able to attract and attach the masses, the martial is able to overawe the enemy.”
36. Sun, *Art of War*, 14, 28, 44, 60, 70; Wuzi’s *Art of War* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 213, 217. *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*, in the same work, 297–8, expands the appraisal of “the enemy’s situation” with the economic means he possesses to sustain a protracted war: “Look into his granaries and armories, estimate his food stocks.”
37. Sun, *Art of War*, 16, 60; *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*: “Accord with the enemy’s actions to initiate measures and repress him.” In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 293. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*: “Engaging in battle in accord with the respective strengths [of your men, and the enemy’s men].” For example, if “the barbarians” are good on horseback, avoid fast-moving fighting and instead play to the strength of your crossbowmen and create a slow-moving fight. In the same work, 334.
38. See, similarly, Tai Gong’s *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 68–9; *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* in the same work, 292. *Methods of the Sima*, Wuzi’s *Art of War*, and Wei Liaozi in the same work, 135 and 141, and 218, and 262, all refer to “exploiting the balance of forces.” *Sima*: “attacking the weak and quiet.” Wei Liaozi: “If you have some-

thing, pretend not to have it; if you lack something, appear to have it. How can the enemy trust the appearance?” Wei Liaozi and others advise a thorough assessment of the relative balance of forces and readiness (including logistics) before launching an offensive campaign. Do not attack, remain on the defensive, as long as you do not have the advantage. In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 272. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong* advances the same point, in the same work, 324, 333, 335, 352. It gives the example of “causing misperception”: secretly ordering the troops to “change their insignia and exchange their uniforms [to then] employ unorthodox methods to attack [the enemy].”

39. Sun, *Art of War*, 56, 60, 74, 76.
40. Sun, *Art of War*, 20, 28, 30.
41. Sun, *Art of War*, 28. See, for instance, Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), chap. 2; Aaron L. Friedberg, “Bucking Beijing: An Alternative U.S. China Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 5 (September/October 2012): 50.
42. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong* offers a vivid example of winning without fighting through co-opting (potential) enemies who cannot be defeated with direct methods, in this case because the territory of “the barbarians” is “distant, wild, and desert-like,” and they are practiced archers and horse-riders. In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 332–3, 337. Chiang Kai-shek, during the Northern Expedition to unite China, defeated some warlords militarily but co-opted others. Regional power centers, and thus a weaker China, remained.
43. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 26–7.
44. Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967): 178–83.
45. Sun, *Art of War*, 46. Also mentioning *shi* is Tai Gong’s *Six Secret Teachings*, in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 70.
46. This sequence of first direct and then indirect methods, involving the weakening of already weak spots in the enemy’s human terrain, is most clearly described in Wuzi’s *Art of War* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 210–11. In *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, the indirect tool does not necessarily come first. Rather, it sees orthodox and unorthodox as changeable as well as working in conjunction. For example, the (directly applied, powerful) orthodox group of troops exploits the feigned retreat executed by the (deceptively portrayed as weak) unorthodox group. The latter group can in turn become the orthodox method executing group. This fluidity enhances the difficulty of the enemy in discerning the shape of one’s force. In Sawyer, 323, 358.
47. An ancient version of *Unrestricted Warfare* can be found in Tai Gong’s *Six Secret Teachings*, Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 33, 35, 56–7. The text has a segment on subverting the loyalty of enemy officers with, for example, bribes, deep relationships, flattery and giving honors, and beautiful women, called “Civil Offensive.” See similarly, Wuzi’s *Art of War* in the same work, 210. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, “*chaoxian zhan*” [Unrestricted warfare] (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999).
48. Xiao Tianliang, Lou Yaoliang, Kang Wuchao, and Cai Renzhao, eds., “*zhanlüe xue*” [Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2020), 86, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-01-26%202020%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy.pdf>.
49. Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007), 14.
50. BBC, “Xi Jinping Says Taiwan ‘Must and Will Be’ Reunited with China,” January 2, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-46733174>; Reuters, “Xi Says No One Can Stop China’s ‘Reunification’ with Taiwan,” December 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/xi-says-no-one-can-stop-chinas-reunification-with-taiwan-2024-12-31/>. John Power, “China’s Xi says ‘Reunification’ with Taiwan ‘Unstoppable,’” *Al Jazeera*, January 1, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/1/1/chinas-xi-says-reunification-with-taiwan-unstoppable>.

51. This timeline is based on American intelligence. See comments by the Indo-Pacific commander, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the CIA director in Noah Robertson, "How DC Became Obsessed with a Potential 2027 Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," *Defense News*, May 7, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2024/05/07/how-dc-became-obsessed-with-a-potential-2027-chinese-invasion-of-taiwan/>.
52. Ministry of National Defense, "pei luo xi cuan tai de ruogan shishi" [Some Facts About Pelosi's Visit to Taiwan], *PLA Daily*, August 25, 2022, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2022-08/25/content_322712.htm.
53. Guo Yuandan, "'fanqie xiangchang' xin changtai! zhuanjia: 'taidu' fenlie shili tiaoxin yici jiefangjun jiu xiang qian yibu" [The new normal of 'salami slicing'! Experts: For every provocation by 'Taiwan Independence' separatist forces, the People's Liberation Army takes a step forward], *Global Times*, May 23, 2024, <https://hqttime.huanqiu.com/article/4HuTsfQJAEU>.
54. See section 10, on psychological attack and defense, in chapter 11 on war operation, and chapter 13, section 2, on operational guidance, in Xiao et al., eds., *Science of Military Strategy*.
55. Buzan stresses in this and other work that he is not a China expert. Barry Buzan, "The 'Chinese school': An Outsider Perspective," in Peng Lu et al., eds., "Forum: Debating the Chinese School(s) of IR Theory," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 17, no. 3 (2024): 285–7.
56. See Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, chap. 2.
57. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 106–7.
58. See Raphals, "Sunzi versus Xunzi," 208ff.
59. See Figure 2 in Andrea Ghiselli, "Revising China's Strategic Culture," 175.
60. On the Tsinghua website, his teachings are described (in Mandarin for a domestic audience) as follows: "Through in-depth analysis of national interests, Yan Xuetong allows students to truly appreciate the importance of the Party and the country to the people, thereby cultivating emotions and shaping identity. His classes are considered by students to be 'the most moving and profound Party lessons.'" Tsinghua University, "wei xue wei jiao wei shi yue chuncui yue jianchi — ji 2015 nian qinghua daxue youxiu gongchandang yan xue-tong" [Pursuing Scholarship, teaching, and mentorship: The purer the commitment, the more unwavering the dedication—A profile of Yan Xuetong, 2015 Outstanding Communist Party Member of Tsinghua University], July 3, 2015, <https://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/1774/72043.htm>.
61. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 52.
62. Tai Gong's *Six Secret Teachings* starts the text with the core Mandate of Heaven notions of the "sage king," who's "virtuous" and "benevolent" rule forges his "authority." This "good governance"—reminding us of CCP scholar Yu Keping's work—is only possible through wealth creation, and extends to nearby states: "Do not estrange your relatives." In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 41–7. See also Qinghua Wang and Gang Guo, "Yu Keping and Chinese Intellectual Discourse on Good Governance," *China Quarterly* 224 (December 2015): 985–1005.
63. *Methods of the Sima*, in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 126–7, 129, explicitly mentions "proper conduct" during war, "not exhausting the incapable and having sympathy for the wounded and sick." See also the Sunzi section and footnote 33. Accordingly, I do not agree with Johnston that the labeling of a country as enemy removes all restraints in waging the war. Several texts stress limiting the cost to both oneself and the enemy, albeit not necessarily for moral but for instrumental reasons.
64. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 69–72.
65. Wei Liaozi in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 273.
66. *Ibid.*, 260.
67. See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "kangmei yuanchao" [Resist the US, Aid Korea], https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/wjs_674919/2159_674923/200011/t20001107_7950018.shtml; Office of the Historian, "Memorandum by the Department of the

- Army to the Department of State,” June 27, 1949, [https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v07p2/d266#:~:text=South%20Korean%20National%20Assembly%20on,officials%20of%20the%20Rhee%20government.&text=4-,5.,\(NSC%208%2F2\):](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v07p2/d266#:~:text=South%20Korean%20National%20Assembly%20on,officials%20of%20the%20Rhee%20government.&text=4-,5.,(NSC%208%2F2):) in Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 26ff.
68. People’s Daily, “U.S. the Biggest Threat to Peace, Stability in South China Sea,” August 13, 2021, <https://en.people.cn/n3/2021/0813/c90000-9883628.html>.
 69. Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, 3–4.
 70. Benjamin Ho, “Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism: China’s Rise, Its Goodness, and Greatness,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 39, no. 3 (August 2014): 171.
 71. Sun, *Art of War*, 12. Wuzi’s *Art of War* states that “control”—discipline in battle—can trump numerical advantage. In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 214. See, similarly, Wei Liaozi, in the same work, 246; *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, in the same work, 333–4. On motivating the troops to (stay and) fight, see *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*, in the same work, 295: “The basis for complete victory in battle is military administration.” See also Tai Gong’s *Six Secret Teachings*, on the general leading by humble example, in the same work, 66–7.
 72. Wuzi’s *Art of War* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 214–15, 223; see, similarly, *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, in the same work, 354.
 73. Wei Liaozi in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 250.
 74. Clausewitz, *On War*, 74.
 75. Colin S. Gray, drawing on Clausewitz and Howard, in Gray, 26ff.
 76. Yuan Jifu, “*ba women ziji de shiqing zuo hao (sixiang zongheng)*” [Let’s Do Our Own Thing Well (Thoughtful Perspectives)], *People’s Daily*, August 24, 2022, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0824/c40531-32509894.html>.
 77. Wuzi’s *Art of War* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 207, 209.
 78. *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 297.
 79. Wei Liaozi in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 249.
 80. Tai Gong’s *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 43; Wei Liaozi, 259 and *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*, both in the same work, 294. See also Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 78, 87–8, 107.
 81. Wuzi’s *Art of War* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 207; see similarly *Methods of the Sima*, in the same work, 126.
 82. Wei Liaozi in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 246.
 83. *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 298.
 84. Xinhua News Agency, “*xi jinping zai kanwang canjia zhengxie huiyi de min jian gongshang lian jie weiyuan shi qiangdiao zhengque yindao minying jingji jiankang fazhan gao zhiliang fazhan*” [When Xi Jinping visited members of the China National Democratic Construction Association and the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce attending the CPPCC meeting, he emphasized the need to correctly guide the healthy and high-quality development of the private economy], March 6, 2023, http://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/2023-03/06/c_1129417096.htm.
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 86. *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 292–3.
 87. Wei Liaozi, by contrast, rejected this philosophical notion by putting the human effort centrally. In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 242.
 88. Xinhua News Agency, “*xi jinping zai zhonggong zhongyang zhengzhi ju di sanshi ci jiti xuexi shi qiangdiao jiaqiang he gaijin guoji chuanbo gongzuo zhanshi zhenshi liti quanmian de zhongguo*” [Xi Jinping stressed during the 30th Collective Study of the Politburo of the CCP Central Committee to strengthen and improve international communication efforts to show a true, three dimensional, and comprehensive picture of China], June 1, 2021, https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-06/01/c_1127517461.htm.
 89. John King Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 12–13.

90. *Methods of the Sima* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 131, 133, 137, 139.
91. Tai Gong's *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 47.
92. *Methods of the Sima* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 126.
93. Wuzi's *Art of War* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 206.
94. *Methods of the Sima* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 142; Wuzi's *Art of War* in the same work, 211, 219.
95. Wuzi's *Art of War* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 211.
96. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*, in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 336.
97. Tai Gong's *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 52, 68; *Methods of the Sima* in the same work, 134–5; *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*, 296–7, and Wei Liaozi, in the same work, 250.
98. *Methods of the Sima* in the same work, 134–5.
99. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 76.
100. Wei Liaozi in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 247.
101. International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The Military Balance: The Annual Assessment of Global Military Capabilities and Defence Economics," 2024, 256–8.
102. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 62–76.
103. This pertains to the "main strategic direction" (*zhuyao zhanlüe fangxiang*) of China's defense policy. See Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's military strategy for a 'new era': Some Change, More Continuity, and Tantalizing Hints," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 46, no. 6–7 (2023): 1155, 1158.
104. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 92. *Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 346.
105. Wei Liaozi ascribes the first quote to Sunzi, which cannot be found in the version we have today. In Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 261–2, 475.
106. *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 296–7.
107. Tai Gong's *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 52.
108. Wei Liaozi in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 250.
109. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 30.
110. Wei Liaozi in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 262.
111. Cf. Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 66ff.
112. Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force*, 32.
113. Kuang-sheng Liao and Allen S. Whiting, "Chinese Press Perceptions of Threat: The U.S. and India, 1962," *China Quarterly* 53 (March 1973): 82.
114. Paul M. McGarr, "The Long Shadow of Colonial Cartography: Britain and the Sino-Indian War of 1962," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 5 (2019): 629–30.
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120. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," 1187.
121. Daniel Tretiak, "China's Vietnam War and Its Consequences," *China Quarterly* 80 (December 1979): 750–3.

122. See the cited interview with Deng expressing his intention in Harlan W. Jencks, "China's 'Punitive' War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 8 (August 1979): 803 fn. 6; see the conversation of Deng with Carter in Office of the Historian, "Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980, Volume XIII, China. 207. Memorandum of Conversation," January 30, 1979," <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d207>.
123. Examples of opportunities to strike with tactical advantage are when the enemy troops are exhausted after a long march; are dispersed because they have just begun assembling; or are stretched thin because they are traveling along long roads. Tai Gong's *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 96–7; See, similarly, Wuzi's *Art of War* in the same work, 213.
124. Muiy Xiao and Agnes Chang, "China's Great Wall of Villages," *New York Times*, August 10, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/08/10/world/asia/china-border-villages.html>.
125. CSIS, "China Island Tracker," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>. There is a similar page for Vietnam's expansion efforts.
126. Xiao et al., eds., *Science of Military Strategy*, 18.
127. State Council Information Office, "China's national defense."
128. Zhao, "A Political World Philosophy," 8–9.
129. Scobell, "Strategic Culture and China," 3–4.
130. As for the first border clash, the McMahon Line in the Himalayas, drawn by colonial Britain, was never accepted by China, which, less than two decades before the Sino-Indian war, had British and other colonial "concessions" in places like Shanghai.
131. Benjamin Ho, "Understanding Chinese Exceptionalism," 171.
132. A duality also argued for by Shu Guang Zhang in "China: Traditional and Revolutionary Heritage" in Ken Booth and Russell Troad, eds., *Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 29.
133. To pick out one sentence by Mao: "During the process of hostilities, guerillas gradually develop into orthodox forces that operate in conjunction with other units of the regular army." Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, Translated by Samuel B. Griffith (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy, 1989), 25; Griffith discussing Tai Gong's *Six Secret Teachings* in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*, 23–4, 34.
134. Xi Jinping, "*dang de qunzhong luxian jiaoyu shijian huodong gongzuo huiyi zhaokai xi jinping fabiao zhongyao jianghua*" [A working conference on the Party's mass line education and practice campaign was held, Xi Jinping delivering an important speech], June 18, 2013, https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-06/18/c_116194026.htm?+Newsletter&utm_term=0_171f237867-9a78854fde-; Bonnie Lin et al., "The Purges Within the Chinese Military Are Even Deeper Than You Think," CSIS, February 26, 2026, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-pla-military-purges/>.
135. The problem of the modern-day communists' dogmatic incoherence is reflected in Xi pointing to the "historical cycle of rise and fall" while in the same paragraph advancing Maoist "self-revolution" as the answer to prevent the Party's fall. Xi Jinping, "*shenru tuijin dang de ziwo geming*" [Deepen the party's self-revolution], *Qiushi*, December 15, 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202412/content_6992654.htm.

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