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Writings on Warfare Found in Ancient Chinese Tombs

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Mark Edward Lewis

WRITINGS ON WARFARE FOUND IN ANCIENT CHINESE TOMBS

Actual warfare has always escaped adequate depiction in writing. War in the field is converted to war on paper, or bamboo strips in the case of ancient China, only through the removal of its violence and emotions, as well as the errors, accidents, and products of chance that constitute Clausewitz's "friction." In the West these factors have been eliminated by the "narrative tradition" of the "battle piece" described by John Keegan.¹ In ancient China, warfare was depicted as a mental art that gave the strategist complete mastery of the conflict. For centuries these texts were known only through the examples preserved in the examination syllabus of the Song dynasty (A.D. 960-1126). They lacked historical context, and several were dismissed as forgeries. In recent decades, however, finds of texts in tombs have allowed a complete reconsideration of the dating of these works, their evolution, and their links to other works of the period.

The most important find was the tomb at Yinqueshan, Linyi in Shandong, dating from the 130s B.C. It contained over four thousand bamboo strips, and five wooden boards listing "chapter" titles of some of the works found in the tomb. Those strips pertaining to warfare are as follows. There were substantial passages that appear in three of the received military treatises-

¹For the concept of friction in Clausewitz's theory of war, see Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University, 1976), Book One, ch. 3-7, esp. ch. 7 "Friction in War;" Paret, "Clausewitz," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University, 1986), pp. 202-205. On the intellectual limitations of standard Western accounts of the conduct of battles ("the battle piece"), see John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (paperback ed., New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 36-46.

-the *Sunzi*, the *Wei Liaozi*, and the *Tai gong liu tao*. There was also one previously lost work--the treatise attributed to Sun Bin. In addition there were fragments of texts closely related to chapters on warfare from the *Mozi* and the *Guanzi*, two philosophical texts compiled in the Warring States and the Han. Finally, there was a large number of strips stemming from the *yin/yang* school that relate to the conduct of government and warfare.²

These finds, and others such as the texts from the early Han tombs at Mawangdui, have made at least four major contributions to our knowledge of military texts in early China. First, they have confirmed the early date of a substantial portion of the received "military classics" and thus allowed us to treat these as texts in a historical setting and not a corpus of timeless wisdom. Second, the new finds offer internal evidence for more precisely dating the texts and establishing a tentative sequence among them. This sequence allows us to create both a model of the evolution of early military thought and to relate these developments to the shifting political situation in Warring States China. Third, the substantial body of writings found in the tombs that were not preserved in the military classics is devoted primarily to the application to warfare of *yin/yang* thought, Five Phases theory, calendrical models, and divination.³ Finally, although I will not discuss this question in detail here, the newly discovered military texts, like all such tomb finds, suggest the interplay between the physical nature of writings and their social role.

The first point requires little elaboration. The finds at Yinqueshan show that versions

²For a brief, English-language account of the tomb and its contents, see Roger Ames, tr., *Sun-tzu The Art of Warfare: The First English Translation Incorporating the Recently Discovered Yin-ch'üeh-shan Texts* (New York: Ballantine, 1993), "Appendix".

³On this see Robin Yates, "The Yin-Yang Texts from Yinqueshan: An Introduction and Partial Reconstruction with Notes on their Significance in Relation to Huang-Lao Daoism," *Early China* 19 (1994), pp. 75-144.

or elements of three of the seven "military classics" already existed at the beginning of the empire. Since one "classic"--the dialogue between Tang Taizong and Li Jing--makes no pretence of being an early text, that means that fully half the military classics with claims to an early date are now confirmed as being so. In addition, the version of the *Sunzi* found at Yinqueshan is close to the historically received version, although there are significant textual variations, and judging from the fragmentary "table of contents" preserved on one of four wooden boards found in the tomb, the order of chapters was not the same. The previously unknown chapters of the *Sunzi* are not listed on this wooden board and they may well, as Li Ling has argued, represent later additions serving as commentaries or as dramatizations of Sun Wu--the eponymous master of the text-- as a "historical" figure.⁴ The existence of such later strata indicate an earlier date for the other chapters. Finally, the existence of the *Sun Bin bing fa*, which claims to represent the thought of a late fourth-century B.C. descendant of Sun Wu and which expands and elaborates many of the formulations found in the *Sunzi*, similarly indicates that the writing of military treatises must have begun early in the Warring States, in order for the emergence of this "second generation" text.

This dating can be confirmed by evidence from the newly discovered strips. The most important evidence is the appearance of prophecies of historical events within the texts. Where such prophecies are fulfilled, one can be fairly certain that the passage in question was written after the event predicted. The most important such prophecy appears in a previously unknown chapter of the *Sunzi*:

⁴On these wooden boards, see Ames, *Sun-tzu*, p. 275; Li Ling, *Sunzi gu ben yanjiu* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue, 1995), pp. 4-6, 239-253. On the significance of the absence of the titles of the newly discovered chapters from this board see Li, *Sunzi gu ben yanjiu*, pp. 212-213, 244-248.

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The king of Wu asked Sunzi, "When the six generals [a reference to the six powerful clans that contended for power in Jin state in the fifth century B.C.] divide up and occupy Jin's territory, who will perish first? Who will be secure and successful? Sunzi said, "The Fan and Zhonghang clans will be the first to perish."
"Who will be next?"
"The Zhi clan will be next."
"Who will be next?"
"The Han and Wei will be next. The Zhao have not lost their ancient laws, so the state of Jin will revert to them."⁵

The prophecy of the sequential destruction of the Fan, Zhonghang, and Zhi lineages is accurate, which indicates that the text was written after the destruction of the Zhi clan in 453 B.C.

The balance of the prophecy is harder to use. Several scholars have argued that since Jin was officially divided into three states in 403, the incorrect prophecy of Zhao's triumph indicates that the chapter was written before that date.⁶ However, Li Ling has challenged this argument for three reasons. First, while the incorrect prophecy clearly shows that the author of this chapter was writing before the triumph of Qin in the 220s, and perhaps before Qin's victory over Zhao at Changping in 260, it was not necessarily written before the official partition of Jin in 403. During the early decades of the third century Zhao was battling Qin for supremacy and even defeating it, while Wei had fallen to the second rank and Han had been reduced to a powerless buffer state. For anyone writing at that time the prophecy of Zhao's triumph would have been virtually an achieved reality. This leads to Li's second point, that anyone writing in the late fifth century would scarcely have predicted the victory of Zhao over Wei, then the most powerful state in the Chinese world, while such a prophecy would be natural in the early third century. Finally,

⁵I here follow the translation in Ralph Sawyer, *Sun-tzu: The Art of War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 246-247.

⁶For this argument see Wu Shuping, "Cong Linyi Han mu zhujian 'Wu wen' kan Sun wu de fajia sixiang," *Wenwu* 1975:4, pp. 6-7; Tay Lien-soo (Zheng Liangshu), "Lun Sunzi de zuocheng shidai," in *Zhujian boshu lunwenji* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), pp. 68-71.

Li argues that the literary form of an extended dialogue between ruler and master appears relatively late in the Warring States--with no evidence of its existence earlier than the *Mencius* in the late fourth century B.C.--and is not likely to be found in a fifth century text.⁷

I find Li's arguments persuasive, although by no means decisive, and the early third century dating that he proposes is supported by the fact that the Yinqueshan version of the *Sunzi* chapter on spies clearly refers to Su Qin's acting as a spy in Qi state in order that Yan might flourish.⁸ This story--elaborated in the chapters of the *Strategems of the Warring States* found at Mawangdui--indicates that the *Sunzi* chapter was written after Yan's victory in 284 B.C., i.e., at the same time as Li Ling's hypothetical date for the chapter of dialogue with the King of Wu. In any case, it is clear that the composition of the *Sunzi* was still going on in the early third century B.C. To the extent that these new-found chapters are, as Li Ling argues, commentarial or dramatizing extensions of earlier chapters, this suggests that the *Sunzi* was already begun in the mid-fourth century, if not earlier.

As noted earlier, this dating is strengthened by the discovery of the lost *Sun Bin* treatise, a text attributed to a descendant of the putative author of the *Sunzi*.⁹ This supposed link between "authors" indicates an actual connection between texts, for the *Sun Bin* assesses, analyzes, and develops many of the major strategic ideas of the *Sunzi*. It accepts such fundamental principles as reliance on indirection and alternation between "normative" (*heng*) action and "extraordinary" (*qi*) maneuvers. However, it extends the *Sunzi*'s theory of war through discussions of the use

⁷Li, *Sunzi gu ben yanjiu*, p. 213.

⁸For the variant passage from Yinqueshan referring to Su Qin, see Li, *Sunzi gu ben yanjiu*, p. 19.

⁹See Ralph D. Sawyer, tr., *Sun Pin: Military Methods* (Boulder: Westview, 1995).

of such newly developed types of forces as massed cross bows and cavalry. Like other late Warring States treatises it also placed greater emphasis on the soldiers' training and morale, on the problem of securing provisions--which the *Sunzi* had assumed could be largely derived from pillaging the enemy--and on generals and formations. Finally, the *Sun Bin* and later treatises evince significant advances in the art of exposition and argument. Whereas the *Sunzi*, apart from the new, perhaps later chapters discovered at Yinqueshan and fragments preserved in the *Tong dian*, consists of "bundles" of maxims with little logical connection, the *Sun Bin*, *Wuzi*, and later treatises feature extended elaboration of basic concepts, long enumerations of key features, and sustained dialogues. In this way the *Sunzi* is closer to a work like the *Lun yu*, begun perhaps in the late fifth century, than the more elaborate arguments and dialogues that figure in later philosophical works and military treatises.¹⁰

This indicates that the *Sun Bin* is a later development presupposing the prior existence of the *Sunzi*, and the two may well form a single, continuously developing intellectual tradition united under the Sun name. The *Sun Bin* contains a prophecy of the occupation of Qi by Yan in 284 B.C.¹¹ This shows it was being compiled in the early third century B.C., at approximately the same time as the later, "commentarial" or dramatizing chapters of the *Sunzi*.

I will at this point suggest a possible model for the historical development of Warring States military treatises. Prophecies and historical references in the *Sunzi* indicate that its later chapters were being compiled in the early third century B.C., suggesting that the book itself was

¹⁰This argument is elaborated in Robin Yates, "New Light on Ancient Military Texts: Notes on Their Nature and Evolution, and the Development of Military Specialization in Warring States China," *T'oung Pao* 74 (1988), pp. 212-248.

¹¹See Sawyer, *Sun Pin*, p. 156.

begun in the fourth century. One interpretation of the failed prophecy would even indicate that it was being written in the second half of the fifth century, but this argument should probably be rejected. The later chapters of the work and the biographies of the eponymous "master" make him active in the state of Wu in the last decade of the sixth and the very beginning of the fifth century B.C. Sun Bin won his greatest victory around 341 B.C., while the book written in his name prophesies the conquest of Qi in 284. Similarly, Wu Qi, putative author of the *Wuzi* treatise, died around 381 B.C., while the text written in his name contains information that suggests it was being written considerably later. In the chapter "Evaluating the Enemy" the lord of Wei asks Wu Qi to discuss the strategic situation of his state. Wu Qi's reply—which emphasizes the certainty of rewards and punishments in Qin—assumes that the reforms of Shang Yang had already been introduced, suggesting a date at least four decades after Wu Qi's death.¹² Moreover, both question and reply assume a world consisting of seven great powers, a strategic situation that had not developed until the 320s. In short, the tentative dating of the texts based on prophecies and historical references indicates that in every case they were being compiled several generations after the life of their eponyms, or that an invented author was placed two or three generations earlier. While the writing of the texts could have begun during the supposed lives of their eponyms, hard dates always point to a time several generations later. This indicates that the military treatises, like other works in China from this period, were probably not written by the men for whom they were named, but by groups of ambitious scholars who borrowed a prestigious name to lend authority to a doctrine.

These datings also suggest a rough correlation between the sequence of the military

¹²See Ralph D. Sawyer, tr., *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Boulder: Westview, 1993), pp. 210-211.

treatises and Warring States history. During the period in which large infantry armies were developing, the first great power was Wu, which emerged to dominance at the end of the sixth century B.C. and held that position for several decades. From the second half of the fifth century the political scene was dominated by Wei, until that state was supplanted in turn by Qi in the middle of the fourth century. Significantly, the first military treatise is attributed to a general of Wu (Sun Wu), the probable second to a general of Wei (Wu Qi), and the third to a general of Qi (Sun Bin). In short the earlier military treatises, credited to men of the recent past, follow the shifting center of power. While the scholars who wrote these texts may have come from the states of their eponymous heroes, it is also possible that the current or recent prestige of a state acted as a magnet for ambitious scholars offering military wisdom under the name of a celebrated commander.

The pattern may have continued to the end of the Warring States, with the development of military treatises in association with the state of Qin that rose to dominance in the third century B.C. First, there was a military treatise, now lost, attributed to Gongsun Yang, the personal name of Lord Shang, Qin's reforming minister and general of the mid-fourth century. However, the most extensive Qin military treatise is probably the *Wei Liaozi* (or *Yu Liaozi* as some scholars read it), parts of which were also found in the tomb at Yinqueshan. While the identity of the text's eponym is debated, all the figures identified with the name Wei Liao are associated with Qin.¹³ Moreover, there are clear reasons to link the work to Qin and to identify it as a product of the late Warring States. Like the *Book of Lord Shang*, the *Wei Liaozi* identifies the bases of the state as agriculture and warfare and insists that victory derives from proper laws

¹³See Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics*, pp. 229-232, 238-241.

in the state and regulations in the army. Indeed the second half of the book is devoted entirely to regulations which resemble those known to have been used in Qin. It speaks of the importance of giving titles for military service, of collective responsibility, and of the strict use of rewards and punishments. Finally, several passages directly echo others found in the *Han Feizi* and the *Xunzi*, both of which were connected with Qin state at the end of the Warring States period.

Apart from the links to Qin, there are also two arguments for a late Warring States date. First, among the exemplary figures that it cites as models for military action are not only such relatively recent commanders as Sun Wu and Wu Qi, who together formed a metonym for military thought in the late Warring States period, but Lord Huan of Qi (seventh century B.C.), the Zhou founder King Wu and his "strategist" Tai Gong, and the Yellow Emperor. It was a standard feature of the evolution of texts over the course of the Warring States that earlier texts were attributed to recent figures and dealt generally with more recent events, while later texts evoked exemplary figures and even putative authors in an ever more remote antiquity. This pattern also applies to military texts. Thus the inclusion of such ancient rulers in the *Wei Liaozi* clearly suggests a relatively late date of composition. A final piece of evidence for the *Wei Liaozi*'s relatively late date is its repeated attacks on guiding military action by means of *yin* and *yang* thought, calendrics, almanacs, or astronomical divination. While such ideas figure to a certain extent in the earlier texts, it is in the late Warring States that they come to dominate much military writing and hence become a target for criticism.

These theories in which combat was to be conducted according to natural or cosmological models mark the most important development in military writings in the late Warring States period. Texts on this subject constituted one of the subcategories of military treatises in the

earliest catalogue of the imperial library, but virtually all examples had been lost. Elements of such theories already appear in the *Sunzi*, the *Wuzi*, and above all the *Liu tao*--and as noted above--they were also the object of denunciation in the *Wei Liaozi*. However, tomb finds in the last quarter century have revealed the importance and scale of this development. The Yinqueshan tomb contains a large body of fragments that apply to warfare the theories of *yin* and *yang* or the Five Phases.¹⁴ These texts correlate the conduct of warfare with the season, the month, and the day. They are sometimes part of more extended discussion of calendrical taboos that resemble the system of "Monthly Ordinances" defined in the late third century B.C. *Lü shi chun qiu*. Auspicious or inauspicious features of landscape are also discussed. At least one of these texts is couched in the form of a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor, the mythic inventor of licit combat, and one of his ministers. A large cache of silk manuscripts found in an early Han tomb at Mawangdui also includes dialogues between the Yellow Emperor and his officials upon basing warfare on the pattern of the seasons. I quote examples from these:

Heaven has its seasons of life and death, while the state has its policies of life and death. To nourish life in accord with the propagating of Heaven is called "culture" (*wen*). To attack and cause things to die in accord with killing of Heaven is called martiality (*wu*).

The sage has no craft; he holds to the reversals of the seasons. In his benefactions and love of the people he shares the Way of Heaven. He holds himself correct to await Heaven and quiescent to await men; he does not abandon the punishments of Heaven nor break his covenants. In all decisions he matches the seasons of Heaven.¹⁵

The same tomb contained a text on methods for marshalling various deities to support military action, as well as a chart depicting types of comets, with associated prognostications often

¹⁴Yates, "The Yin-Yang Texts from Yinqueshan."

¹⁵For a collection of such quotes, see Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), pp. 316-317 note 140.

dealing with war. The same preponderance of military issues in official astronomy also marks the chapter on astrology ("Heaven's Official") in the *Shi ji* (the first comprehensive history of China, complete ca. 90 B.C.). The aforementioned *Tai Gong liu tao*, a received text of which several sections were found in the Linyi tomb, includes discussions of the use of divination, yin and yang, the Five Phases, and the seasons to guide combat.¹⁶ In short, in the late Warring States period many scholars applied the then fashionable theories of nature and cosmology to the military realm, and they placed these doctrines in the mouths of ancient sage rulers. This development in military thought parallels the contemporary incorporation of cosmology and natural philosophy into political and social thought.

A final development in military writing confirmed by the tomb finds was the emergence of texts describing actual techniques and procedures used in battle, particularly in defending cities. Treatment of such topics had previously been known only in the late chapters of the Mohist canon, along with a couple of brief treatments in the *Wei Liaozi* and *Tai Gong liu tao*. The cache at Yinqueshan, however, includes fragments of several texts--"Rules for Defence," "Orders for Defence"--that are very close to extant Mohist examples, but without attribution to Master Mo. These texts deal with the actual use of weapons, their numbers, their dimensions, their placement, and other technical matters. Some strips from Yinqueshan also deal with regulations for markets, which may reflect increasing concern about provisioning armies.

The Mohists were in fact unique among scholarly traditions in that they formed themselves into military units employed to defend cities. Their writings on the subject thus grew out of personal experience and were closely related to the doctrines of the school, and their

¹⁶See, for example, Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics*, pp. 47-48, 53, 58, 60-61, 64, 69, 72-73, 74, 80.

interest in military technology probably accounts for the discussions of technology and optics in the chapters on logic preserved in the Mohist canon. These texts and the related examples from Yinqueshan are consequently unique in their discussion of actual combat procedures.

The other military writings, by contrast, are texts composed from other texts. The *Sunzi*, with no immediate predecessors, defined the basic issues and concepts of the genre, and subsequent examples operated within its terms. Significantly, the *Sunzi* advocated a strategy that gained victory without battle and tactics that won battles through maneuver, deception, and attacking the enemy's weak spots. Its ideal audience consisted of a ruler seeking maximum gain with minimum risk, so it aimed to remove the violence and hazards of battle from the conduct of war. It thus provided a rhetoric that enabled men with little or no experience of combat to propose nostrums guaranteeing victory. Later texts incorporated major developments in warfare, such as the introduction of cavalry, but there was no re-thinking of fundamental issues. The most important textual innovations were, first, the more detailed discussion of recruitment, regulations, and training--issues shared with "legalist" works such as the *Shang jun shu*--and then the increasing incorporation of ideas from the mantic or cosmological traditions--*yin/yang*, the Five Phases, almanacs, or calendrics. These appeals to administration and mantic practices begin to supplant theories of strategem and maneuver, just as mythical rulers replaced historical commanders.

Another example of this displacement of battle is the rise of the closest equivalent *within military treatises* (as opposed to histories) of the Western "battle piece." This is what might be described as the "battle dialogue." In this genre of writing an interlocutor describes a situation that might be encountered in the field, and a strategist will explain how he would deal with it.

Almost invariably the former is a ruler and the latter a commander, but in one case the interlocutor (Tian Ji) is the supreme commander and the strategist (Sun Bin) his adviser.¹⁷ (This passage is also unique in that it is the one dialogue that claims to be presenting an actual campaign in progress, hence approaching the status of the Western-style battle piece while remaining fundamentally a theoretical dialogue.) The earliest examples of this form of writing appear in dialogue chapters of the *Sunzi* preserved in the Tang encyclopedia *Tong Dian*, in the *Sun Bin*, and in the *Wuzi*, i.e., texts of the late fourth or early third century B.C. They reach their apogee in the *Tai gong liu tao*. While some of the early examples are plausible, they rapidly become accounts of incredibly complex maneuvers that could not have been managed even on the parade ground, much less on the field of battle:

King Wu asked Tai Gong, "Suppose we have led the army deep into another's territory and have confronted the enemy's main assault army. The enemy are numerous and we are few. The enemy are strong and we are weak. The enemy comes at night; some attack our left and some our right. Our whole army is shaken [with fear]. I want to be able to conquer if we attack and be secure if we defend. What should be done?"

Tai Gong said, "Such a case is called 'Shaking Invaders.' Advantage is gained by going out and fighting; one cannot hold a defensive position. Select your crack troops, strong crossbowmen, chariots and cavalry and form into units on the left and right. Rapidly strike his vanguard; urgently attack his rear. Some attack his exterior and some his interior. His troops will certainly be in disorder and his generals fearful."¹⁸

While such hypothetical "case studies" might approximate to the status of military doctrine in a modern army, they bear little relation to field combat.

The prevalence of this mode of the depiction of warfare within the later military treatises, in contrast with the Western battle piece, can be explained by the differing origins of the two

¹⁷See Sawyer, *Sun Pin*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁸Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics*, p. 91.

types of writing. Western writing on warfare was created by men known to have commanded armies in the field--Thucydides, Xenophon, Caesar. These authors sought to demonstrate their acumen or courage by dramatizing battles which they had witnessed or fought. The Chinese tradition instead relies on hypothetical exercises framed in the ideal situation sought by the authors of the text, i.e., acting as a royal adviser. Just as the *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, *Book of Lord Shang*, and *Han Feizi* dramatize the debates of their eponyms with or in the presence of rulers, so the military treatises increasingly rely on staged dialogue/debates. This substitution of discussions within the court for accounts of battle suggests that the Chinese military treatises were written by textually-trained scholars in the pursuit of office. These men were distinct from those who actually commanded armies in the field, who in the scattered accounts from the period rose through the ranks or came from families of hereditary generals. It is perhaps significant that the couple of cases of hereditary generals said to have studied military treatises, Zhao Kuo (whose recklessness led the Zhao army to disaster at Changping in 260 B.C.) and Xiang Yu (the hereditary general of Chu who toppled the Qin empire but finally in 202 B.C. lost the civil war against the Han founder), were commanders who led their men to ultimate disaster.

The scholastic origin, or early co-optation, of military writing is one reason why the treatises emphasized the political foundations and goals of warfare, and radically de-centered combat, a feature which is both their strength and their weakness. The largely text-based evolution of the genre--fed by borrowing from other textual traditions more than from military practice--also suggests why discussion of regulations, mantic practices, and fantastic maneuvers conjured up to impress the ruler gradually supplanted the abstracted principles of strategy that constituted the long-term core of military doctrine, principles still best represented by their initial formulation in the *Sunzi*. Determined to claim possession of a text-based art that held the key

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to inevitable victory and rendered actual combat superfluous, the authors of the early Chinese military treatises banished the "friction" of warfare by largely dismissing its reality.

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