Advanced lesson - Sun Zì Bing Fa - Sun Tzu on the Art of War

IV. Tactical Dispositions - xìng piān dì sì

Sun Zì's Art of War was written by Sun Wu in the final year of the Spring and Autumn Period (770BC - 476BC). It is not only the oldest Chinese military work in existence but also the oldest book of military theory in the world, well-known for a long time in the history of the military academy in China and abroad. Sun Zì's Art of War has altogether 13 chapters. Both concise and comprehensive, this book sum up the experience of ancient wars, bring to light the many laws of war which are of universal significance.

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xìng piān dì sì
形 篇 第 四

sūn zìyuē: xī zhī shàn zhàn zhě, xiān wéi wèi bù kě shèng, yī dàidí zhīkě

孙子曰：昔之善战者，先为不可胜，以待敌之可胜。bù kě shèng zài jǐ, kě shèng zài dí。gù shàn zhàn zhě, nèngwéi

不可胜在己，可胜在敌。故善战者，能为bù kě shèng，bù néng shǐ dí zhī kě shèng。gù yuē：shèng kě zhī，

不可胜，不能使敌之可胜。故曰：胜可知，èr bù kě wéi。

而不可为。

bù kě shèng zhě，shǒu yě；kě shèng zhě，gōng yě。shǒu zé bù zú，

不可胜者，守也；可胜者，攻也。守则不足，

gōng zé yǒu yú。shàn shǒu zhě，cáng yú jiǔ dì zhī xià；shàn gōng

攻则有余。善守者，藏于九地之下；善攻

zhě，dòng yú jiǔ tiān zhī shàng，gù néng zì bǎo ér quán shèng yě。

者，动于九天之上，故能自保而全胜也。

jiàn shèng bù guò zhòng rén zhī suǒ zhī，fēi shàn zhī shàn zhě yě；

见胜不过众 人之所知，非善之善者也；

zhàn shèng ér tiān xià yuē shàn，fēi shàn zhī shàn zhě yě。gù jǔ

战胜而天下曰善，非善之善者也。故举

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qiū háo bù wéi duō lì , jiàn rì yuè bù wéi mù mínɡ, wén léi tíng bù wéi cōnɡ ěr。

古之所谓善战者，胜于易胜者也。故善战者之胜也，无智名，无勇功，故其战胜不忒。不忒者，其所措必胜，胜已败者。古之所谓善战者也，立于不败之地，而不失敌之败者。是故胜兵先胜而后求战，败兵先战而后求胜。善用兵者，修道而保法，故能为胜败之政。

兵法：一曰度，二曰量，三曰数，四曰称，五曰胜。地生度，度生量，量生数，数生称，称生胜。

故胜兵若以镒称铢，败兵若以铢称镒。胜者之战民也，若决积水于千仞之溪者，形也。

Translation: (Translated from the Chinese version By LIONEL GILES, M.A. (1910))

IV. TACTICAL DISPOSITIONS
1. Sun Tzu said: The good fighters of old first put themselves beyond the possibility of defeat, and then waited for an opportunity of defeating the enemy.

2. To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.

3. Thus the good fighter is able to secure himself against defeat, but cannot make certain of defeating the enemy.

4. Hence the saying: One may know how to conquer without being able to do it.

5. Security against defeat implies defensive tactics; ability to defeat the enemy means taking the offensive.

6. Standing on the defensive indicates insufficient strength; attacking, a superabundance of strength.

7. The general who is skilled in defense hides in the most secret recesses of the earth; he who is skilled in attack flashes forth from the topmost heights of heaven. Thus on the one hand we have ability to protect ourselves; on the other, a victory that is complete.

8. To see victory only when it is within the ken of the common herd is not the acme of excellence.

9. Neither is it the acme of excellence if you fight and conquer and the whole Empire says, “Well done!” To lift an autumn hair is no sign of great strength; to see the sun and moon is no sign of sharp sight; to hear the noise of thunder is no sign of a quick ear.

10. What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease.

11. Hence his victories bring him neither reputation for wisdom nor credit for courage.

12. He wins his battles by making no mistakes. Making no mistakes is what establishes the certainty of victory, for it means conquering an enemy that is already defeated.
14. Hence the skillful fighter puts himself into a position which makes defeat impossible, and does not miss the moment for defeating the enemy.

15. Thus it is that in war the victorious strategist only seeks battle after the victory has been won, whereas he who is destined to defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory.

16. The consummate leader cultivates the moral law, and strictly adheres to method and discipline; thus it is in his power to control success.

17. In respect of military method, we have, firstly, Measurement; secondly, Estimation of quantity; thirdly, Calculation; fourthly, Balancing of chances; fifthly, Victory.

18. Measurement owes its existence to Earth; Estimation of quantity to Measurement; Calculation to Estimation of quantity; Balancing of chances to Calculation; and Victory to Balancing of chances.

19. A victorious army opposed to a routed one, is as a pound’s weight placed in the scale against a single grain.

20. The onrush of a conquering force is like the bursting of pent-up waters into a chasm a thousand fathoms deep.