**The Art of War Reading Guide**

**Title**: The Art of War

**Author**: Sun Tzŭ

**Setting**: Ancient China during the late Spring and Autumn Period or early Warring States Period

**Summary**: The text stands out among ancient war literature because, instead of telling “war stories,” it analyzes the nature and strategies of war itself. Moreover, it does so from a unique point of view. While The Art of War’s author acknowledges the necessity of war, it is treated as something to resort to only after attempts at diplomacy and negotiation have failed. Even then, the text maintains, it should be pursued in the least harmful way possible. Most significantly, the book presents very clear guidelines for actually accomplishing that goal. This combination of moral reasoning and practical advice is why The Art of War remains the world’s most famous and studied treatise, or systematic analysis, on military strategy nearly 2,500 years after it was written.

**Major Characters:**

1. **Sun Tzŭ:** The attributed author of "The Art of War" and a revered military strategist and philosopher. His insights and teachings form the foundation of the treatise, emphasizing strategy, intelligence, and adaptability in warfare.
2. **The General (Commander):** While not a specific individual, the role of the general is crucial in Sun Tzŭ's teachings. The general is responsible for the planning, execution, and adaptation of military strategies. Their wisdom, leadership, and decision-making are pivotal to the success of any campaign.
3. **The Ruler (Sovereign):** Another key figure in Sun Tzŭ's work, the ruler is the political leader who authorizes and supports military actions. The relationship between the ruler and the general is essential for coherent and effective military strategy.
4. **The Enemy:** Representing the opposing forces, the enemy is a central focus in Sun Tzŭ's strategies. Understanding the enemy's strengths, weaknesses, and intentions is critical for devising effective tactics and achieving victory.

**Themes:**

* **Strategic Planning and Adaptability:** Sun Tzŭ emphasizes the importance of thorough planning and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. He advocates for careful assessment of factors such as terrain, enemy capabilities, and resource availability before engaging in combat. The idea is that a well-considered plan provides a strong foundation, but flexibility and the ability to respond to unexpected developments are crucial for success. This theme underscores the need for both foresight and agility in leadership and strategy.
* **Intelligence and Deception:** One of the central tenets of Sun Tzŭ's philosophy is the use of intelligence and deception to gain an advantage over the enemy. He discusses the importance of gathering accurate information through spies and other means, as well as the value of misleading the enemy to create opportunities for victory. By knowing the enemy's strengths and weaknesses and concealing one's own intentions, a commander can outmaneuver opponents and achieve strategic objectives with minimal conflict.
* **Efficiency and Resource Management:** Sun Tzŭ stresses the importance of efficient use of resources, including time, energy, and supplies. Prolonged conflicts are costly and can drain an army's morale and resources. Therefore, swift and decisive action is often preferable. This theme highlights the need for effective logistics and the prudent management of resources to maintain the fighting capability of an army. It also speaks to the broader principle of achieving maximum impact with minimal expenditure.
* **Psychological Warfare and Morale:** The psychological state of both one's own troops and the enemy plays a significant role in Sun Tzŭ's strategies. Maintaining high morale among one's forces while undermining the enemy's confidence can be as decisive as physical combat. Sun Tzŭ discusses various tactics to influence the psychological state of both sides, such as creating confusion, exploiting fear, and using surprise. This theme underscores the importance of psychological factors in warfare and the impact of morale on the outcome of conflicts.

**Review Questions**: Answering the following questions will increase your comprehension of the book. Respond to these questions by writing the answers in your notebook. *All the questions require you to express an opinion, evaluate the writing, synthesize what you have read with current reflections, or describe your reaction to events in the reading. In these instances, there is no right or wrong answer, and your responses will vary.*

**Chapter l. LAYING PLANS**

1. Sun Tzŭ identifies five constant factors that govern the art of war. List these factors. Explain how each one contributes to a successful military strategy. Evaluate the effectiveness of Sun Tzŭ's writing in conveying the importance of these factors. Do you find his explanations clear and convincing? Why or why not?
2. Sun Tzŭ provides a method for comparing military conditions. Choose three of the seven considerations he lists and explain how they can help forecast victory or defeat. Evaluate the relevance of these considerations in the specific historical context of ancient China. How might these considerations differ in today's world?
3. Sun Tzŭ outlines the virtues of a commander. Choose two of these virtues and discuss why they are particularly important for military leadership. Do you agree with these virtues, why or why not? Which one virtue would you add and why?
4. Sun Tzŭ asserts that "All warfare is based on deception." What are some examples of deceptive tactics he suggests? How might these tactics be applied in non-military contexts such as business or sports?

**Chapter II. WAGING WAR**

1. Sun Tzŭ warns against prolonged warfare, mentioning the dulling of weapons, dampening of ardor, and exhaustion of strength. Why do you think he emphasizes these points? How might these consequences affect the overall strategy and morale of an army? Evaluate the effectiveness of Sun Tzŭ's writing in conveying the urgency and dangers of prolonged conflict.
2. "There is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare." Reflect on this statement. How does speed in warfare contribute to success according to Sun Tzŭ? Think of historical or contemporary examples where this principle has been applied. Share those and explain how the principle was applied with those examples.
3. According to Sun Tzŭ, "the leader of armies is the arbiter of the people’s fate." Discuss the responsibilities and pressures faced by military leaders in wartime. How does this statement reflect the broader theme of leadership in *The Art of War*? Make a personal connection by reflecting on a time when you were in a leadership position and had to make big decisions that affected others.
4. Sun Tzŭ emphasizes that the primary objective in war should be victory, not prolonged campaigns. Why do you think he stresses this point? Evaluate the text within the specific historical context in which it is set. Consider how the political and social environment of ancient China might have influenced Sun Tzŭ's emphasis on swift victory.

**Chapter III. ATTACK BY STRATAGEM**

1. Sun Tzŭ presents a series of strategies, ending with advice against besieging walled cities. What are the key points he makes to support his position against sieges? Trace the progression of his reasoning throughout the text. Based on your understanding, what outcomes could you foresee if a commander chose to conduct a siege despite Sun Tzŭ's warnings? Provide a hypothetical example to illustrate your prediction.
2. Sun Tzŭ advises generals to avoid launching premature assaults, likening such actions to the chaotic and uncoordinated behavior of swarming ants. What are the risks he highlights for military leaders who fail to exercise patience? Discuss how this metaphor might resonate with leaders during Sun Tzŭ's time. Then, evaluate its relevance today.
3. Sun Tzŭ describes the general as the key to the state's strength and stability, emphasizing the critical role of leadership. How does a leader's effectiveness influence the overall health of an organization or nation? Identify and discuss the traits that Sun Tzŭ believes are essential for a leader to serve as a strong "bulwark." Compare these traits to those exhibited by a historical or current leader you admire and analyze how their leadership impacted or is impacting their era.
4. The chapter concludes with the famous saying, "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." How does this principle apply to self-awareness and understanding one's adversaries in various contexts, such as business, sports, or personal relationships? Evaluate how well Sun Tzŭ’s advice holds up in today's world.

**Chapter IV. TACTICAL DISPOSITIONS**

1. The text mentions that securing oneself against defeat lies in one's own hands, while the opportunity to defeat the enemy is provided by the enemy's mistakes. Evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy in both historical and contemporary military contexts. Can you provide an example where a leader capitalized on an opponent's error to achieve victory?
2. Sun Tzŭ describes a systematic process for achieving victory, beginning with Measurement and ending with Victory. How does this structured approach illustrate the importance of planning and strategy in any endeavor? Reflect on a recent project or challenge you faced. How could you have applied these steps to improve your approach and outcome?
3. The comparison of a victorious army to a pound's weight against a single grain underscores the advantage of strong morale and discipline. How does this metaphor resonate with your understanding of the role of mental and emotional strength in overcoming challenges?
4. Pick a quote from this chapter that you think captures the essence of the chapter itself. Include the quote along with your reasoning for selecting it.

**Chapter V. ENERGY**

1. If you could title this chapter differently while still capturing the purpose of the chapter, what title would you give it? Explain your choice.
2. Sun Tzŭ compares the impact of an army to a grindstone dashed against an egg to illustrate the effectiveness of exploiting weak points. Choose another key concept from this chapter, such as the use of direct and indirect methods, and create your own metaphor to explain it. How does your metaphor help clarify the concept?
3. Sun Tzŭ uses various metaphors and analogies to illustrate the principles of energy and momentum in battle. Summarize the main ideas presented in this chapter, focusing on how Sun Tzŭ explains the use of energy, the importance of timing, and the role of deception. Do you think these elements combine to create a successful strategy? Explain your thinking.
4. The chapter concludes with the idea that the energy of good fighters is like the momentum of a rolling stone. How does this imagery convey the importance of harnessing and directing collective energy towards a common goal? Reflect on a group project or team effort where combined energy led to success. What role did individual contributions play in this achievement?

**Chapter VI. WEAK POINTS AND STRONG**

1. Sun Tzŭ emphasizes the importance of being the first to arrive and prepare for battle, suggesting that those who come later will be at a disadvantage. How can this principle of early preparation be applied to academic or professional settings in your life? Describe an instance where being well-prepared ahead of time helped you succeed.
2. The text advises discovering the enemy’s plans and forcing them to reveal their vulnerabilities. Do you think this approach be ethically applied in negotiations or conflict resolution? Explain your thinking? Do you think Sun Tzŭ would agree with you, why or why not?
3. Based on the strategies and principles outlined by Sun Tzŭ in this chapter, such as the importance of preparation, adaptability, and exploiting weak points, which modern or historical leader do you think Sun Tzŭ would admire? Explain your choice by highlighting specific actions or decisions made by this leader that align with Sun Tzŭ's advice.
4. Sun Tzŭ mentions the five elements and states that they are not always equally predominant. How does this idea of changing dominance among the elements relate to the concept of adaptability in strategy? Can you think of a situation in your life where you had to adapt to changing circumstances to achieve your goal? Describe how you adjusted your approach.

**Chapter VII. MANŒUVERING**

1. Sun Tzŭ begins the chapter by stating, "In war, the general receives his commands from the sovereign." What do you think this suggests about the relationship between military and political leadership? Do you think this is true today? Explain your thinking.
2. The text mentions that "the difficulty of tactical maneuvering consists in turning the devious into the direct, and misfortune into gain." How do the historical examples of Hannibal and Napoleon illustrate this concept? Evaluate the effectiveness of Sun Tzŭ’s writing in conveying this principle. Do you find his examples compelling? Why or why not?
3. Sun Tzŭ advises to "ponder and deliberate before you make a move." Discuss how this principle of careful planning and strategic thinking is relevant in today’s fast-paced decision-making environments. Provide examples from current events or personal experiences. How does this advice resonate with your personal decision-making style?
4. Reflect on Sun Tzŭ's recommendation to leave an escape route for a surrounded enemy. Why does he believe this will prevent desperate resistance? Can you identify a time in where providing an option for retreat resulted in a better outcome? How does this advice align with or differ from current strategies in conflict resolution?

**Chapter VIII. VARIATION OF TACTICS**

1. Discuss the importance of blending considerations of advantage and disadvantage in a leader’s plans. How can this approach affect the outcome of a military campaign or a strategic decision in another field? Analyze how this principle could develop the character of a leader. What traits would this leader exhibit?
2. Sun Tzŭ states that a general who thoroughly understands the advantages of varying tactics knows how to handle his troops. Reflect on the historical context of ancient Chinese warfare. How might the geographical and political landscape of the time have influenced the need for tactical variation? Provide specific examples from the text or historical records to support your answer.
3. Sun Tzŭ outlines five dangerous faults that can affect a general. Do you agree with Sun Tzŭ that these are critical faults for a leader? Would you add any other faults to this list? Why or why not? Additionally, identify a current or historical leader who has embodied one or more of these traits. How did these faults impact their leadership and the outcomes of their actions?
4. Sun Tzŭ concludes the chapter by urging meditation on the five dangerous faults of a general. Do you agree with the idea that self-awareness and reflection are crucial for effective leadership? Why or why not?

**Chapter IX. THE ARMY ON THE MARCH**

1. Sun Tzŭ emphasizes the importance of location when encamping an army. Based on the text, why is it helpful to camp in high places and near valleys? How does this strategy relate to the availability of resources and the overall well-being of the troops? Can you think of a time when the location was crucial to the success of an event or activity you were involved in? How did the setting impact the outcome?
2. "When the enemy is close at hand and remains quiet, he is relying on the natural strength of his position." What does this imply about the enemy's strategy, and how should a commander respond to such a situation according to Sun Tzŭ?
3. Sun Tzŭ discusses the importance of forethought and not underestimating the enemy. What are the potential consequences of making light of opponents according to Sun Tzŭ? Provide an example from the text that illustrates this principle. What does Sun Tzu’s emphasis on caution and respect for the enemy suggest about his views on leadership and strategy?
4. Sun Tzŭ mentions the significance of confidence between a general and his soldiers. How does mutual confidence between a general and his troops contribute to military success? What does Sun Tzŭ suggest is the result of a general who consistently enforces commands? How might Sun Tzu’s principles of mutual confidence and strict enforcement of commands apply to a modern context?

**Chapter X. TERRAIN**

1. Sun Tzŭ categorizes terrain into six types. List and describe each type of terrain and the specific strategies Sun Tzu advises for navigating and fighting in these environments. Based on this, pick which type of terrain you think Sun Tzŭ would prefer to fight in and which type of terrain you would prefer to fight in, explain your choices.
2. Sun Tzŭ describes six calamities that can occur in an army due to the general’s errors. Select one of these calamities and discuss how it can come about and what its potential consequences might be. Which of these calamities do you believe is the most severe and why?
3. From this chapter, what do Sun Tzu’s insights into self-awareness and understanding the enemy suggest about his views on leadership and strategy? Would Sun Tzŭ be the type of leader you would follow? Explain your thinking.
4. Sun Tzŭ asserts that "the general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace is the jewel of the kingdom." Do you agree with this assertion? Why or why not?

**Chapter XI. THE NINE SITUATIONS**

1. What are the nine varieties of ground that Sun Tzu identifies in warfare? Briefly describe each type. Then, consider a modern conflict or geopolitical situation. How might these categories of ground still apply today?
2. How should a general conduct themselves on dispersive ground versus contentious ground? What are the key differences in approach? Evaluate the effectiveness of Sun Tzŭ's writing in conveying these distinctions.
3. Sun Tzŭ states "Place your army in deadly peril, and it will survive; plunge it into desperate straits, and it will come off in safety." Explain the logic behind this contradictory advice. Then, evaluate this text within the specific historical context of ancient Chinese warfare. How might this strategy have been particularly effective or risky in that era?
4. Analyze the final metaphor Sun Tzŭ uses in this chapter comparing military strategy to the coyness of a maiden and speed of a hare. What key principles is he trying to convey with this imagery? Evaluate the effectiveness of this metaphor in conveying Sun Tzu's ideas to both ancient and modern readers.

**Chapter XII. THE ATTACK BY FIRE**

1. Sun Tzŭ states, "No ruler should put troops into the field merely to gratify his own spleen; no general should fight a battle simply out of pique." Do you agree with this statement, why or why not. Predict the potential consequences of ignoring this advice in a modern military or political scenario.
2. Sun Tzŭ states, "Unhappy is the fate of one who tries to win his battles and succeed in his attacks without cultivating the spirit of enterprise." What does he mean by this? How does this principle apply to both military strategy and broader life contexts?
3. The chapter recounts the story of Pan Ch’ao and his successful night attack using fire. What key elements contributed to the success of this attack? How does this story illustrate the principles Sun Tzŭ is advocating?
4. The phrase "Unless you enter the tiger’s lair, you cannot get hold of the tiger’s cubs" is used to illustrate a point. What does this phrase mean in the context of military strategy? How does it relate to the broader theme of taking calculated risks?

**Chapter XIII. THE USE OF SPIES**

1. Sun Tzŭ begins the chapter by discussing the heavy costs of war. How does he use this argument to justify the expenditure on spies? Do you find his reasoning persuasive? Why or why not?
2. Sun Tzŭ identifies five types of spies. Define each type and discuss how they might be used in a strategic plan. Which type of spy do you think would be most valuable to a war effort today and why?
3. Sun Tzŭ outlines the interconnected roles of spies. How does the information flow among these different types of spies to create an effective intelligence network? Predict how this system might break down if one type of spy fails in their role.
4. Pick a quote from this chapter that you think captures the essence of the chapter itself. Include the quote along with your reasoning for selecting it.

**Answers to Review Questions:**

\*Answers will vary for each question