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### Can Eastern Wisdom Solve Western Problems? A Book Review on Sun Tzu's "The Art of War"

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#### Abstract

This paper explores how Eastern philosophical wisdom, specifically Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, can be applied to address modern Western organizational challenges. By drawing parallels between Sun Tzu's military strategies and Bolman and Deal's (2008) organizational theory—particularly the structural, political, and human resource frames—the review highlights how strategic evaluation, environmental awareness, and adaptive leadership can drive

success in contemporary institutions. It critically examines Sun Tzu's authoritative leadership style and its limitations, while emphasizing the continued relevance of strategic thinking, stakeholder analysis, and resource management in complex organizations such as higher education. The analysis suggests that while some of Sun Tzu's tactics must be modernized, the core principles of foresight and adaptability remain vital to organizational effectiveness.

**Keywords:** Sun Tzu, The Art of War, Organizational Leadership, Eastern Philosophy, Leadership Styles, Decision-Making

#### Introduction

Sun Tzu is a well-known ancient character in China throughout the nation's history (Griffith, 1963) [3]. Sun Tzu wrote "The Art of War" to demonstrate his martial philosophies. The text should not be ignored as literature that has no relevancy with today's organizational studies. Parallels could be drawn between Sun Tzu's suggested concepts and Bolman and Deal's (2008) [1] text "Reframing Organizations" focusing on structural, political and human resources frames, and leadership assumptions and practices.

Sun Tzu talks about mainly five aspects of martial arts. They are the art of evaluating enemy, the art of evaluating terrain for maneuver, the art of managing troops, the art of martial strategies, and the art of using natural resources and environmental conditions to attack. The overriding theme of Sun Tzu's book is to evaluate the situations before taking actions, and to cope with the changing outside environment and take advantage of it in order to win. The author's major assertion is that if one can evaluate conditions and use resources strategically, then victory is predetermined even without fighting. Higher education professionals will be able to evaluate competitors, allocate resources, improve human resources management, understand the working environment, and predict the future success more accurately if they can implement the merits of Sun Tzu's theories.

Bolman and Deal's (2008) [1] proposition about organizational diagnosis asserts that common mistakes organizational leader make facing failure is to blame a single factor, such as one individual or the bureaucracy. Sun Tzu's theory supports Bolman and Deal's (2008) [1] proposition by emphasizing the complexity of victory and failure. Sun Tzu claims that in order to thoroughly study war one needs to appraise it in terms of five fundamental factors.

They are moral influence, weather, terrain, command, and doctrine (trans. 1963, p. 63). These five dimensions suggest the idea that the success of warfare as an organizational operation is determined by various factors. Neither of any single factor decides the final result.

When conducting organizational diagnosis, people can easily simplify problems.

The most common fallacy is to blame people; the second alternative is to blame the bureaucracy; and the last fallacy is to attribute the problem or failure to "the thirst of power". These three fallacies are not wrong but the problem is that they are "oversimplifying a more complicated reality" (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p. 38) [1]. When the organization leader attributes the problem to simply one individual, this is like attributing the failure of a war to the bad weather or one general's insufficient

command. This frame of thinking simplifies the actual problem in a complicated situation and therefore prevents the leader from solving the real problem. As Sun Tzu realized, the complexity of war requires the general to adopt comprehensive ways to evaluate the situations; in a similar vein the complex and ambiguous features of organization require managers to take multi-angled approaches to understand organizations' flexibility (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p. 39)<sup>[1]</sup>.

Among the four organizational frames Bolman and Deal (2008)<sup>[1]</sup> talked about, army as an organization is a combination of structural and political frame under Sun Tzu's perspective because Sun emphasizes the both the structural and political frames' central concepts of rules, roles, goals, policies, and power, conflict, and competition of organizational politics. In terms of the leadership challenges, generals in war need to develop both agenda, authoritative power, and strategies based on environment. Due to these two organizational frames' features, the leadership practices in warfare heavily rely on authoritative leadership style (Guthrie, 2010)<sup>[2]</sup>.

Sun Tzu states that "five qualities are dangerous in the character of a general: " If reckless, he can be killed; if cowardly, captured; if quick-tempered you can make a fool of him; if he has too delicate a sense of honor you can calumniate him; if he is of a compassionate nature you can harass him"; " the ruin of the army and the death of the general are inevitable results of these shortcomings and they must be deeply pondered" (trans. 1963, p.114-115). Negative consequences of personality shortcomings in modern organizations can be as fatal as discussed in Sun Tzu's text, especially when we look at recent wars.

Bolman and Deal's (2008)<sup>[1]</sup> statement that a leader's personality flaws, such as cluelessness, may create severe problems in organizational operations. Smart people act stupid because when influenced by "personality flaws - things like pride, arrogance, self-love and ego" (p. 6). However, Bolman and Deal (2008)<sup>[1]</sup> further argued that cluelessness is not a problem of personality flaws but a result of inappropriate framing. If leaders adjust the way they "think and make sense of the world around them" (p. 6), they will be able to overcome the cluelessness and develop new direction for the organization.

In Sun Tzu's text, there is an omission of solution for the personality flaw problem. Sun did not talk about professional leadership training. Modern organizations such as higher education institutions should take advantage of Bolman and Deal's (2008)<sup>[1]</sup> organizational theories to better educate organization leaders and staff. In this way, they will be able to overcome personality shortcomings and weaknesses of human nature to be better prepared for challenges such as decision making.

The desired leadership style in Sun Tzu's text is the authoritative style due to the nature of command. Little emphasis is made on communication between commanders and soldiers.

Surprisingly, Sun Tzu put a strong emphasis on the application of deception, even in the commander-soldier relationship: "A general should be capable of keeping his officers and men in ignorance of his plans" (trans. 1963, p. 136). This type of top-down control may create failure because the lack of communication may cause people in the lower levels of the chain of command to resist following orders due to confusion and ambiguity in mind.

Subordinates might either act ineffectively or become a spy for the opposing side because of disappointment with their own commander (trans. 1963).

Sun Tzu repeatedly emphasizes the importance of evaluating the enemy. The application of such evaluation in modern organizations is discussed in the ecosystem theory in the Bolman and Deal's (2008)<sup>[1]</sup> text. For example, educational institutions play a role in a complex public policy ecosystem (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p. 231)<sup>[1]</sup>. Stakeholders include parents and students, school board and administrators, coalitions and state governments. Higher education practitioners in such a political frame need to understand different stakeholders' perspectives in order to direct schools' practices towards an appropriate orientation which can satisfy most participants' interests and gain opponents' respect.

Sun Tzu's human resources principle expects administrators to use punishments and rewards "in an enlightened manner" (trans. 1963, p. 66). Such "enlightened manner" is a combination of Douglas McGregor's (1960) Theory X and Y because Theory X emphasizes tight control and punishment while Theory Y encourages application of organizational rewards (Bolman and Deal, 2008)<sup>[1]</sup>. Higher education managers should pay attention to the distinctive features of Theory X and Y when using them as a combination. Theory X may create "superficial harmony with undercurrents of apathy and indifference" while Theory Y requires managers to "align employees' self-interests with organization's requirements" (Bolman and Deal, 2008, p. 118-119)<sup>[1]</sup>. For example, a manager who adopts Theory X in management practices will need to implement assessment and evaluation among employees to make the staff care about the job and avoid indifferent attitudes. A director who adopts Theory Y will need to examine employees' passion and goals in order to create encouraging organizational condition and assign relevant tasks to the personnel.

In conclusion, Sun Tzu's opinions about the art of war reflect concepts in Bolman and Deal's (2008)<sup>[1]</sup> structural, political and human resources frames in organizational studies. However, Sun Tzu's suggestions about leadership assumptions and practices tend to be extremely authoritative with a top-down mentality, which are less diverse than modern practices due to wars' extraordinary nature and cruelty. The core assertion of "The Art of War" is that victory is predictable if the leader can evaluate enemy, command strategically, and take advantage of the natural environment. All these recommendations are relevant and vital to modern organizations' operations to ensure success.

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