

Modern Chinese Strategic Thought: Classical and Maoist Influences

This paper will examine the influences of classical Chinese and Maoist strategic thought on China's contemporary military strategy, as expressed in *The Science of Military Strategy*. The present aspects of classical and Maoist thought will be compared in light of their prescriptions for the sources of victory in conflict; efficacy of using force, and the manner of its employment to achieve strategic goals. We will see that the modern concepts of sources of victory reflect Sun-Tzu's and Mao's concepts of military command, while implicitly replaying Sun-Tzu's emphasis on the commanding officer. Victory may be achieved through the classical paradigm of economical application of violence at specific points, obtaining maximum effect for minimal effort. In discussing the use of force, we will find a synthesis of Maoist and classical principles: an inclination towards Sun-Tzu's ideal of decisive battle, blended with a modified version of Mao's prescription for quick decision in battle while preparing for protracted conflict. Finally, in an examination of contemporary guidance for employing force, we will see implicit reflections of both the classical emphasis on psychological victory, and the Maoist importance placed upon mass struggle, updated to reflect technological conditions, while neither principle is directly enumerated.

Contemporary Chinese strategic thought on the sources of victory reflects the Maoist and classical concepts of command, while eschewing classical prescriptions for the attributes of a general. But, by assigning key responsibility for victory to the commander, contemporary strategy implicitly reflects the classical ideal. Thus, although explicit mention is not given to the central role of the commander in the employment of troops to obtain victory, the focus placed upon the functions and responsibilities of command make this point nonetheless.

In Chap. 11 of *The Science of Military Strategy*, named “Strategic Command,” the authors make brief mention of the Tai-Kung, before spending the bulk of the chapter discussing the responsibilities and desired attributes of a strategic commander:

“The sagacity, fortitude, and determination of the strategic commander are the key to boost the morale and maintain the cohesion of his army... However, due to the high level of strategic command, it is neither necessary nor possible for the strategic commander to closely command and control all the details of all the armed forces...”¹

This reflects Mao’s ideas on military organization in Chap. 9 of *Problems of Strategy in Guerilla War*, entitled “The Relationship of Command”. He writes:

“...the principle of command in guerilla war should be centralized strategic command and decentralized command in campaigns and battles.”²

This somewhat muscular and direct prescription for command may be contrasted to the original, but more generalized, perspective on the specifics of military organization necessary for victory, as written by Sun-Tzu:

“In general, commanding a large number is like commanding a few. It is a question of dividing up the numbers... It is a question of configuration and designation.”³

In its guidance for fighting “high-tech local wars,” contemporary strategic thought echoes Sun-Tzu’s concepts of victory through the precise application of violence to defeat one’s opponent at minimal cost: commanders are instructed to “strike the nodes to destroy the network.”⁴ Focus is placed upon destruction of the enemy’s “effective strength,”⁵ which is an interesting combination of Mao’s ideas of “annihilation” and Sun-Tzu’s emphasis on attacking the enemy’s strategy. In Chap. 24 of *The Science of Military Strategy*, “China’s Strategic Guidance for Future High-Tech War,” we read:

“When striking the nodes to destroy the whole network, generally the information systems and command and control systems must be destroyed to a maximum

¹ Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 252-255

² Mao, 1938: p. 110. Page numbers of Mao’s writings are the original numbers as marked in the text, rather than the page number of the translation.

³ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 164

⁴ Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 463

⁵ *Ibd.*, p. 465

extent... However, partial destruction of the forces and fire systems will be enough... [Wipe] out the enemy's effective strength, to bring political, public opinion, physiological and spiritual pressure to the enemy..."⁶

For comparison, we juxtapose the relevant passages, starting with Mao's endorsement of "annihilation" in *On Protracted War*:

"...it is necessary to advocate and vigorously carry out campaigns and battles of annihilation whenever circumstances are favourable, so as greatly to deplete the enemy's forces and greatly replenish our own."⁷

Sun-Tzu eschewed this strategy. He sourced victory in the defeat of the enemy's plans and strategies rather than his material destruction, giving play to self-preservation and providing the foil to Mao's focus on annihilation:

"Thus the highest realization of warfare is to attack the enemy's plans...one who excels at employing the military subjugates other people's armies without engaging in battle... He must fight under Heaven with the paramount aim of 'preservation'"⁸

The classical strategy of Sun-Tzu is perhaps too abstract for employment in the service of a modern (or modernizing) military, so its more mystical elements are set aside in favor of the concrete and specific instructions of Mao. Mao's strategies of annihilation are somewhat absolute, offering little flexibility and requiring dedication of the mass effort of the people into a singular objective, to the loss of all others; these are prescriptions perhaps too strong for an economically globalizing society, and they suffer a crisis of relevance when applied to an enemy who is not actively invading the homeland. As such, contemporary strategy borrows from both: seeking victory from elements of Mao's practicality and Sun-Tzu's subtlety.

In exploring the efficacy of the use of force, contemporary Chinese strategy presents a synthesis of Maoist and classical strategic thought. Sun-Tzu is reflected through the stated disinclination towards violent conflict – his thesis of "subjugating the

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Mao, 1938: p. 176

⁸ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 161

enemy's army without fighting"⁹ is explicitly presented, and it is recognized as the underpinning of traditional Chinese strategy:

“The idea of winning victory by stratagem has always been the main idea of traditional Chinese strategic thinking. It means the use of limited force to achieve victory or realize the aim of the war.”¹⁰

Maoist principles concerning “mass war” and “protracted war”¹¹ are discussed, but only loosely espoused – it seems to be recognized that the conditions of modern, “high-tech local wars” warfare obviate the mass guerilla strategies of the 1940s in practice; however, the ‘spirit’ of such strategies remains closely held. In Chap. 23, “High-Tech Local Wars That China May Face in the Future,” we read

“The war China has to fight in the future is still people’s war. This basic characteristic will never change. But the future people’s war is likely to take place in the strategic frontlines far away from the depth of the state... In the past, the PLA greatly depended on the superiority of mass mobilization, strategic depth, and protracted wars. Things are different now...The deep-rooted source of the sinews of war will remain in the masses of people forever.”¹²

Mao’s thesis of seeking quick decisions to battles, while being prepared for protracted war, is modified in an interesting manner: its modern incarnation seeks quick decision to both battle and larger conflict, while retaining Mao’s prescriptions to remain prepared for a protracted war. Mao’s original exposition in *On Protracted War* states:

“...our strategically protracted war is translated in the field into battles of quick decision...the above operational principle for fighting campaigns and battles is one of “quick-decision offensive warfare on exterior lines”. It is the opposite of our strategic principle of “protracted defensive warfare on interior lines”, and yet it is the indispensable principle for carrying out this strategy.”¹³

While Mao endorses short battles in the course of long war, *The Science of Military Strategy* equivocates on his position, stating:

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 135

¹¹ Mao, 1938: p. 134-138

¹² Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 451

¹³ Mao, 1938: p. 159-160

“As the cost of high-tech local war is so high that both sides can hardly afford...it is the target of both sides to fight a quick battle and force a quick decision. But it doesn't remove the possibility to achieve the military object through enduring operations if it is necessary.”¹⁴

This is a modification of Mao's writings on protracted war, reducing it from a primary strategy to a strategy of last resort, and it leans towards Sun-Tzu's ideals of seeking quick resolution to battles. The synthesis of classical and Maoist strategy seems to have been motivated by the need to recognize the disastrous nature of protracted conflict in the 21st century economy; or, it may reflect the observations of the relatively short duration of recent instances of technologically-intensive warfare, given its destructiveness and the economic interconnectedness of nations wealthy enough to employ it. None of these conclusions are new. Sun-Tzu long ago observed:

“Thus in military campaigns I have heard of awkward speed but have never seen any skill in lengthy campaigns. No country has ever profited from protracted warfare.”¹⁵

Thus, we see the Maoist avocation of the utility of extended uses of force, and the contrasting classical view, advocating minimalization and brevity. Modern Chinese thought espouses partly the Maoist estimation of the need to be prepared to use force in protracted conflict, while favoring the classical ideals of seeking quick decisions to conflicts. Force is most effective when applied quickly and decisively, but when this is not possible, it may be effective when applied over the long term as well.

Examining contemporary Chinese theory on the employment of force to reach strategic goals, we find the classical emphasis on the foreknowledge of the outcome of battles, and on initiative, and a Maoist emphasis on the concentration and deployment of troops and firepower. The discussions of the “strategic initiative” and “subjective initiative” echo strongly the discussions of Sun-Tzu and Wei Liao-Tzu of psychological advantage and victory. “Strategic initiative” is defined as an actor's freedom of action,

¹⁴ Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 428

¹⁵ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 159

movement, and “decision-making,” and “subjective initiative” is explained as the ability to obtain strategic initiative through both material and psychological superiorities.¹⁶

Sun-Tzu dedicates most of Chap. 6 of *The Art of War*, named “Vacuity and Substance,” to discussing what modern readers might consider “initiative.” Summarizing both the attributes and benefits of holding the initiative, he writes:

“Thus, if I determine the enemy’s disposition of forces while I have no perceptible form, I can concentrate my forces while the enemy is fragmented.”¹⁷

While this is not explicitly reprised in *The Science of Military Strategy* – unsurprising in a work that seeks to present strategy in the context of modern or “high-tech” conditions of conflict, avoiding the more abstract elements of the classical texts – the substance of these theories of the mental battlefield remains a strong undercurrent in this writing. In Chap. 10, “Principles of Strategic Actions,” Sun-Tzu is channeled into a discussion of preparations for battle that combines both his psychological tenets, and the objective, materialist prescriptions of Mao:

“Careful planning and full preparations are the precondition for winning victory, but are not equal to being sure of victory...the material conditions needed to defeat the enemy must be actively prepared.”¹⁸

Earlier, Peng and Yao quote Mao almost directly, stating as he did in *Problems of Strategy in China’s Revolutionary War*, “The initiative is not something imaginary but is concrete and material.”¹⁹

The contemporary theory thus preconditions the employment of force with careful preparation, both of the classical (read: psychological) nature and of the Maoist-materialist nature. In particular, Mao captures the somewhat esoteric discussion of initiative in Sun-Tzu and presents it in his typically direct manner.

Elsewhere, in discussions of the concentration of troops and firepower as a facet of these necessary preconditions to using force, we see a distinctive Maoist influence. Mao wrote extensively on the necessity and proper modality of dispersing or concentrating guerilla troops as dictated by the conditions of battle, in order to achieve

¹⁶ Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 242-245

¹⁷ Sun-Tzu, trans. Sawyer, 1993: p. 167

¹⁸ Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 238

¹⁹ Mao, 1936: p. 234

tactical or strategic objectives, and these thoughts are here replayed, again in the “high-tech/local” context, in Chap. 22, “Strategic Guidance of High-Tech Local War”:

“In traditional war... Concentration of firepower relied on concentration of manpower... Now the technological component is greatly increased, so concentration of superior power mainly means the qualitative gathering of the combat effectiveness of the armed forces.”²⁰

By way of comparison, we look to Mao’s writings on this matter. Mao tied his prescriptions for the employment of forces to his ideas on the short timescale of battles and protracted timescale of conflict; casting the tactical and strategic goals as oppositional aspects of the same thing. He wrote:

“Our strategy is “pit one against ten” and our tactics are “pit ten against one” – this is one of our fundamental principles for gaining mastery over the enemy.”²¹

Thus, Mao is a primary influence on the contemporary Chinese thought on the configuration of troops as an aspect of the employment of force. The classical commentaries here focus mainly on deception, i.e. forcing the enemy to disperse his forces by making the point and time of attack unknown. Mao’s ideas present a more practical side of the coin, and when lifted from their context in a low-tech, guerilla struggle, and updated to account for the technological centrism of the modern battlefield, they make up the core of contemporary thought on this matter. This dovetails with the classical, somewhat impractical emphasis on foreknowledge of outcomes; and, the abstract conception of initiative received from Sun-Tzu, incorporated into contemporary thought via Mao’s intermediary interpretation.

Maoist and classical strategic thought influence contemporary Chinese strategy, as evinced in the investigation of the sources of victory in conflict, the efficacy of using force, and the manner of employing force to reach strategic goals. Victory in conflict is obtained through proper military organization and the economized application of violence, reflecting both Maoist and classical thinkers. Force is most effective when applied quickly and decisively, reflecting aspects of both schools of thought, but

²⁰ Peng & Yao, eds., 2005: p. 430

²¹ Mao, 1936: p. 237

primarily the classical thought of Sun-Tzu, as the conditions of modern technology push war away from the Maoist conception of protracted struggle. Finally, force is best employed by superior forces holding the initiative. It is noted that the initiative is not purely psychological, and superiority is not simply numerical: again, contemporary thought borrows from both the classical and Maoist schools.

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17.408 Chinese Foreign Policy
Fall 2013

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