

Tao Te Ching (TTC) and the Art of War (AOW)
Strategies for Survival

Copyright J. Justin Meehan, 2008

The T.T.C. was written at a time in China known as the “Warring States” period (403-221 BCE) for good reason. After centuries of numerous feudal lords fighting each other for land, access, resources, etc. seven major states emerged. These seven continued to fight and plot against each other for dominance. It was like a seven sided civil war continually raging back and forth until 221 BCE when China was finally united.

Scholars disagree on the exact time the TTC was written and whether it was written by a single author, Lao Tzu, rather than a compilation of sayings. Regardless, it continues to stand the test of time and forms one of the 3 pillars of Chinese thought and philosophy (Confucius, Taoism and Buddhism). For purposes of this article I will treat the author as Lao Tzu. Keep in mind that although Taoism is a Chinese school of thought and that the average Chinese was seldom exclusively Taoist, Confucian or Buddhist. It has been said that the educated Chinese gentlemen was Confucian in his public life and Taoist in retirement. Many were all three simultaneously and each system had an influence on the other. Many subsequent neo-philosophical movements attempted to blend the best from all three schools of thought, as can we.

The AOW was written at about the same time as the TTC as a book of military strategy and although 2500 years old, is still taught in military schools today, such as West Point. Although considered the “oldest military treatise in the world” it has never been outdated despite modern advancements in technological warfare. It is my opinion that the AOW is a military treatise that was written after the TTC and was heavily influenced by its philosophy.

For the ordinary person, the period of the Warring States was a time of ceaseless strife, chaos and destruction. The TTC offered a strategy for survival, recommending keeping a low (the lowest) profile, avoiding involvement in conflict, retreating rather than advancing and turning inward for meaning, rather than outward.

There may be no guaranteed method or strategy by which one may be assured to win every fight, but there is a guaranteed method by which one may never lose such an encounter . . . **don’t fight!** After all it takes two to tangle or as the TTC points out “No one can contend with one who does not contend” (ch. 66). There is no honor, vindication, glory or pride in this method, only the possibility of continued survival.

In a statement predating Christ’s that “he who lives by the sword will die by the sword”, Lao Tzu says.

What another has taught let me repeat:
“A man of violence will come to a violent end.”
Whoever said this can be my teacher and my father. (42)

Put another way:

He who is brave in daring will be killed;
He who is brave in not daring will survive;
Of these two kinds of bravery, one is beneficial,
while the other proves harmful. (73)

Much of Lao Tzu's thinking seems to reflect his real life experience with times of trouble as when he describes that:

When the world is in possession of the Tao,
The galloping horses are led to fertilize the
fields with their droppings.
When the world has become Taoless,
War horses breed themselves on the suburbs. (46)

In an ideal world

Boats and carriages, weapons and armor
there may still be, but there are no occasions
for using or displaying them. (80)

Although anti war, Lao Tzu is **not** a pacifist, as he points out:

Fine weapons of war augur evil.
Even things seem to hate them.
Therefore, a man of Tao does not set
his heart upon them.
In ordinary life, a gentleman regards
the left side as the place of honour.
As weapons are instruments of evil,
They are not properly a gentlemen's
Instrument;

Only on necessity will be resort to them.
For peace and quiet are dearest to his heart,
And to him even a victory is no cause for rejoicing.
To rejoice over a victory is to rejoice over
the slaughter of men. (31)

These thoughts are echoed in the AOW "therefore, those who are not thoroughly aware of the disadvantages in the use of arms cannot be thoroughly aware of the advantages in the use of arms."

Therefore, the proper Taoist mind set should be:
You must rather regret that you had not
been able to prevent the war.
You must never think of conquering others
by force
For to be over-developed is to hasten decay,

And this is against Tao,
And what is against Tao will soon cease to be. (30)

WU WEI and STRATEGY

One of the significant concepts espoused by the TTC is the concept of “**Wu Wei**” or Non Action. Actually non action is less than correct. What the TTC advocates is less forceful or precipitous action or overreaction which his likely to backfire on itself and bring about the opposite consequence of what was intended. Can you say Iraq War II? Proper action is blending in harmony with the forces that exist. More “go with the flow” than the Confucian concept of “do the right thing”. The underlying assumption would be that “whatever is going to happen will happen anyway” or “Que Sera, Sera.”(What will be, will be).

With that in mind, the strategy of the Taoist is clear:

The strategist has a saying:
I dare not be a host, but rather a guest;
I dare not advance an inch, but rather
retreat a foot.
This is called marching without moving,
Rolling up one’s sleeves without baring
one’s arms,
Capturing the enemy without confronting him,
Holding a weapon that is invisible.
There is no greater calamity than to under-
estimate the strength of your enemy.
For to under-estimate the strength of
your enemy is to lose your treasure.
Therefore, when opposing troops meet in
battle, victory belongs to the grieving side. (69)

And much of this strategy is elaborated on in the AOW by Sun Tzu:

“Therefore a victorious army first wins and then seeks battle,
a defeated army first battles and then seeks victory”. (Formations)

In that regard, the ideal Taoist warrior exemplifies the following characteristics and purpose:

A good soldier is never aggressive;
A good fighter is never angry,
The best way of conquering an enemy
is to win him over by not antagonizing him. (68)

Bruce Lee echoes this ideal when he states:

“The best soldiers are not warlike; the best fighters do not lose their temper.
The greatest conquerors are those who overcome their enemies without strife.
The greatest directors of men are those who spread peace to others.”

No general wants soldiers who fight independently as opposed to working as a member of a team and following orders. As the AOW points out:

“Therefore good warriors seek effectiveness in battle from the force of momentum, not from individual persons.” (Force)

And how does Lao Tzu know all this?

You govern a kingdom by normal rules;
You fight a war by exceptional moves;
 (which echoes in the words of the AOW which states
 “**All Warfare if based on Deception**, Laying Plans 18)
But you win the world by letting alone.
How do I know this is so?
By what is within me. (57)

For as the AOW mentions:

“Those who win every battle are not really skillful –
those who render the other’s army helpless without
fighting are best of all” (Planning a Siege)

and

“Know your enemy,
Know yourself
100 battles
100 Victories” Attacks by Strategy 18

or on an individual level, as the Tai Chi Classic state, “My opponent does not know me, but I know him; wherever the hero goes, he is unmatched.”

WATER – FORMLESSNESS

Water is formless and thereby circumvents every obstacle. It gives way, surrounds, finds and flows into even the slightest of unopposed openings.

Perhaps the underlying paradigm is as follows:

Nothing in the world is softer and
weaker than water;
But, for defeating the hard and strong,
there is nothing like it.
For nothing can take its place.
That the weak overcomes the strong,
and the soft overcomes the hard,
This is something known by all, but
practiced by none. (78)

and

Herein is the subtle wisdom of life:
The soft and weak over come the hard and strong (36)

The formlessness of water is also used as a goal for military maneuvering in the AOW.

“Military tactics are like unto water;
for water in its natural course runs away from high places
and hastens downward so in war,
the way to win is to avoid what is strong and to attack what is weak”.
Weak Points and Strong 29 & 30.

Commentary to Wang Tsung-yueh’s Treatise on Tai Chi Chuan state: “The metaphor of a river expresses the infinite possibilities for transformation. One technique becomes five, five becomes a hundred. The flow is unceasing like a river.”

Bruce Lee often discussed the metaphor of water (“Be water, my friend”)when discussing the martial arts: “One of the best examples of gung fu is a glass of water. Why? Because it is capable of adapting itself to any situation. If you pour it into a cup, it becomes the cup; if you pour it into a bottle, it becomes the bottle; if you pour it into a glass, it becomes the glass. Water is the softest substance in the world, yet it can penetrate the hardest rock. Water is also unsubstantial; by that I mean, you cannot grasp hold of it, you cannot punch it and hurt it. So every gung fu man is trying to do that; to be soft like water, to be flexible and able to adapt to the opponent.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

Ultimately and as usual paradoxically Lao Tzu states:

Mercy alone can help you to win a war.
Mercy alone can help you to defend your state.
For Heaven will come to the rescue of the merciful
and protect him with its Mercy.

Some of this is contained in the AOW admonition:

“A surrounded army must be given a way out” and
“Do not press a desperate enemy” and
“Do not stop an army on its way home” (Armed struggle)

These thoughts are mirrored in the Tai Chi (Taiji) Classics. Wang Tsung-yueh’s Treatise on Tai Chi Chuan states:

“The sages have taught us that to conquer with force leaves the heart unconquered”. When we learn the Art of weakness overcoming strength, of slowness overcoming speed and using skill to control an opponent, then we truly conquer the opponent’s heart/mind.”

For many, these insights are too difficult to comprehend. Lao Tzu understood this when he said:

My words are very easy to understand,
and very easy to practice:
But the world cannot understand them,
nor practice them. (70)

Sun Tzu seemed to share the same experience when he stated:

“How victory may be produced for them out of the enemy’s own
tactics –
that is what the multitude cannot comprehend.
All men can see the tactics whereby I conquer,
but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved.”
Weak Point and Strong 26 & 27

Bruce Lee would agree: “In a similar way, when the highest stage is reached in the study of Taoist teaching, a gung fu man turns into a kind of simpleton who knows nothing of Tao, nothing of its teachings, and is devoid of all learning. Intellectual calculations are lost sight of and a state of no-mindedness prevails. When the ultimate perfection is attained, the body and limbs perform by themselves what is assigned to them to do with no interference from the mind. The technical skill is so automatized it is completely divorced from conscious efforts.”

EXAMPLES:

Could such a strategy work? Are there practical examples we can find?

MODERN WARFARE

In terms of military strategy we can look at the US experience during the Vietnam War. How did a small country of peasants fighting in pajamas defeat the mightiest and most technically advanced army in the world? Digging tunnels underground the Cu Chi district of Saigon created a hidden highway of over 250 km for transportation of soldiers and supplies. The U.S. Army rarely saw the enemy hidden below the ground they were patrolling. Even when tunnels were found and destroyed there were layers of tunnels below that served as supply depots, hospitals and staging locations for troops to attack from and retreat.

The Chinese Nationalists resisted Japanese Invasion during World War II by retreating deeper and deeper into the vast interior of China. Japan would never have enough soldiers to conquer and occupy the vast country of China. Furthermore, other Allied European countries were doing the work of fighting the Japanese for them. It was only a matter of time. And as the Nationalists rightly understood, their real threat was from within against the Chinese Communists.

The leader of the Chinese Communists became Mao Tse Tung who abandoned the Russian Western military strategies for return to the Chinese strategies of the Art of War in eluding the Chinese Nationalist. By conducting a fighting retreat known as the “Long March” into some of the most impassable terrain, including swamps, snowy mountainous regions and deserts to Yen-an where those that survived regrouped and then proceeded to attack and destroy the Nationalist army forcing them to flee to Taiwan. In conducting his strategy of warfare he stated that when the enemy retreated, he attacked; when the enemy attacked, he retreated; when the enemy was tired, he hit them; and when the enemy was stationary, he harassed them.

POLITICS

While not avoiding danger non violent responses have overcome superior force and power in many instances of world history. How could one man with nothing but the hand made clothes on his back drive England out of India? How could one prisoner end apartheid in South Africa? How could civil rights activists led by a single Southern Baptist preacher practicing non violence help end segregation in America?

In words that did augur well regarding the recent 2008 Presidential election, Lao Tzu states that:

Hence a man who rejoices over the
slaughter of men cannot expect to
thrive in the world of men.
On happy occasions the left side is
preferred.

On several occasions the right side.
In the army, the Lieutenant Commander
stands on the left,
While the Commander-in-Chief stands
on the right.
This means that war is treated on a par
with a funeral service.
Because man people have been filled, it
is only right the survivors should
mourn for them.
Hence, even a victor is a funeral. (31)

Ultimately, Lao Tzu would recommend
Be a leader, not a butcher!
This is called hidden Virtue. (10)

LEGAL

From a legal view point, a willingness to retreat, allowing the other person to make the first move and responding with appropriate force will bolster a claim of self defense. Acting in what one perceives is self defense is no guarantee that one will not be arrested,

forced to undergo expensive and prolonged legal proceeding that may or may not result in a jury of 12 fellow citizens finding that one acted in perfect self defense (as witness the New York subway gunman , Bernard Goetz).

CONTACT SPORTS/MARTIAL ARTS

Any fighting art based primarily on speed and power is an Art where the fighters have to retire early. The more speed and power required, the earlier the age of retirement such as Thai Kick Boxers “over the hill” in their 20s and most western boxers in their 30s. Same with contact sports: 3 or 4 years is the most some professional football players will survive as compared to 10 years for basketball players and even 20 years for baseball players.

Other martial arts such as Taijiquan which was and is consciously based on the theories of Taoist especially the dynamic interrelationship of Yin & Yin, have the advantage of building health instead of destroying it. What advantage to being the best fighter, if prevented from fighting because of injury or sickness? The early Chen Taiji masters substituted the push for the punch and developed Push Hands Practice which allowed Masters to survive training with fewer injuries and often live to their 60s, 70s and 80s while still being able to practice their art successfully.

BOXING

On an individual level Muhammad Ali beat a seemingly unbeatable opponent, George Foreman in Zaire by goading Foreman into attacking him on the ring ropes and absorbing body shots on his arms while leaning back on the ropes to avoid head shots, the so called “Rope A Dope” strategy. In addition, Ali’s manager had loosened the ropes prior to the contest so that the ropes could absorb some of the heavy blows intended for Ali’s body. Once Foreman tired, Ali surgically counter attacked sending Foreman to the floor down and out for the first time in his life.

Ali also fought going backwards against the ever aggressive Joe Frazer using retreat as a means of attack.

Irish Light-Heavy weight Billy Cohn almost won the Heavyweight Championship from the great Joe Louis. Toward the end of the fight, all he had to do was stay away from Joe Lewis and he would have been the first Light Heavyweight to win the Heavyweight Championship of the world, using what would later come to be identified as Ali’s “Float Like a Butterfly, Sting like a Bee” strategy. But, being Irish, he got cocky and over confident and decided he could beat Joe Louis at his own game and although ahead in points, stood to fight in the 13th round only to see his dreams turn into a nightmare as Joe Louis sent him crashing to the canvas in defeat.

BRUCE LEE

Perhaps one of the greatest and most influential martial artists of the twentieth century, Bruce Lee drew heavily on the wisdom of the TTC and also Zen Buddhism (which, with its emphasis on finding understanding by searching within oneself was a

direct product of Taoist influence on Buddhism in China). He actually majored in philosophy while attending the University of Washington and had over 2500 books in his personal library, covering everything from Eastern philosophy to Western psychoanalysis. His early writings quoted directly from TTC and the Taiji Yin/Yang diagram was always at the center of any symbolic representation of his art. His background experience with Taiji (through his father) and Wing Chun drew heavily on the concept of yin and yang. The concept of martial strategy based on formlessness, like water, was his ultimate ideal. The concept of wu wei was used to describe his concept of direct response without predetermined techniques or wasted effort.

“Thus wu wei is the art of artlessness, the principle of no principle. To state it in terms of gung fu, the genuine beginner knows nothing about the way of blocking and striking, and much less of his concern for himself. When an opponent tries to strike him, he instinctively parries it. This is all he can do. But as soon as his training starts, he is taught how to defend and attack, where to keep the mind, and many other technical tricks – which make his mind stop at various junctures. For this reason whenever he tries to strike the opponent he feels unusually hampered (he has lost altogether the original sense of innocence and freedom). But as months and years go by, as his training acquires fuller maturity, his bodily attitude and his way of managing the technique move toward no-mindedness which resembles the state of mind he had at the very beginning of training when he knew nothing, when he was altogether ignorant of the art. The beginning and the end thus turn into next-door neighbors.”

CINEMA

Bruce Lee demonstrated the “Art of Fighting without Fighting” in confronting the obnoxious and belligerent Australian on board the transport boat leading to Han’s Island Tournament in the movie, Enter the Dragon. When asked to demonstrate Bruce Lee suggested they take the rowboat to a nearby island where they would have greater room. After the Australian entered the boat Bruce let go of the tow rope and let the bitter fighter contemplate his loss to the Art of Fighting without Fighting.

What scholarly treatise would be so shallow as not to include how the Tri Lams in the movie, Revenge of the Nerds, defeated the Alpha Jocks in the Adams College Homecoming contest? Giving up completely on events requiring strength (the Tug of War rope pull) they proceeded to win the lesser events using advanced planning and strategy, eventually winning the admiration of the entire school and head of the Adam’s College Greek Council. Perhaps the ultimate example of a detective who does “wu wei” nothing and lets events unveil themselves is the Dude in the Big Libowski. He does nothing and yet nothing remains to be done.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

So what’s left? Try to avoid trouble and see when its coming before it arrives. Understand trust and utilize the strategy of Yin and Yang. Avoid your opponent’s strengths and capitalize on his weakness. Entice him to overextend and take advantage of

his imbalance. Don't let the opponent choose the time and place of confrontation. Pick the time and place most advantageous to yourself and your situation. As the Tai Chi classics advise, "if the opponent does not move, you do not move, when the opponent makes the slightest move, you move first". If he is tall attack his legs (witness Bruce Lee vs. Kareem Abdul Jabbar in movie, Game of Death) and if he is strong, counter with speed and mobility (Manny Paquiao vs. Oscar de La Hoya). If his weapons are long fight in close and if he is stronger inside avoid closing, keep a distance and use long range attacks. Utilize deception and surprise and avoid direct confrontation (who would remember the 300 Spartans had Xerxes taken a little more time to find the hidden mountain path that would out flank the pass defenders?) If worse comes to worse, call the police and other authorities and let them do your fighting for you. Sometimes just stepping back, postponing reaction and just waiting to see how the situation is going to develop may be the best advice. Would that George Bush had given the U.N. weapon's inspector more time, before taking action? After all sooner or later, "what goes around comes around."

One of the most important concepts anyone can recommend is Situational Awareness which forms part of the basis for an outstanding program for women developed by security expert, Laura Clark. What is Situational Awareness"? "When you improve your situational awareness you learn to be aware in the present moment and cognizant of the situation around you, so that if danger develops you are better prepared to recognize the early warning signals and respond appropriately." Laura Clark, Security Expert www.securityforwomen.com.

PERSONAL

As for myself, I am not always a Taoist all the time. I am Taoist when contemplating the mystery and wonder of the universe. I am Taoist when walking in the MO Botanical Gardens or when diving into the ocean waves or practicing Taiji on the Cahokia Mounds. I like to be Taoist when sparring with others, seeking to blend with my opponent's movements rather than opposing them, turning my opponent into my dance partner instead of my enemy. I am Taoist when I contemplate the continuous ebb and flow of Yin and Yang. I am Taoist whenever people ask me to define myself in their terms, or whenever else I feel like it. But in truth I must also confess to a fondness for being Confucian, also and sometimes at the same time "Bears Paw". "Bears Paw" as discussed by Confucius foremost disciple Mencius states:

"I like fish and I also like bear's paw. If I cannot have both, I shall give up the fish and choose the bear's paw. I like life and I also like righteousness. If I cannot have both of them, I shall give up life and choose righteousness. I love life, but there is something I love more than life, and therefore I will not do anything improper to have it. I also hate death, but there is something I hate more than death and therefore there are occasions when I will not avoid danger." 6A:15

RESOURCES/BOOKS

Translations:

- (1) Tao Te Ching – John Wu, Shambala Press (pocket edition only \$6.95)
- (2) The Art of War – Thomas Cleary, Shambala Press (pocket edition only \$6.95)
or free at www.chinapage.com/sunzi
- (3) A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy – Wing-Tsit Chan, Princeton University Press

Tai Chi Classics:

- (4) Tai Chi Touchstones – Douglas Wile, Sweet Chi Press

Other helpful Resources/Books

- (5) Bruce Lee, The Tao of Gung Fu, by Bruce Lee
as edited by John Little, Tuttle Publishing (1997)
- (6) Security for Women, The Evolution of Empowerment by
Laura Clark and Wm. Algaier (2006)
- (7) Surveillance Detection, The Art of Prevention by
Laura Clark and Wm. Algaier (2006)

AUTHOR

J. Justin Meehan is a St. Louis Attorney and Martial Artist of 45 years study primarily in the Chinese Martial Arts, especially Taijiquan (Tai Chi Chuan). He is President of the Chinese Internal Arts Association and Taoist Research and Resource Forum. For further info check out his qualifications at: www.jjustinmeehan.com and his website at www.stltaiji.com. © 2008 J. Justin Meehan