

The Queen's Theory and the King's Theory

Void and Fullness in Chinese and Western Patterns of Waging Wars

Hard against hard or hard against soft?

Chinese martial art has evolved under the influence of a fundamentally different ethics, a way of understanding humanity, but also cosmology, that is, the way of perceiving the Universe and the interdependencies of phenomena occurring within it. The oldest compendium of knowledge on this subject is the *Book of Changes*, whose origins date back to the Chinese Neolithic. It has been and still is an instruction for observation, but also for influencing the reality surrounding people. In the briefest terms: this collection of ancient maxims teaches how to act in a given social situation, taking into account the phases of the world.

The phases of the world are governed by their own laws, which in the Chinese cultural circle are referred to as *Dao*, the unnameable principle of the functioning of all phenomena. They oscillate in their intensity from peak to minimum. A vigorous empire can reach the apogee of its strength, only to fall into powerlessness, decadence... and eventually succumb to a barbarian invasion or a rebellion caused by the hunger of the peasantry.

The work known to almost all military history enthusiasts, *The Art of War*, is a treatise in which the maxims of the *Book of Changes* are served to the reader in the form of advice in a specific context – conducting armed conflict or commanding an army and influencing it against the opponent and the course of events. If we were to translate the original title of the treatise literally, it would be *Rules/Principles for Using the Army of Master Sun*.

Sun Zi, the presumed author of the work, uses the same metaphors that we find in the *Book of Changes*. Thus, we encounter in the ancient treatise the maxim "strike fullness against emptiness" or "strike hard against soft" expressed in anecdotes and recommendations formulated for the use of the adept of tactics and strategy. Sun Zi wrote:

"Induce the opponent to a hasty decision by showing illusory benefits. When disorder prevails on his side, strike unexpectedly and defeat him. When the opponent is in a state of Fullness, prepare for his attack." (1.15-17)

Fullness (*shi* 實) is a state of maximum combat readiness, which may consist of the apogee of morale and strength of soldiers, a combination of favorable tactical, geopolitical circumstances, etc. It can be a stage of preparation of the country and nation for war efforts, thus the result of long-term work and foresight. The state of Emptiness (*xu* 虛) is the opposite of the above, a situation in which the army is weak for some reason: exhaustion, an incompetent or deceived commander, modest size compared to the opponent's forces, etc.

Fullness and Emptiness also have another meaning, which often recurs in ancient Chinese military treatises and also functions in contemporary military thought. Fullness is something real,

actual, while Emptiness is our illusions, delusions, something that is merely a facade. This pair of meanings, although fundamentally derived from Buddhist thought and associated with it, frequently recurs in Chinese civilization long before the import of Buddhism to China, which occurred around the 3rd century AD.

The Book of Changes in general, and the treatise *The Art of War* in the military context, recommends manipulating the state of one's army and circumstances in such a way as to strike hard (Fullness) against soft (Emptiness). Therefore, one should wait until the natural cycles of the Universe – says the *Book of Changes* – take a form such that with minimal effort we can exert maximum effect. Sun Zi translates this into the language of the soldier in many places in his treatise, writing among other things:

"If the enemy's troops are full of strength, they must be exhausted." (I.20)

Therefore, if the opponent is in Fullness of strength, he will exhaust him. (VI.4)

In the Chinese mental space, this maxim is a commonly recognized proverb, and at the same time one of the "plans of action" that I analyze in depth in my book *36 Stratagems*. By the way: the Polish word "fortel" is a translation of the Chinese *ji* (計, pronounced as in *gee, let me think*), which has a completely different semantic field – in Chinese, besides trickery, it means a clever plan, procedure. The mentioned "fortel" advises finding the entry point, the place or moment of applying leverage. One must choose the time of attack when the ratio of forces of the fighting sides is most favorable for oneself.

Such a situation is seen in the most obvious example taken from our Polish history – the maneuver of Jagiełło on the day of the Battle of Grunwald. Historical accounts say that on the battlefield appeared, on one side, the exhausted Teutonic Knights, who had marched all night, almost literally preparing for battle in the full sun, and on the other, the armies of Lithuania and the Crown, calmly waiting among the shadowy forests. Thus, the armies of the sleepless and the well-rested stood opposite each other, exhausted by the heat and refreshed. Emptiness and Fullness.

May God judge us

Now let us return to the world of the West, to the world of Clausewitz. To a world where a pattern, more or less ostentatiously, prevails, according to which victory must be achieved in the most spectacular clash possible, in a pitched battle, and more broadly – in the confrontation of forces of a similar (customarily and ritually) nature.

I believe that the pursuit of confrontation of forces of similar nature is deeply ingrained in our culture, legal system, and way of thinking. This pattern has been inherited from ancient Greece, where a dispute between two city-states was resolved by a battle of two armies of hoplites. The phalanx of citizens of the polis that drove the opponent from the battlefield or otherwise demonstrated its superiority won.

An important phase in the evolution of this pattern was the duels of knights and battle duels, practiced in medieval Europe. They did not allow the use of trickery in certain customary phases of confrontation, as they constituted a form of divine judgment, meant to indicate the side on which truth and God stand. Victory achieved through trickery was shameful and, above all, did not resolve the matter. The range of acceptable and unclean plays changed, of course, with time and the place of the event.

An example of such a battle duel is the Battle of Koronowo, fought on October 10, 1410. Piotr Derdej, the author of the study *Koronowo 1410*, quotes Długosz's chronicle, according to which in the battle the opponents called for breaks, serving each other wine. According to historians cited by Derdej, Stefan Maria Kuczyński and Zdzisław Spieralski, this stemmed from the belief that the knightly guests of the order from Western Europe

[...] still retained the ancient chivalric customs, which demanded respect for the opponent who fights fairly.

Earlier, Derdej writes:

The chivalry on both sides adhered to the Western European code of honor and fought this battle also in a Western manner, partly tournament-style, where equals stood in ranks [...] in chivalric customs, opponents who admired and respected each other, albeit temporarily – fought under opposing banners.

The King's Theory and the Queen's Theory

In both civilizations, Western and Chinese, commanders and statesmen faced the choice of how to neutralize the opponent. Such neutralization is a synonym for winning the war. However, the contents encompassed by that synonym depend on the cultural context in which the conflict takes place, and thus on the definition of what is commonly referred to as "victory." Neutralization is a very clever word, as it can mean one of a whole spectrum of events, from the physical destruction of the enemy army (instruments of influence) through the spectacular capture of the capital, to depriving the enemy of the will to pursue his interests.

Possible interpretations of what victory is are at the very core of the differences between East and West. The Chinese are more likely to be satisfied that the opponent has ceased to interfere. And ritual victory, for example, the solemn signing of peace in a railway carriage or on the deck of a battleship, or imposing humiliating war reparations, can provoke... or more: force the opponent to seek a way to "regain honor." Such a situation is observed in the case of revanchist sentiments in German society after World War I. The perception was that Germany lost the war not as it should have, on the battlefield, but as a result of the strangulation of its economy. And perception is everything.

In my opinion,

**"to win means to make others lose the will power
to counter our plans; to win is to optimize
one's ability to influence the course of events.**

To this end, it is not necessary to physically destroy the opponent or his instruments of action (then we would write: deprive him of the ability to counter us...), nor even to impose one's views on him or politically or physically enslave him. In the minimum version, it is enough to evoke in him a psychological phenomenon known as "the feeling of real or perceived defeat," to destroy his morale (fortitude).

This "minimum version" is the quintessence of Chinese philosophy of conducting conflict in any sphere, starting from personal life and ending with formulating geopolitical doctrines. Also in

contemporary times and in the context of building the so-called New Silk Road. The aforementioned concept of "seeking the entry point," which involves taking action at the moment optimal for the acting ratio of forces, is the concept of *wuwei* (無為), otherwise known as the doctrine of non-action.

While gathering materials to write *36 Stratagems*, I came across an absolutely fascinating book, *The Art of Maneuver*, in which American theorist Robert Leonhard formulates the dilemma of the decision-maker participating in a conflict (and in this work, a military commander) as the **King's Theory and the Queen's Theory**. Leonhard believes that the dilemma should be resolved by defining what should be or what is the critical point, whose effective attack will become the moment of conflict determining victory.

The King's Theory is a concept of actions that assumes an attack on the weakest point – in chess, this is the king piece. The Queen's Theory is an attack on the strongest point, that is, on the queen piece. Allow me to quote a fragment of my own book discussing Leonhard's reasoning:

Wars and conflicts are waged by people. The primary goal of influence is the mind of the opponent. This understanding of the art of war is, by its very nature, a branch of psychology. The "Western" approach is a war of attrition. The method of victory is to create a calculable advantage, which can therefore be quantified, in numbers or material, and then physically (kinetically) destroy the opponent or deprive him of the ability or instruments of action. The critical point, whose destruction is the goal, the so-called center of gravity of the opponent, is his key strength. Cultural conditions make the clash take the form of a fair game confrontation, and thus, among other things, the attack has the nature of striking hard against hard, and defense consists of generating a counter-force of a similar type to that used in the attack.

In Clausewitz's understanding, the center of gravity of the conflict constitutes either building a force capable of breaking the enemy's army (counter-forces of a similar type), or capturing his capital and – necessarily! – a victory parade in the city brought to its knees. This "necessarily" is needed for both the opponent to acknowledge his defeat and for observers to legitimize it, formally recognizing the geopolitical effect achieved. But this is our Western logic. Decision-makers educated under the influence of Sun Zi find such a ritual framing completely unnecessary, and often consider it harmful, as it opens the way to revenge.

To catch the bandits, catch their leader

The fundamental difference between Chinese and Western conduct of wars is – besides the fact that the Chinese try to wage conflicts secretly – achieving victory without fighting. Thus, the main goal of the exerted influence and the instrument of realization will be for them not the army (Fullness, hard), but the activity of the opponent that serves the generation of Fullness (Emptiness, soft). The measure of mastery of the political decision-maker or commander turns out to be not the ability to win a battle or a war, but to resolve the conflict before a costly and unpredictable escalation requiring the use of military force occurs. I will now quote my two favorite fragments from *The Art of War*, which, although seemingly referring to the use of military force, describe any situation of influencing the course of events:

"The leader who achieves victory in such a way that outsiders notice it is not the greatest master. He who lifts a feather is not a strongman, he who sees the sun and the moon does not possess keen eyesight, just as hearing the thunder does not provide extraordinary hearing. He, whom in ancient times they called the Master of War, won unnoticed. Hence his victories, improperly valued by outsiders, brought him neither the glory of a great leader nor the glory for unyielding deeds."

[...] "Therefore, the army whose victory is written first wins, and only then seeks to engage in battle; the army that is doomed to defeat first engages in combat, and only in battle seeks hope of victory." (IV. 9-12, 15)

To achieve victory, both Western and Chinese commanders have at their disposal a pool of actions, fundamentally divided into two groups regarding the identification of the critical point, whose attack leads to a knockout or decisive collapse of the opponent's efforts. The Chinese, as I have already said, consider a pitched battle of "forces and counter-forces" (that is, a siege or a pitched battle of main forces) and all variants and forms of such confrontation to be the worst solution. They will try to influence in places and situations that cannot be defined, and sometimes even noticed and identified as "the decisive clash." This is not the subject of this essay, but such a conducted "war without war" is the essence of what we today call hybrid wars.

The Chinese approach, whose precursor is Sun Zi, Leonhard calls maneuver warfare – in contrast to attrition warfare. Allow me to summarize his reasoning:

In such a war, the participant gains an advantage by exploiting the difficult-to-weigh weaknesses and strengths of the human soul. Psychology is the foundation of all concepts of maneuver warfare – the clash of two opposing human wills. In maneuver warfare, the center of gravity of the opponent is his key weakness. The attack takes the form of striking hard against soft, preferably under conditions as unfair as possible for the latter.

The quintessence of the above reasoning in Chinese martial art can be found in Sun Zi's treatise:

"Therefore, the most appropriate type of war is to turn the opponent's plans and schemes to naught. Less favorable is to strike at his alliances. An even worse rank is the attack on his armies, and the worst is to besiege his city."

A handful of examples

Among the possible variants for realizing the King's Theory, I will now choose two. The first of them is the maxim-proverb: "To catch the bandits, catch their leader."

The chief decision-maker for an army or any group pursuing collective goals is usually its most vulnerable link in the sense that it requires minimal resources to attack. And such a minimalist attack often translates into maximum effect. In the person of a charismatic leader concentrates the "political will" to continue the conflict or the ability to wage it, and sometimes even to win it. Such a link was Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who was killed by the Americans – under the dictation of the Chinese proverb – in the famous operation of April 1943.

Another variant of applying the King's Theory is the proverb-stratagem "take the fuel from under the kettle." Here we will smoothly recall an example from the same period and theater of operations. The Japanese fell into the trap of striking hard against hard in 1941. In love with their triumph in the Battle of Tsushima (this is my personal assumption), they believed that by attacking

the base at Pearl Harbor, they should destroy the "hard," that is, the American battleships and aircraft carriers. The attack on fuel depots, crucial for maintaining the operational capability of the US Navy in the Pacific, was planned only for the third wave of the raid, which, due to the Americans' awakening and increasing air defense, was canceled by those commanding the attack.

The Japanese poorly defined the task to be accomplished. Their strategic goal was to remove the American fleet from the Pacific theater, but not to "destroy" it (striking hard against hard)! If, therefore, on the "day of infamy," they had focused on destroying the fuel depots, and then destroyed or rendered the Panama Canal unusable, they would most likely have achieved their strategic goal – the Americans would have withdrawn themselves, giving the Empire of Nippon space and time to seize further territories in East Asia.

The last example is the Vietnam War. One aspect of it seems to be the most important for the entire conflict. Vietnamese decision-makers waged the conflict according to the concept of guerrilla warfare formulated by Mao Zedong in the form of a treatise in 1937. Its central point is building one's own strength and exhausting the opponent's strength.

The Americans, as unwittingly as eagerly, cooperated in this regard with their opponent. Trapped in their Western model of conflict, they waged a war of attrition using a war machine created to fight a symmetrical, that is, prone to collapse industrial machine, opponent.

They eagerly awaited the decisive clash and tried to provoke it. They could then exploit their advantage – the firepower of aviation and artillery. This specific play occurred in the 1968 campaign in the area of the American fire base Khe Sanh. The Americans tempted the opportunity for the Vietnamese to repeat their victory over the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954.

That battle was a classic clash of the "Queen's Theory." But now the Vietnamese outplayed the Yankees at their own game while playing their own. For General Võ Nguyên Giáp (1911–2013), who commanded the Vietnamese war effort, attacking the American "fullness," the prevailing form, that is, the military forces present in Vietnam, was an undesirable, costly, and fundamentally suicidal application of the Queen's Theory. Giáp's goal was on another continent. The intention of the Vietnamese strategist was to exhaust American society, specifically – to strike at its "connection" with democratically elected representatives.

The specific strategy of the Vietnamese was to play for time ("wait until the enemy gets tired"), but also clever moves aimed at sowing discord between American decision-makers and society. This goal was pursued – as we read more and more often in historical studies – both by activating leftist groups in the USA and by the famous "Tet" offensive of 1968. But although the offensive ended with horrific losses for the Vietnamese side, its goal was not military. The commander of the North Vietnamese effort, General Giáp, achieved something entirely different: he irrefutably demonstrated to American television viewers (read: voters) that – contrary to the optimistic messages from the White House – the war was not approaching a victorious end for the Americans at all.

A trick within a trick within a trick, or a summary

And this is a great moment to point out my favorite tidbit regarding the Chinese art of deception, always connected – with patterns that are the essence of the Book of Changes.

"Hide the Fullness in the Emptiness," "hide the Emptiness in the Fullness," teaches Sun Zi. Hide your strength in the weakness shown outwardly. Pretend to be weak when you are strong. Or when you are weak, pretend to be strong. Arrange your campfires in battle formation so that the enemy is frightened by the unexpected change in the balance of power. Puff yourself up – like fighting

animals do. Or provoke. Pose as an easy prey so that the opponent underestimates precautions and does not use all the strength available to him.

This – more generally, closer to the *Book of Changes* than to the *Art of War* – represents two forces of opposite nature, one hidden within the other. Both can be seen in the well-known Yin-Yang symbol. The two unassuming dots are not only the beginning of the transformation of oscillating forces – white into black and black into white. Forces into weakness. Full combat readiness into exhaustion. Appearance and illusion into the true state of affairs. It is a reminder that the Emptiness conceals the Fullness and vice versa. But it is also a warning that even at the peak of strength, a weak point can be found somewhere... and vice versa. The weakest opponent also has some last-chance trick to strike unexpectedly. It is a lesson that even the strongest opponent always has some weak point, a proverbial Achilles' heel. It is also advice that it is not yet time for the decisive move, that the oscillating phenomena have not yet aligned as they should... and at the same time, it is the mystery of Chinese patience and the foresight attributed to this nation.

In the specific case of the Vietnam War, it also represents two different methods of achieving a goal. The "Tet" offensive is a major battle of the main forces, an action that has for the Americans an alluring character akin to a siren's song of a wet dream. It is the theory of the queen. However, its political, or rather psychological, goal, as it plays out in the realm of mind games rather than the firing of cannons, turned out to be the attitude of American voters. The attack was not on an army armed to the teeth, but on something very susceptible to "soft" influence, which is the theory of the king, or perhaps the deepest essence of Sun Zi's work – to win, attack the plans and intentions of the opponent, his will to fight (fortitude).

Hiding the Fullness in the Emptiness and the Emptiness in the Fullness means creating complicated mental images. Presenting them before the eyes of the opponent in such a way that he willingly and at his own expense walks down the path leading to ruin – not seeing the consequences several moves ahead. Chinese decision-makers, raised on Sun Zi's treatise, the anonymous compilation of the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, and the *Book of Changes*, have a natural advantage over us in being accustomed to tricks, the prediction or noticing of which already in the implementation phase can determine victory or defeat. "On the fall or survival of a state," as Sun Zi writes at the very beginning of his treatise.

Today, in the year 2020, as we stand on the brink of the end of the geopolitical pause and the political correction of the power dynamics altered by the rise of China's power, we observe a complicated dance of great powers above our heads. Will any of them manage to tip the scales before the openly waged war becomes an inevitable phase of the struggle for power over the world? Will we be able to recognize that moment when it occurs? Will future historians, mesmerized by the official narrative, debate it?

When the matter is accomplished, I bet it will happen unnoticed. According to the immortal words I have already quoted here:

He who in ancient times was called a master of warfare won unnoticed. For this reason, his victories, improperly valued by outsiders, neither brought him the glory of a great leader nor the glory for unyielding deeds.

Perhaps the players, one playing the theory of the king and the other drawn into the theory of the queen by the first, will only smile at each other... A bit like in an unassuming scene from the film *Last Knights* (2015), where one of the two warriors playing chess, frowning his brow over an unremarkable arrangement of pieces, said with quiet admiration: "Hmm! It looks like you won."

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