



Monumenta Serica

Journal of Oriental Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/ymon20

A Choice between *Su* 速 and *Jiu* 久

An Interpretation of the *Sunzi* and War Practice during the Sanguo Period (220–280)

Wu Leijia 吳磊佳

To cite this article: Wu Leijia 吳磊佳 (2024) A Choice between *Su* 速 and *Jiu* 久, Monumenta Serica, 72:1, 1-18, DOI: [10.1080/02549948.2024.2335811](https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.2024.2335811)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02549948.2024.2335811>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 03 Jun 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 602



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

A CHOICE BETWEEN *SU* 速 AND *JIU* 久

An Interpretation of the *Sunzi* and War Practice during the Sanguo Period (220–280)

WU LEIJIA 吳磊佳

This article questions a prevailing view that the Sunzi advocates the su strategy (seeking quick victory) and opposes the jiu strategy (gradually exhausting the enemy through protracted warfare) or, at the very least, advocates the su strategy and opposes the jiu strategy in the study of how best to make war on an enemy. By means of a study of the contents of the Sunzi and the war practice of the Sanguo (Three Kingdoms) period, the argument here is that the prevailing view is unconvincing. The Sunzi is in favor of neither the su nor the jiu strategy, but in fact values bian (“flexibility and adaptability”). A commander should flexibly select his strategies between su and jiu according to the varying situations. This principle was widely applied by top Sanguo commanders during their training for war.

KEYWORDS: Sunzi, military strategy, quick victory, protracted warfare, flexibility and adaptability, Three Kingdoms

ABBREVIATIONS

HHS	Hou Hanshu 後漢書
JS	Jinshu 晉書
SGZ	Sanguozhi 三國志

INTRODUCTION

The *Sunzi* 孫子, also known as the *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法, is widely regarded as the most important ancient Chinese military treatise. Its second chapter, “Zuozhan” 作戰 (Operational Principles) has a well-known saying: “What should be valued in warfare is *sheng*, but not protracted involvement” (*bing gui sheng, bu gui jiu* 兵貴勝, 不貴久).¹ Most researchers think that the character *sheng* 勝 should be translated as “quick victory.”² Based on such an interpretation, many scholars assert that the *Sunzi* advocates quick victory and opposes protracted warfare,³ or

¹ *Sunzi* 1.26.

² For instance, see the annotations of Meng 孟 (given name unknown) of Liang 梁, Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣 and Zhang Yu 張預 of the Song dynasty (*Sunzi* 1.26); Guo Huaruo 1984, p. 20; Ames 1993, p. 77; Li Ling 2006, p. 105; Mair 2007, p. 83; Lin Wusun 2007, p. 29. All translations from the *Sunzi* and other Chinese classical works are my own unless otherwise stated.

³ For example, see Handel 1991, p. 32; Ren Li 2006, pp. 58–59; Yang Xin 2013, p. 13.

at least advocates victory and opposes protracted operations in offensives.⁴ Although some other researchers simply translate *sheng* as “victory,” rather than “quick victory,”⁵ they seem to have no objection to the notion that the *Sunzi* opposes protracted warfare.⁶ Therefore, many scholars evaluate the military thoughts of the *Sunzi* and compare them with others based on such an understanding. For instance, Victory Mair opines that it “stands in sharp contrast to Mao Zedong’s advocacy of protracted war.”⁷ Guo Huaruo criticized the *Sunzi* by saying that it ignores the importance of protracted warfare, which is the only feasible strategy for weaker defenders pitted against stronger invaders.⁸

To compare the military thoughts of the *Sunzi* and others or to evaluate the correctness of the views expressed in the *Sunzi* is not in the scope of this article. A prerequisite of studying the above topics is to correctly understand the contents of the *Sunzi*. To the best of my knowledge, no work thus far has deeply investigated the question of whether the *Sunzi* truly advocates quick victory and opposes protracted warfare as an offensive strategy. The answer is not only essential to understand the chapter of “Zuozhan,” but also very important in understanding the whole idea of the *Sunzi*. In this article, I define a strategy aiming to seek quick victory through decisive battles as the *su* 速 strategy. At the same time, however, I also define a strategy that aims to use protracted warfare to gradually exhaust the enemy, as the *jiu* 久 strategy.⁹ My intention is to offer a deep investigation of the attitude in the *Sunzi* about these two opposing strategies. I will also study the practical applications of the two strategies in the Sanguo period (approximately 200–280).¹⁰ We should keep in mind that various interpretations of *Sunzi* have differed over the passage of time and even differed in the views of people of the same period. I chose the Sanguo period as my research object because it is a famous period of war in the overall history of China. I have noticed that many military experts of Sanguo made their plans and decisions based on the principles proposed by the *Sunzi*. Unlike contemporary researchers, they had rich war experiences and direct command of great battles.¹¹ Some military leaders were born of aristocratic families, and thus were

⁴ Huang – Gao 2015, p. 31.

⁵ See Giles 1910, p. 45; Griffith 1963, p. 76; Sawyer 1996, p. 48.

⁶ For example, see Sawyer’s commentary on the chapter of “Zuozhan” (Sawyer 1996, p. 48).

⁷ Mair 2007, p. 80.

⁸ Guo Huaruo 1984, p. 96.

⁹ In this article, I generally define “strategy” as an overall guiding principle to achieve one’s goal, and “tactics” as the detailed means to implement and realize one’s strategy. For example, a decision to seek quick victory over the enemy through a decisive battle is a strategy, the *su* strategy. The detailed means to implement and realize the strategy, as for example the choice of a battlefield, deployment of troops, application of a central breakthrough, or the outflanking of an enemy are tactics.

¹⁰ The starting year of it is still a matter of debate. The four most popular versions are 184, 190, 208, and 220 C.E. to 280 C.E. (Wu Leijia 2017, p. 43). The year of 184 C.E. can be regarded as the start year of the Sanguo period in a broad sense because from this year, the founders of the three states, Wei 魏, Shu-Han 蜀漢, and Wu 吳 stepped onto the historical stage, and local separatist regimes started to form.

¹¹ Some contemporary researchers, like Samuel B. Griffith and Guo Huaruo had participated in wars, like World War II and the Chinese civil war (1945–1950). During these periods of conflict, however, they served only as low to intermediate officers and were not in the decision-making process.

well educated.¹² Moreover, because they lived in an era much closer to the time when the Classics were written, they might have had a better understanding of the texts, compared to contemporary scholars. Although this does not mean their opinions must be correct, I believe that on the one hand, studying the *Sunzi* can help us to understand the military history and war practice of ancient China and, on the other hand, enable us to grasp more accurately how ancient Chinese military experts understood the military thoughts of the *Sunzi* and applied them in practice. Such an approach can help us to understand this highly abstract work, which does not offer examples to explain its theories.

THE CHOICE BETWEEN *SU* 速 AND *JIU* 久

As I have mentioned, many researchers believe that *Sunzi* advocates the *su* strategy and opposes the *jiu* strategy. Their opinion seems to be supported by the contents of the *Sunzi*. If we go through the chapter of “Zuozhan,” we easily find that it repeatedly emphasizes the disadvantages of being involved in protracted warfare. For example, it says:

[If a state has been involved in] protracted [warfare], then its weapons will wear out and the morale of its soldiers will decline. [In such circumstances, if it] attacks the [enemy’s] walled cities, [its] strength will be too weak [to do so]. [If its] army stations in the field too long, [its] wealth and resources will be insufficient [to support it].¹³

The text also says: “No state has ever benefited from protracted warfare.”¹⁴ In addition, its eleventh chapter, “Jiudi” 九地 (Nine Battlefields) says: “The principle of using military forces stresses speed” (*bing zhi qing zhu su* 兵之情主速).¹⁵ However, it should be noticed that the chapter of “Zuozhan” does not discuss general warfare principles, but focuses on the offensive strategy of advancing deep into the enemy’s territory. For example, the operations accordingly require

¹² Some examples are Huangfu Song 皇甫嵩 (?–195 C.E.), the Grand Commandant (*taiwei* 太尉) of Han dynasty, Sima Xuanwang 司馬宣王 (179–251 C.E.), the Grand Tutor (*taifu* 太傅), and Wuyang hou 舞陽侯 of Wei 魏 (179–251). See HHS 71.2299 and *Jinshu* (hereafter *JS*), 1.1. In this article, all English translations of Chinese dynasty government titles are from de Crespigny 2007, unless otherwise stated. However, because of the huge culture differences, it is very difficult to accurately translate all the titles into English. I will present my understandings on the translations in the footnotes for reference. In addition, Rafe de Crespigny does not translate all the titles. In Eastern Han, the three highest standing positions of the government were called the Three Excellencies (*san gong* 三公): the Grand Commandant, the Excellency over the Masses (*situ* 司徒), and the Excellency of Works (*sikong* 司空). The Grand Commandant was ranked first among them and was in charge of accessing the military achievements of officers. The Grand Tutor, whose duty was to guide *tianzi* 天子, the master of *tianxia* 天下 (the ancient Chinese civilization circle), was not a standing position. Usually it was only established when a new *tianzi* succeeded while still underage. *Tianzi* means the son of Tian, which is usually translated as heaven but this is not correct. Tian is the highest form of existence in ancient Chinese culture, like God and Allah in other cultures, rather than being a place. The ranking of The Grand Tutor was even higher than that of the Three Excellencies. Under normal circumstances, however, the ranking was merely an honorary position without actual power.

¹³ 久則鈍兵挫銳，攻城則力屈，久暴師則國用不足。 *Sunzi* 1.18–19.

¹⁴ 夫兵久而國利者，未之有也。 *Sunzi* 1.26.

¹⁵ *Sunzi* 3.149.

“to transport grains to [troops] 1,000 *li*¹⁶ [away from their homeland]” (*qianli kui-liang* 千里饋糧),¹⁷ which clearly shows that the text considers operations going on in the heartland of the enemy state. It also says: “[If] the army stations in the field too long, the wealth and resources of the state will be insufficient [to support it]” (*jiu pushi ze guoyong buzu* 久暴師則國用不足).¹⁸ If the army is in its own territory, it does not have to station in the field. Obviously, it indicates that the army is in the enemy’s land. And it suggests “dividing troops to plunder the countryside” (*lüe xiang fen zhong* 掠鄉分眾).¹⁹ It does not make sense that an army plunders its own countryside. Again, here the countryside undoubtedly refers to the enemy’s countryside. And *bing zhi qing zhu su* 兵之情主速 is not only a principle of general warfare, but has a specific focus too. The complete passage in the chapter of “Jiudi” is:

The principle of using military forces stresses speed. Take advantage of an enemy when it is unready. Use unexpected routes to attack where the enemy is not guarded.²⁰

Here the *Sunzi* obviously advises that speed is the key factor for raids only. Hence, it is unconvincing to conclude that the *Sunzi* prefers the *su* strategy in general.

A careful reading of the *Sunzi* shows that its words do not always advocate the *su* strategy and oppose the *jiu*. For instance, according to the *Sunzi*, “The former masterly commanders made themselves invincible first and then waited for the enemy to be defeatable.”²¹ The above adage shows that the *Sunzi* believes that one should not rush to attack, but should be well prepared first and wait patiently for an opponent to make a mistake. The *Sunzi* also says:

Water forms its courses in accordance with the terrain. Forces [are used] to achieve victories in accordance with the enemy’s [situations]. Since there are no fixed situations in warfare [just as] there are no fixed courses of the water, one who can adapt in accordance with the enemy’s [situations] demonstrates [military] talent.²²

The above words clearly show that the *Sunzi* does not believe in a fixed way to achieve victories. On the contrary, one should vary strategies and tactics to adapt to different situations. For example, the *Sunzi* says:

Therefore [according to the situation, sometimes an army should advance] as swift as the wind, [sometimes should advance] slowly [while maintaining a formation] as tight as a forest.²³

¹⁶ *Li* is a traditional Chinese length unit. One *li* is equivalent to approximately 400 meters in the Chunqiu 春秋 period (Wu Leijia 2019, p. 300).

¹⁷ *Sunzi* 1.18.

¹⁸ *Sunzi* 1.19.

¹⁹ *Sunzi* 2.90.

²⁰ 兵之情主速，乘人之不及，由不虞之道，攻其所不戒也。 *Sunzi* 3.149.

²¹ 昔之善戰者，先為不可勝，以待敵之可勝。 *Sunzi* 1.43.

²² 水因地而制流，兵因敵而制勝。故兵無常勢，水無常形，能因敵變化而取勝者，謂之神。 *Sunzi* 2.81.

²³ 故其疾如風，其徐如林。 *Sunzi* 2.90.

Hence, it is questionable to say the *Sunzi* believed that the *su* strategy is always better than the *jiu* strategy.

Some scholars have noticed that the chapter of “Zuozhan” focuses on offensives. Hence, they think that the *Sunzi* advocates the *su* strategy because it looks at the problem from the perspective of the offensive side. They argue that attackers (usually the stronger side) should use the *su* strategy, while the defenders (usually the weaker side) should adopt the *jiu* strategy. These scholars often use the Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) as an example to support their argument.²⁴ They indicate that although, in general, the *Sunzi* does not advocate the *su* strategy, it does assert that the attacking side should apply the *su* strategy. To a certain extent, their opinion is reasonable. In the beginning of the Sino-Japanese War, for example, China’s military strength was much weaker than Japan’s. China therefore preferred a prolonged war to gradually exhaust the enemy’s strength and wait for a change in the international scene, as happened with the outbreak of the war in the Pacific. On the contrary, Japan wanted a quick victory over China. The wishes of Japan, however, did not represent the teaching of the *Sunzi*. Simply put, the *Sunzi* does not indicate that the *su* strategy is always a better option for offensives, while the *jiu* is a better defensive strategy. Secondly, a single example cannot prove that the *su* strategy is always advantageous to the attacking side.

Let us look at the following examples during the Sanguo period. In the fifth year of Jian’an 建安 in the Han dynasty (200 C.E.), the Grand General (*da jiangjun* 大將軍), Governor of Jizhou (Jizhou *mu* 冀州牧), and Ye *hou* 鄴侯 Yuan Shao 袁紹 (?–202 C.E.),²⁵ the most powerful warlord at that time, planned to eliminate his major

²⁴ See Guo–Zhang 1994, pp. 55–56 and Wang Tingwen 2015, pp. 24–26. Several other scholars also agree, or hold similar opinions. For instance, Liu Ju claims that the quick victory theory and the protracted warfare theory are two sides of the same coin (Liu Ju 1999, p. 30). Li Ling asserts that quick warfare is suitable to the stronger side, while protracted warfare is suitable to the weaker side (Li Ling 2006, p. 105).

²⁵ De Crespigny translates *da jiangjun* as “General-in-Chief.” This translation may be questionable. *Jiangjun* 將軍 was a high-ranking military commander position. A title like *da* 大 was added before it to differentiate one *jiangjun* from another. *Da jiangjun* ranked first among all *jiangjun*, but theoretically, the other *jiangjun* are not subordinates of *da jiangjun*. The *jiangjun* did not take orders from each other. They led their armies independently. Hence, it is questionable to translate *da jiangjun* as “General-in-Chief.” A better translation may be “Grand General.” The territory of Eastern Han consisted of thirteen *zhou* 州: Sili 司隸, Yanzhou 兗州, Qingzhou 青州, Yuzhou 豫州, Xuzhou 徐州, Jizhou 冀州, Youzhou 幽州, Bingzhou 並州, Yangzhou 揚州, Jingzhou 荊州, Yizhou 益州, Liangzhou 涼州, and Jiaozhou 交州. De Crespigny’s translations of the Han administrative regions may be problematic. For example, he translates *zhou*, *wangguo* 王國, and *jun* 郡 as “province,” “kingdom,” and “commandery” respectively. In Eastern Han, *zhou* was the highest level of administrative division. *Jun* and *wangguo* were the second. Readers may feel confused about how a kingdom can be part of a province, and how the kingdom can be equivalent to a commandery which, in Europe, is a district under the control of a commander of an order of knights. Hence, I prefer to use transliteration for these terms. This method is widely used in Japanese studies. For example, 大名 is transliterated into *daimyō*, and 戦国 is transliterated into Sengoku. The chief executive and military officer in charge of a *zhou* was called the governor (*mu* 牧). In Eastern Han, the ranks of noble titles from high to low were *huangdi* 皇帝 (an exclusive title of *tianzi*), *gong* 公 (a title in principle only conferred to the successors of the Shang and Zhou dynasties), *wang* 王, *liehou* 列侯, and *guanmeihou* 關內侯. *Liehou* again included three sub-ranks: *xianhou* 縣侯, *xianghou* 鄉侯, and *tinghou* 亭侯. Their forms of address are the name of the place, added to *hou*, *xianghou*, and *tinghou* respectively. For instance, Ye *hou* was ranked as

competitor, the Excellency of Works,²⁶ acting General of Chariots and Cavalry (*cheqi jiangjun* 車騎將軍), Governor of Yanzhou (Yanzhou *mu* 兗州牧), and Wuping *hou* 武平侯 Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220). Yuan Shao's subordinates held two opposite opinions. Several urged Yuan Shao to immediately launch a general offensive against Cao Cao. Others argued that gradually wearing down Cao Cao's strength through protracted warfare was a better strategy. Yuan Shao adopted the first option, but met utter defeat at the hands of Cao Cao at the battle of Guandu 官渡. In the first year of Jingchu 景初 in the Wei dynasty (237 C.E.), Gongsun Yuan 公孫淵, the Grand Marshal (*da sima* 大司馬), Administrator of Liaodong (Liaodong *taishou* 遼東太守), and Lelang *gong* 樂浪公, betrayed the state of Wei.²⁷ Hence, the Grand Commandant and Wuyang *hou* Sima Xuanwang 司馬宣王 (179–251) was ordered to put down this rebellion. In the next year, Sima Xuanwang besieged Xiangping 襄平, the capital of Liaodong. The city happened to be hit just at that time with heavy rain for over thirty days. Sima Xuanwang did not hurry to strike. Instead, he rejected his commanders' request to attack the Liaodong soldiers pasturing and cutting firewood outside the walled city. He waited until the rain stopped and then stormed Xiangping. Sima Xuanwang took the city, beheaded Gongsun Yuan, and squashed the rebellion. In both of the above cases, it seems that even in offensive action, the *jiu* strategy may at certain times be better than the *su* strategy. In the following section, I will discuss how top Sanguo military experts apply the *su* and *jiu* strategies in war practices and offer examples to illustrate my points.

CASE STUDIES

In the fifth year of Zhongping 中平 in the Han dynasty (188 C.E.), Wang Guo 王國 of Liangzhou rebelled, and besieged Chencang 陳倉, a strategic city of Liangzhou. The Han government sent General on the Left (*zuo jiangjun* 左將軍) Huangfu Song 皇甫嵩, commanding the General of the Van (*qian jiangjun* 前將軍) Dong Zhuo 董卓 (?–192 C.E.),²⁸ each leading an army of 20,000 soldiers, to suppress the rebellion. Dong Zhuo suggested advancing immediately to rescue Chencang. He said:

xianhou, whose fief was at Ye. De Crespigny translates *huangdi*, *gong*, *wang*, and *guanleihou* as Emperor, Duke, King, and secondary marquis, respectively (he does not translate *liehou* and its three sub-ranks). However, simply matching the ancient Chinese noble titles with titles of European nobility may cause confusion. For example, in Europe, although the Emperor is generally recognized to be of a higher honor and rank than the King, a king is not usually the subject of an emperor. Readers may conceivably be confused by the ranking of a duke vis-a-vis that of a king. In the system of Han dynasty nobility, however, the *wang* were the subjects of the *huangdi*. The status of nobility for *wang* was granted and could be deprived by the *huangdi*.

²⁶ The Excellency of Works, ranked the third among the Three Excellencies, was in charge of civil construction affairs.

²⁷ In the Sanguo period, the Grand Marshal, who was in charge of military affairs, ranked above the Three Excellencies. But the title conferred to Gongsun Yuan was merely an honorary position. In Eastern Han, each *zhou* was further divided into a number of *jun* 郡 and other equivalent administrative units. The chief executive and military officer in charge of a *jun* was called *taishou*.

²⁸ As I have mentioned before, the *jiangjun* did not take orders from each other. They led their armies independently. When a few armies needed to fight together to deal with a large-scale war, however, the central government might temporarily appoint a *jiangjun* to command the other *jiangjun* during the war.

A wise person will not lose time. A decisive person will not hesitate. [If we] rescue [Chencang] right now, the city will be preserved. If not, the city will be destroyed. [The city's destiny], to be preserved or destroyed, depends on [our decision] now.²⁹

However, Huangfu Song held a different view. He argued:

No. To fight and win a hundred open battles is not the most brilliant [method] among all brilliant [methods]; to exhaust the enemy army without doing open battles is the most brilliant [method] among all brilliant [methods].³⁰ Therefore, [one should] make oneself invincible first and then wait for the enemy to be vulnerable. Our invincibility depends on ourselves [while] the enemy's vulnerability depends on himself.³¹ [If] the enemies' preparation for defense is insufficient [and] our preparation for attack is more than enough, [then we], the ones whose [preparation] is more than enough [will take initiative like] flying in the highest reaches of the sky [while the enemy], whose [preparation] is insufficient [will be in a passive position like one] stuck in the lowest depths of the earth. Now, although Chencang is small, its defense is strong and complete. [Therefore], it is not [in a passive position like being] stuck in the lowest depths of the earth. Although Wang Guo is powerful, [he] attacked where we do not have to rescue.³² [Therefore, he does] not [take initiative] like flying in the highest reaches of the sky. [The attackers do] not [take initiative] like flying in the highest reaches of the sky, so that they will suffer. [The defenders] are not [in a passive position like being] stuck in the lowest depths of the earth so that their city will not be taken. Now, [Wang] Guo has already been stuck in a disadvantageous place while [the defenders of] Chencang are protecting an unbreakable city.

²⁹ 智者不後時，勇者不留決。速救則城全，不救則城滅，全滅之執，在於此也。HHS 71.2305.

³⁰ This sentence is from "Mougong" 謀攻 (Planning Offensives), the third chapter of the *Sunzi*. See *Sunzi* 1.28. Most researchers translate the character *qu* 屈 as "subdue," "subjugate," or "submit." See the annotations of Cao Cao, of the Tang dynasty scholars Du You 杜佑 (735–812), Chen Hao 陳皞, Jia Lin 賈林, and of Song dynasty scholar Zhang Yu (*Sunzi* 1. 28); Guo Huaruo 1984, p. 41; Sawyer 1996, p. 53; Ames 1993, p. 79; Mair 2007, p. 85. Several other scholars think that it means "break one's resistance." See Giles 2012, p. 12 and Lin Wusun 2007, p. 29. According to the context, however, I think that Huangfu Song interpreted *qu* as "exhaust." As we will see later, Huangfu Song did not expect Wang Guo to be subdued without fighting. His plan was to attack after Wang Guo's troops were exhausted. Almost all contemporary researchers translate *zhan* 戰 as "fighting." See Giles 2012, p. 12; Guo Huaruo 1984, p. 41; Sawyer 1996, p. 53; Ames 1993, p. 79; Mair 2007, p. 85; Lin Wusun 2007, p. 29. In my view, Huangfu Song interpreted *zhan* as "waging open battle." Chencang had already been under siege, a demonstration of a different form of fight. Huangfu Song simply wanted to avoid a fight with Wang Guo in the field when his army was strong.

³¹ The above two sentences are from "Xing" 形 (Situations Caused by Strength), also known as "Junxing" 軍形 (Military Situations Caused by Strength), the fourth chapter of the *Sunzi*, but the wording of the second sentence is slightly different. The original text of the *Sunzi* is 不可勝在己，可勝在敵。See *Sunzi* 1.43.

³² See "Xushi" 虛實 (Weaknesses and Strengths). The sixth chapter of the *Sunzi* says: "Hence if we want to fight open battles, although the enemy has built high ramparts and deep entrenchments [for protection], its soldiers must [come out] to fight open battles with us [because we] attack where they must rescue" (故我欲戰，敵雖高壘深溝，不得不與我戰者，攻其所必救也)。See *Sunzi* 2.72. Obviously, Huangfu Song thought that the walled city of Chencang was too strong to be overcome by Wang Guo. Since Chencang was a place which did not require the efforts of Han reinforcements to be rescued, it was unnecessary for the Han reinforcements to fight with Wang Guo in a hurry.

[Therefore], we can obtain the result of winning a complete victory without bothering to use [our] troops. [Hence], why rescue [Chencang]!³³

Huangfu Song then halted the Han armies and waited. Wang Guo besieged Chencang for over eighty days, but still could not conquer it. The rebels were exhausted and had to retreat. Huangfu Song seized the opportunity to attack the rebels. He defeated them.

The key difference between Huangfu Song and Dong Zhuo is not about *su* and *jiu*, which one is better than the other in general, but about which one was more suitable to the situations at that time. The division of opinion between them was caused by their different evaluations of whether Wang Guo could take Chencang in a short period. If the answer was “yes,” then Dong Zhuo’s opinion probably was right. The Han armies should come for the rescue of Chencang immediately. Otherwise, Huangfu Song’s decision was wiser. Although the written account does not give us more details of the battle, we can deduce that Wang Guo’s army probably was superior in numbers. Hence, Huangfu Song said, “Wang Guo is powerful” and avoided an open battle with him in the beginning. After nearly three months of siege, Wang Guo’s troops were exhausted, and their morale had sharply declined. Hence, Huangfu Song even dared to lead his army alone in pursuing the rebels while leaving Dong Zhuo’s army behind.³⁴ Huangfu Song won the battle because he adopted the *jiu* strategy to patiently wait until the state of an enemy had changed from invincibility to vulnerability, which is in accord with the idea of the *Sunzi* – “the enemy’s vincibility depends on himself” (*ke sheng zai di* 可勝在敵). From the above example, it is obvious that in Huangfu Song’s opinion, the *jiu* strategy can be a better option than the *su* strategy in some cases.

The second example is the battle of Guandu, which I briefly discussed earlier. Before the battle, Yuan Shao’s subordinates argued heatedly about the best strategy to attack Cao Cao. *Jianjun* 監軍³⁵ and *fenwu jiangjun* 奮武將軍 Ju Shou 沮授 recommended the adoption of the *jiu* strategy by saying:

[We should] divide [our] elite cavalry into groups and send them to raid his [Cao Cao’s] border areas. [This] will give him no peace, [but] we will be comfortable. Thus [we] can put [him down without effort], as if we were merely sitting.³⁶

However, Guo Tu 郭圖 and *zhizhong* 治中³⁷ Shen Pei 審配 objected him and preferred the *su* strategy:

[According to] the principle [found in] military books, if [enemy troops numerically outnumber you up to five or ten times], then surround or attack them; if

³³ 不然。百戰百勝，不如不戰而屈人之兵。是以先為不可勝，以待敵之可勝。不可勝在我，可勝在彼。彼守不足，我攻有餘。有餘者動於九天之上，不足者陷於九地之下。今陳倉雖小，城守固備，非九地之陷也。王國雖強，而攻我之所不救，非九天之執也。夫執非九天，攻者受害；陷非九地，守者不拔。國今已陷受害之地，而陳倉保不拔之城，我可不煩兵動眾，而取全勝之功，將何救焉！ HHS 71.2305.

³⁴ HHS 71.2305.

³⁵ *Jianjun* was a position to supervise and coordinate multiple armies led by different *jiangjun*.

³⁶ 分遣精騎，抄其邊鄙，令彼不得安，我取其逸。如此可坐定也。 HHS 74.2390.

³⁷ *Zhizhong* was a high-ranking assistant officer of the Governor.

[the number of soldiers is equal to yours], then be able to fight them in open battle.³⁸ Now with Minggong your talent and valiancy,³⁹ along with the powerful troops of Heshuo,⁴⁰ attacking Cao Cao [and defeating him], it is as easy as turning one's hand. If [we] do not attack [him] now, it will be difficult to do so later.⁴¹

Ju Shou then argued:

[An army] eliminating chaos and riots is called a righteous army. [An army merely] relying on [its superior] numbers and [stronger] strength is called an arrogant army. The righteous one is invincible [while] the arrogant one will fall first. Cao Cao respects, supports, and welcomes the son of Tian [and] has built palaces in Xudu [to settle him].⁴² Sending troops towards the south [to attack Cao Cao] now is a violation of righteousness. Furthermore, the scheme predetermining the result of a war is not merely based on military strength. The laws and orders [issued by] Cao Cao have already been carried out [and his] troops are crack [...] [If] now [we] give up the safest method and send troops [to start a war] without just causes, [in private I] will be worried about Gong⁴³ for [such an unwise move].⁴⁴

Guo Tu and Shen Pei contradicted him again:

³⁸ This sentence is summarized from the chapter of “Mougong” of the *Sunzi*. The original wording is: 故用兵之法，十則圍之，五則攻之... 敵則能戰之。See *Sunzi* 1.34. Guo Tu and Shen Pei read *shi* 十, *wu* 五, and *di* 敵 into quantitative comparisons. Most contemporary researchers hold the same view. For instance, see Giles 2012, p. 15; Guo Huaruo 1984, p. 42; Mair 2007, p. 86; Li Ling 2006, p. 137; Lin Wusun 2007, p. 29. However, ancient commentators like Cao Cao, Li Quan 李荃 of the Tang dynasty, Du You, and He 何 (given name unknown) of the Song interpreted them into comparisons of overall strength, which includes not only the quantities but also the quality of troops and weapons as well as the capabilities of commanders. See *Sunzi* 1.34. Some contemporary researchers seem to have a similar opinion. See Sawyer 1996, p. 51 and Ames 1993, p. 79. I agree with the second opinion. In its first chapter, “Ji” 計 (Assessments) also known as “Shiji” 始計 (Initial Assessments), the *Sunzi* says that one can predict the result of a war by considering seven factors, which include “the commanders of the side that is able to answer the questions, ‘which side is more capable?’ (將孰有能?), ‘which side has better weapons?’ (兵眾孰強?) and ‘the troops of which side are more finely trained?’ (士卒孰練?). See *Sunzi* 1.8. Obviously, the *Sunzi* does value the importance of qualitative factors.

³⁹ “Minggong” 明公 is a respectful form of second person address for a man in high office and was normally used when speaking with one's superior.

⁴⁰ Heshuo 河朔 refers to the areas north of the Huanghe river, which were under the control of Yuan Shao at that time.

⁴¹ 兵書之法，十圍五攻，敵則能戰。今以明公之神武，連河朔之強衆，以伐曹操，其執轡若覆手。今不時取，後難圖也。HHS 74.2390–2391.

⁴² In late Eastern Han, the central government lost control over its territories, and warlords frequently attacked each other. In the first year of Chuping 初平 (190 C.E.), Han Xiandi 漢獻帝, the last *tianzi* of Han, was forced to move from Luoyang 洛陽, the capital of the Eastern Han, to Chang'an 長安. In the second year of Xingping 興平 (195 C.E.), he was again forced to leave Chang'an and became homeless for over one year until in the first year of Jian'an 建安 (196 C.E.), when Cao Cao took him back to Luoyang and then moved the capital to Xudu 許都.

⁴³ Gong 公 is a respectful form of second person address to call a man.

⁴⁴ 蓋救亂誅暴，謂之義兵；恃眾憑強，謂之驕兵。義者無敵，驕者先滅。曹操奉迎天子，建宮許都。今舉師南向，於義則違。且廟勝之策，不在彊弱。曹操法令既行，士卒精練... 今棄萬安之術，而興無名之師，竊為公懼之。HHS 74.2391.

[Zhou] Wuwang attacked [Shang] Zhou, which is not regarded as [an act of] injustice,⁴⁵ let alone saying that [a dispatch of] troops to attack Cao Cao has no just cause! Moreover, Gong, your troops are crack and brave, and they want to spare no effort [for Gong]. If [we] do not seize the chance to complete [our] great cause before it is too late,⁴⁶ it will be an example of the adage “[the one] not taking what Tian has offered will instead be punished [by Tian].” This is why Yue established [its] hegemony and why Wu fell.⁴⁷ The plan of Jianjun⁴⁸ puts [too much] emphasis on prudence and safety but is not a flexible adaptation according to the current opportunities.⁴⁹

Finally, Yuan Shao agreed with Guo Tu and Shen Pei. After Yuan Shao crossed Huanghe 黃河 and was going to march to Guandu, a key strategic place held by Cao Cao,⁵⁰ Ju Shou advised him again:

The North soldiers are superior in numbers, but are not as courageous and crack as the South soldiers.⁵¹ The South has insufficient grain and less territory than the North. Fighting immediately is advantageous to the South. Postponing the fight is advantageous to the North. [We] should steadily confront [the South army] in a long term and protract the time.⁵²

Once again, Yuan Shao did not listen to him. Rather, he decided to attack Cao Cao immediately. He then suffered a disastrous defeat.

The key problem again is which strategy was better under the circumstances of that time. The wisdom of attacking Cao Cao is a matter of opinion. Did Yuan Shao have overwhelming military strength over Cao Cao? This is the key question

⁴⁵ Shang Zhou 商紂 was the last *tianzi* of the Shang dynasty (around 1600–1046 B.C.E.) and is regarded as a typical tyrant. Zhou Wuwang 周武王 was the first *tianzi* of the Zhou dynasty (1044–256 B.C.E.) and is regarded as a representative of those most virtuous and benevolent monarchs. Zhou Wuwang’s forefathers used to be Shang Zhou’s subject but Wuwang overthrew the rule of Shang Zhou. According to Confucianism, principally a subject should be loyal to his monarch. However, if the monarch is a tyrant like Shang Zhou and the subject is as virtuous and benevolent as Zhou Wuwang, then it is just for the subject to overthrow his monarch. See *Zizhi tongjian* 1.3.

⁴⁶ In the context of ancient Chinese, the “great cause” (*daye* 大業) usually indicates establishing a new dynasty.

⁴⁷ Here Guo Tu and Shen Pei cited a historical story in the late period of Chunqiu. The state of Yue 越 was once defeated by the state of Wu 吳 and faced the possibility of collapse. But finally, Wu spared Yue. Twenty years later, Yue defeated Wu and Wu sued for peace. Fan Li 范蠡 of Yue suggested Yuewang Goujian 越王句踐 (r. 496–465 B.C.E.) to reject the request of Wu by saying that “[the one] not taking what *tian* has offered will instead be punished [by *tian*]” (天與不取, 反受其咎). Goujian listened to Fan Li, annexed Wu, and became the last hegemon in the Chunqiu. See *Shi ji* 41.1745.

⁴⁸ *Jianjun* was Ju Shou’s official position. Calling someone by his official position is a way to show respect in ancient China.

⁴⁹ 武王伐紂，不為不義；況兵加曹操，而雲無名！且公師徒精勇，將士思奮，而不及時早定大業，所謂「天與不取，反受其咎」。此越之所以霸，吳之所以滅也。監軍之計，在於持牢，而非見時知幾之變也。HHS 74.2391.

⁵⁰ Guandu was a key ferry sitting on the south bank of the Guandu river (south to the Huanghe) and positioned on the road leading to Xudu.

⁵¹ North and South refer to Yuan Shao’s side and Cao Cao’s side respectively because Yuan Shao’s territory was to the north of Cao Cao’s.

⁵² 北兵數衆而果勁不及南，南穀虛少而貨財不及北；南利在於急戰，北利在於緩搏。宜徐持久，曠以日月。SGZ 6.199.

to be answered. If the answer is yes, then the *su* strategy proposed by Guo Tu and Shen Pei was probably better, and the *jiu* strategy insisted by Ju Shou might have been too cautious and inefficient. Otherwise, the *jiu* strategy was a better choice, and the *su* strategy was too optimistic and risky. A mistake made by Guo Tu and Shen Pei is that they overestimated the strength of Yuan Shao and underestimated the strength of Cao Cao. In the battle of Guandu, Yuan Shao mobilized 100,000 troops and 10,000 war horses.⁵³ The number of Cao Cao's troops is not clear, but should be less than Yuan Shao's.⁵⁴ However, as pointed out by Ju Shou, Cao Cao's troops had stronger fighting capability. A proof is that the two opposing armies were pitted against each other from the eighth to the tenth month at Guandu. Yuan Shao did not have the ability to crush Cao Cao during such a long period. Another proof is the raid on Wuchao 烏巢. Cao Cao led 5,000 troops to raid on Wuchao, the supply center of Yuan Shao held by over 10,000 soldiers. Although Cao Cao's move was unexpected by the defenders, they still had the time to array and meet the attackers. But Cao Cao defeated the enemies over twice the number of his troops and burned the reserves of Yuan Shao.⁵⁵ The qualitative advantage of Cao Cao's army at least partially counterbalanced the quantitative advantage of Yuan Shao's. Hence, in terms of military strength, Yuan Shao did have the advantage over Cao Cao, but his advantage was not as large as Guo Tu and Shen Pei believed.

In its sixth chapter, "Xushi" 虛實, the *Sunzi* says: "The disposition of forces avoids the strong points and strike[s] the weak points [of the enemy]" (*bing zhi xing, bi shi er ji xu* 兵之形，避實而擊虛).⁵⁶ As pointed out by Ju Shou, Cao Cao was most vulnerable in his logistics. Although Cao Cao chose to give up the Huanghe line and retreat to Guandu to shorten his supply line, he still suffered a shortage of supplies. During the battle, Cao Cao once wanted to retreat to Xudu. The reason was not that he could not withstand the attack of Yuan Shao, but the shortage of grain.⁵⁷ Thus, the victory of Cao Cao was fortuitous to a certain extent. When Cao Cao was about to run out of grain, the internal conflict of Yuan Shao's camp changed the result of the battle. One of Yuan Shao's advisors, Xu You 許攸, turned to Cao Cao and told him that Yuan Shao left his reserves at Wuchao.⁵⁸ After Cao Cao successfully raided Wuchao, Commander of the Royal Bodyguards, who stabilizes the country (*ningguo zhonglang jiang* 甯國中郎將),⁵⁹ Zhang He 張郃 and Gao Lan 高覽, two

⁵³ See SGZ 6.199 and HHS 74.2390.

⁵⁴ According to *Sanguo zhi*, Cao Cao's army had less than 10,000 soldiers. Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451) questioned the reliability of this number, however, and argued that Cao Cao's troops had to be much more than the estimated figure. He offered three convincing reasons. First of all, the opposing armies were at a stalemate for several months. Secondly, Cao was able to draw troops to attack Yuan's supply lines while holding the line. Thirdly, Cao's army would not be able to capture around 70,000 to 80,000 fleeing Yuan soldiers if its number was only one-tenth of the enemy's. See Pei's annotations on *Sanguo zhi* (SGZ 1.20). I think a possible explanation is that the number in *Sanguo zhi* only covers the troops directly under the command of Cao Cao and does not include the troops of other Cao's high-ranking commanders.

⁵⁵ SGZ 1.21.

⁵⁶ *Sunzi* 2.81.

⁵⁷ SGZ 1.21, 10.314.

⁵⁸ According to *Hou Hanshu*, Shen Pei imprisoned Xu You's family because they broke the law. Hence Xu You betrayed Yuan Shao (HHS 74.2400).

⁵⁹ De Crespigny translates *zhonglang jiang* 中郎將 as "General of the Household." The position of *zhonglang jiang*, however, was below that of *jiangjun*. Hence, a translation of both *jiangjun*

important commanders of Yuan Shao's army, surrendered to Cao Cao. The two events together cause the ultimate collapse of Yuan Shao's army.⁶⁰ However, Yuan Shao's failure cannot be merely ascribed to bad luck. He did make a mistake by giving up a safer option proposed by Ju Shou and adopting a riskier one, which added variables to the battle. Ju Shou was right because he had a more objective and accurate judgment on the advantages and disadvantages of both sides.

From the above example, it seemed to Ju Shou that the *jiu* strategy was a better choice, even as an offensive move. As I have discussed earlier, the chapter of "Zuozhan" discusses offensive strategies when an army is far from its base. Hence, should we conclude that the *su* strategy is better than the *jiu* strategy under that circumstance? Before we reach a conclusion, let us look at two more examples. In the first year of Taihe 太和 in the Wei dynasty (227 C.E.), Wei *jianwu jiangjun* 建武將軍, Administrator of Xincheng (Xincheng *taishou* 新城太守), and Pingyang *tinghou* 平陽亭侯 Meng Da 孟達, intended to betray Wei and join Shu-Han 蜀漢. Sima Xuanwang, the General of Agile Cavalry (*piaoqi jiangjun* 驃騎將軍)⁶¹ and Wuyang *hou* 舞陽侯 of Wei, led troops to suppress this potential rebellion. He reached Shangyong 上庸, the main stronghold of Meng Da, after a rapid march of 1,200 *li* 里⁶² from Wan 宛⁶³ in eight days. Then he immediately stormed Shangyong day and night, breached it after 16 days, and beheaded Meng Da.⁶⁴ It is obvious that Sima Xuanwang adopted the *su* strategy in this case and illustrates the principle of fighting far away from one's base proposed by the *Sunzi*. However, as I have discussed before, in the war against Gongsun Yuan, Sima Xuanwang adopted the *jiu* strategy. This is interesting because Liaodong is about 4,000 *li* from Luoyang, the capital of Wei.⁶⁵ This time, Sima Xuanwang had to march a much longer distance. According to the *Sunzi*, it seems that the *su* strategy should have been used again, but this time Sima Xuanwang chose the *jiu* strategy. A Major (*sima* 司馬),⁶⁶ Chen Gui 陳珪 asked him:

Last time, [when we] attacked Shangyong, [our army was divided into] eight columns and advanced together [to storm Shangyong] day and night without rest. Therefore, [we] could conquer the strong city and behead Meng Da in approximately five days.⁶⁷

and *jiang* as "General" may be questionable. In addition, *zhonglang* refers to "royal bodyguards." Hence, in my view, "Commander of the Royal Bodyguards" may be a better translation. Likewise, for *jiangjun*, the title *ningguo* 甯國 was added to differentiate one *zhonglang jiang* from another.

⁶⁰ After learning Wuchao was under attack, Zhang He suggested an immediate rescue effort. Cognizant of the absence of Cao Cao from his camp, Guo Tu, on the other hand, recommended a direct attack upon the site. Yuan Shao listened to Guo Tu. He dispatched Zhang He and Gao Lan to attack Cao Cao's camp. Finally, Wuchao was breached. Nevertheless, Zhang He and Gao Lan failed in their attempt. Guo Tu then shifted the responsibility of failure to Zhang He, which pushed him and Gao Lan to surrender to Cao Cao. See *SGZ* 1.21, 17.525 and *HHS* 74.2401.

⁶¹ The character *piao* also means "valiant." Hence, *piaoqi jiangjun* can be translated as the General of Valiant Cavalry or the General of Agile and Valiant Cavalry.

⁶² One *li* was equivalent to 415.8 meters in Han times.

⁶³ Wan was the base camp of Sima Xuanwang.

⁶⁴ *JS* 1.5–6.

⁶⁵ *SGZ* 3.113.

⁶⁶ *Sima* was an intermediate military commander position at that time. De Crespigny directly matches it with a Western military rank (de Crespigny 2007, p. 1239).

⁶⁷ Chen Gui said that it took around five days to conquer Shangyong. This reference to time is different from another one recorded by *Jinshu*, which is 16 days (*JS* 1.5). There are two possible explanations. One is that there is a wrongly written character. The phrase "around five days" (一句

Now, [we] come from far away, but [act] more slowly. I, the fool, am confused in private.⁶⁸

Sima Xuanwang explained to him:

Meng Da has fewer soldiers [than us], but sufficient food to support [them] for a year. [The number of] our soldiers is four times as many as [Meng] Da's, but [our] food is not enough [to support us] for a month. [An army with food for] a month planned [to defeat an army with food] for a year. How could [we] not [act] quickly? [We] use four soldiers to fight with one [of Meng Da's]. Even if [we] would lose half [of our troops], [we] still should do that.⁶⁹ Therefore, [I] disregarded the casualties to end [the battle] before [we] ran out of [our] food. Now the traitors are superior in numbers, and we are fewer, [but] the traitors are hungry, and we are full. The construction work cannot be carried out [when] it is raining like this. Even if [we] push [our soldiers], nothing can be done. Since [we] depart from the capital, [I] do not worry that the traitors will attack. Rather, my fear is the traitors will escape. The traitors will now run out of food, yet we have not yet completed our siege defenses. [At this time], to take their cattle, horses, and firewood will cause them to run away. Warfare is the art of using unexpected ways, [which] vary with situations.⁷⁰ The traitors depend on their superior numbers and the rain as well. Hence, although they are hungry and fatigued, [they] still do not surrender. [We] should show [our] incompetence to make them feel safe.⁷¹ It is not a good idea to scare them for small benefits.⁷²

The wars against Meng Da and Gongsun Yuan are both long-distance offensives. Sima Xuanwang adopted two different strategies. In the battle against Meng Da, he chose the *su* strategy. However, in the war against Gongsun Yuan, although the battlefield was much further away, Sima Xuanwang instead selected the *jiu*

之半) should be “around 15 days” (一句又半). Another is that the 16 days include the time of the preliminary preparation of the siege and the cleaning up the periphery. The notion of five days only includes the time between the launch of the full-scale attack on the city and the fall of it.

⁶⁸ 昔攻上庸，八部並進，晝夜不息，故能一句之半，拔堅城，斬孟達。今者遠來而更安緩，愚竊惑焉。JS 1.11.

⁶⁹ The phrase “do that” (*wei zhi* 為之) refers to storming Shangyong.

⁷⁰ 夫兵者詭道 is from the chapter of “Ji” 計 of the *Sunzi*. The wording, however, is slightly different. The original quotation is 兵者，詭道也。See *Sunzi* 1.10. Most researchers translate *guidao* 詭道 as “the way of deception.” See the annotations of Cao Cao, Li Quan, Mei Yaocheng, Wang Xi 王皙 of the Song dynasty, and Zhang Yu (*Sunzi* 1.10) as well as Giles 1910, p. 5, Guo Huaruo 1984, p. 38, Ames 1993, p. 74, Sawyer 1996, p. 41, Li Ling 2006, p. 66, Mair 2007, p. 78, and Lin Wusun 2007, p. 22. I believe that according to the contexts, Sima Xuanwang's interpretation was “the art of using unexpected ways.” As I have earlier discussed, according to the chapter of “Mougong,” in principle, an attacking army fighting far from its homeland should seek a quick victory. In the war against Gongsun Yuan, however, Sima Xuanwang took an unusual way, the *jiu* strategy. This was not a way of deception but, instead, an unexpected way.

⁷¹ This idea is from the chapter of “Ji” of *Sunzi*, which says: “Displaying incapability while actually capable” (能而示之不能). See *Sunzi* 1.10.

⁷² 孟達衆少而食支一年，吾將士四倍於達而糧不淹月，以一月圖一年，安可不速？以四擊一，正令半解，猶當為之。是以不計死傷，與糧競也。今賊衆我寡，賊飢我飽，水雨乃爾，功力不設，雖當促之，亦何所為。自發京師，不憂賊攻，但恐賊走。今賊糧垂盡，而圍落未合，掠其牛馬，抄其樵采，此故驅之走也。夫兵者詭道，善因事變。賊憑衆恃雨，故雖飢困，未肯束手，當示無能以安之。取小利以驚之。非計也。JS 1.11.

strategy. From the above analysis of Sima Xuanwang, I think he had noted the essence of the chapter of “Zuozhan.” The core idea of “Zuozhan” is not that one should not engage in a protracted war, or the attacker should not engage in a protracted war. It is that one should not engage in a protracted war if one’s logistics system cannot support it. Alastair Iain Johnston says that the *Sunzi*’s “advice against protracted campaigns is relative, conditioned by logistical problems,” and “should these logistical problems be solved, then the admonitions against extended operations would cease to hold.”⁷³ I agree with Johnston. Usually, one’s army fighting deeply into enemy territory will cause serious logistical problems, which can devastate the economy. However, if one’s economic power and logistics system are strong enough to support a protracted war, then the *jiu* strategy can be a feasible option.

Before the war against Gongsun Yuan, many Wei officials worried about their logistical problems. They suggested reducing the number of troops sent to Liaodong, and when the war became a stalemate because of heavy rain, some even suggested withdrawing the army. However, Wei Mingdi 魏明帝 (r. 226–239) rejected their proposals. With the full support of Wei Mingdi, Sima Xuanwang did not need to worry about the logistical issues of his army. On the contrary, Gongsun Yuan lacked sufficient grain reserves. Although his army was probably superior in numbers, its fighting capacity was weaker than that of the Wei army. Before Xiangping was besieged, the Liaodong army fought several open battles with the Wei army, but lost all of them. Hence Sima Xuanwang explained that he did not worry about the attack from Gongsun Yuan. The numerical superiority of the Liaodong army became a burden rather than an advantage, because more troops consumed more food. Before the fall of Xiangping, the people of Liaodong were reduced to cannibalism.⁷⁴ Sima Xuanwang was therefore in no hurry to attack. Wei had an overwhelming advantage over Liaodong in terms of population, resources, and economic power, which made the *jiu* strategy a feasible option.

Another reason for the *Sunzi* to worry about a protracted war is that a third party may “take advantage of one’s extremity to take action [against one]” (*cheng qi bi er qi* 乘其弊而起).⁷⁵ During Sima Xuanwang’s campaign against Meng Da, Wu 吳 and Shu-Han sent troops to rescue Meng Da. Conditions both on Wei’s Western front (against Shu-Han), and the Eastern front as well (against Wu), were tense. Meng Da planned to rebel in the twelfth month of the first year of Taihe in the Wei dynasty (227 C.E.). In the next year, the Imperial Chancellor (*chengxiang* 丞相) of Shu-Han,⁷⁶ Zhuge Wuhou 諸葛武侯 (181–234) opened his first northern offensive against Wei. In the same year, Wei and Wu had a great battle at Shiting 石亭. Obviously, a protracted war against Meng Da would put Wei in an unfavorable position, because Wu and Shu-Han might take advantage of the opportunity to make trouble for him. During the war against Gongsun Yuan, however, the situations were different. After the death of Zhuge Wuhou in the second year of Qinglong 青龍 in the Wei dynasty (234 C.E.), Shu-Han changed its strategy towards Wei from offensive to defensive. During the war, although Gongsun Yuan asked Wu

⁷³ Johnston 1998, p. 141.

⁷⁴ SGZ 8.254.

⁷⁵ *Sunzi* 1.19.

⁷⁶ *Chengxiang* was the chief executive and military officer of a state.

for help, Wu was not able to provide substantive assistance. Therefore, Wei had no need to worry about the potential threat from a third party. He could concentrate on suppressing the rebellion of Liaodong.

In the above two examples, Sima Xuanwang flexibly applied the *su* and *jiu* strategies respectively in two different battles by adjusting his tactics according to the specific military conditions of the two sides. And I observe that even in the same battle, these top Sanguo military experts actually changed their strategies from time to time to adapt to evolving circumstances. Let us look at the following examples. In the first year of Zhongping 中平 (184 C.E.) in the Eastern Han dynasty, the Huangjin 黃巾 (Yellow Turban) rebellion broke out. The Commander of the Royal Bodyguards of the Left (*Zuo zhonglangjiang* 左中郎將) Huangfu Song and the Commander of the Royal Bodyguards of the Right (*you zhonglangjiang* 右中郎將) Zhu Jun 朱儁 were ordered to suppress the Yingchuan 潁川 rebels. At the beginning, the situation was against Han. The powerful Huangjin army defeated Zhu Jun. Huangfu Song retreated into the city of Changshe 長社 and, relying on the city walls, prepared to adopt the *jiu* strategy to resist the superior enemy. He soon found, however, that the Huangjin army had made a fatal mistake by encamping beside the grass. Hence, he immediately launched a fire attack on that evening and successfully defeated the rebels.⁷⁷

Before the battle of Guandu, in the first month of the fifth year of Jian'an (200 C.E.), Cao Cao attacked Liu Bei 劉備, the General on the Left (*zuo jiangjun* 左將軍), Governor of Yuzhou (Yuzhou *mu* 豫州牧), and Yichang *tinghou* 宜城亭侯. *Biejia* 別駕⁷⁸ Tian Feng 田豐 suggested Yuan Shao taking this opportunity to immediately attack Cao Cao's rear to crush him at one stroke. However, Yuan Shao refused to listen to him. After Cao Cao defeated Liu Bei, Yuan Shao then decided to attack. However, this time Tian Feng strongly opposed the plan because he thought that Yuan Shao had already missed the opportunity to win a quick victory. Like Ju Shou, he advised Yuan Shao to use the *jiu* strategy in order to gradually exhaust Cao Cao by constant harassment.⁷⁹

In the Liaodong campaign, Sima Xuanwang did not always apply the *jiu* strategy. In the beginning, he used the *su* strategy, while Gongsun Yuan was the one who adopted the *jiu*. Gongsun Yuan sent some tens of thousands Liaodong troops to station at Liaosui 遼隧 (near present-day Haicheng 海城 of the Liaoning 遼寧 province) and built strong defenses to resist the Wei army coming from far away. Sima Xuanwang was aware that the enemy wanted to wear out his army by executing a plan for protracted warfare. He said: "Although the enemy has built high ramparts [for protection], it must [come out] to fight open battles with us [because we] attack, where they must rescue" (敵雖高壘，不得不與我戰者，攻其所必救也).⁸⁰ Hence, he surrounded the camp of the Liaodong troops, and directly advanced to their capital, Xiangping. This move forced the Liaodong troops to leave their defenses and fight in a number of open battles, which led to a Liaodong defeat. Sima Xuanwang successfully applied the *su* strategy to frustrate the enemy's *jiu* strategy.

⁷⁷ HHS 71.2300–2301.

⁷⁸ *Biejia* was a high-ranking assistant official of the *zhou* Governor.

⁷⁹ SGZ 6.197, 200 and HHS 74.2392.

⁸⁰ JS 1.11. This sentence is from "Xushi," the sixth chapter of the *Sunzi*. See footnote 32 for details.

CONCLUSION

The above examples indicate that, in the eyes of top Sanguo military experts, neither the *su* nor the *jiu* strategy is superior to the other. These military leaders flexibly changed their strategies according to their particular situations. What they valued in times of warfare was *bian* 變 (flexibility and adaptability). Huangfu Song, for example, said: “Waging warfare includes unexpected variations. [Hence, the result] does not [simply] depend on quantity (兵有奇變, 不在衆寡).”⁸¹ Cao Cao said: “The variation of [the way of] waging warfare certainly has no fixed pattern” (兵之變化, 固非一道也).⁸² Sima Xuanwang said: “Warfare is the art of using unexpected ways, [which] vary with situations.” When a Sanguo military expert praised a peer for his military talent, he mentioned the quality of *bian*. For instance, Tian Feng commended Cao Cao by saying, “Cao Gong is good at waging warfare. [He] varies his [strategies and tactics] without fixed patterns” (曹公善用兵, 變化無方).⁸³ Sun Quan 孫權 (182–252), the first *huangdi* of Wu, applauded Sima Xuanwang by saying that “Sima Gong is good at waging warfare. [He] varies his [strategies and tactics] with miraculous skills” (司馬公善用兵, 變化若神).⁸⁴ Their opinion is in accord with the *Sunzi*, which says: “In warfare, [one] subdues [one’s enemy] in accordance with the [situations] of the enemy [...] One who can adapt in accordance with battle [situations] is a [military] talent.”⁸⁵

An accepted belief is that there is no single fixed way to achieve victories. The *Sunzi* also says: “People all know the situations under which I achieve victories, but [they] do not know how I achieve victories according to the situations.”⁸⁶ Chen Gui is another illustration. He knew that Sima Xuanwang used the *su* strategy to defeat Meng Da, but knew neither why Sima Xuanwang chose the *su* strategy, nor how he could win by applying it. Zheng Youxian 鄭友賢 of the Song dynasty commented:

There are general principles of warfare which can be taught, but the application of them varies. The one constant is the general principle. The one changeable is the situation. The [military] books can summarize all general principles in words, but words cannot include all variations.⁸⁷

In short, I argue that, in general, the *Sunzi* does not advocate the *su* strategy and oppose the *jiu* strategy. A core idea of the *Sunzi* is *bian* and, by itself, neither *su* nor *jiu*. To achieve victories, one should flexibly select the *su* or *jiu* strategy according to applicable situations. The top Sanguo military experts did succeed by applying this principle in their war practices.

⁸¹ HHS 71.2301.

⁸² SGZ 1.35.

⁸³ SGZ 6.200 and HHS 74.2392.

⁸⁴ JS 1.11.

⁸⁵ 兵因敵而制勝...能因敵變化而取勝者,謂之神. *Sunzi* 2.81. Alastair Iain Johnston also argues that “absolute flexibility” is a “more dominant decision rule” and that “responding flexibly to the enemy” is “the essence of the strategic choice” in the *Sunzi* (Johnston 1998, p. 102).

⁸⁶ 人皆知我所以勝之形,而莫知吾所以制勝之形. *Sunzi* 2.81

⁸⁷ 兵法之傳有常,而其用之也有變。常者,法也;變者,勢也。書者,可以盡常之言,而言不能盡變之意. *Sunzi*, p. 188.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- Hou Hanshu* 後漢書. Fan Ye 范曄 (author, 398–445). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965.
- Jinshu* 晉書. Fang Xuanliang 房玄齡 (compiler, 579–648) *et al.* Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974.
- Sanguozhi* 三國志. Chen Shou 陳壽 (compiler, 233–297). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959.
- Shiji* 史記. Sima Qian 司馬遷 (author, 145 or 135–? B.C.E.). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959.
- Sunzi* 孫子 (i.e., *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法). Sun Wu 孫武 (trad. author, fl. Chunqiu period, 770–5th c. B.C.E.). Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995.
- Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒. Sima Guang 司馬光 (author, 1019–1086). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011.

Secondary Sources

- Ames, Roger T. (trs.). 1993. *Sun Tzu: The Art of Warfare. The First English Translation Incorporating the Recently Discovered Yin-ch'üeh-shan Texts*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- de Crespigny, Rafe. 2007. *A Biographical Dictionary of Later Han to the Three Kingdoms (23–220 AD)*. Leiden *et al.*: Brill.
- Giles, Lionel (trs.). 1910. *Sun-tzu on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World*. London: Luzac.
- Griffith, Samuel B. (trs.). 1963. *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*. Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press.
- Guo Huaruo 郭化若. 1984. *Sunzi yizhu* 孙子译注. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- Guo Qianyu 郭千玉 – Zhang Xinyuan 张新元. 1994. “‘Sujuezhān’ yu ‘chijiuzhān’ xiaoyi” “速决战”与“持久战”小议. *Junshi lishi* 军事历史 1994/4, pp. 55–56.
- Handel, M.I. 1991. *Sun Tzu and Clausewitz: The Art of War and On War Compared*. Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S Army War College.
- Huang Pumin 黄朴民 – Gao Runhao 高润浩. 2015. “Sunzi gongshou sixiang shulun” 孙子攻守思想述论. *Sunzi yanjiu* 孙子研究 2015/1, pp. 28–35.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 1998. *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Li Ling 李零. 2006. “Bing yi zha li: Wo du Sunzi” 兵以诈立——我读《孙子》. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.
- Lin Wusun 林戊荪 (trans.). 2007. *Sunzi: The Art of War / Sun Bin: The Art of War*. Beijing: Foreign Language Press.
- Liu Ju 刘炬. 1999. “Lun chijiu zhan yu Sunzi ‘susheng lun’ zhi tongyixing” 《论持久战》与《孙子》“速胜论”之同一性. *Changbai xuekan* 长白学刊 1999/3, pp. 30–32.
- Mair, Victor H. (trs.). 2007. *The Art of War: Sun Zi's Military Methods*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ren Li 任力. 2006. “Siliang bo qianjin: Sunzi bingfa ‘Zuozhan pian’ daodu” 四两拨千斤——《孙子兵法·作战篇》导读. *Junshi lishi* 军事历史 2006/6, pp. 58–59.
- Sawyer, Ralph D. (trans.). 1996. *The Complete Art of War*. Boulder, Col.: Westview Press.
- Wang Tingwen 王廷文. 2015. “Sunzi ‘gui sheng bu gui jiu’ yu Mao Zedong ‘chijiu zhan’ zhi bijiao yanjiu” 孙子“贵胜不贵久”与毛泽东“持久战”之比较研究. *Sunzi yanjiu* 孙子研究 2015/5, pp. 22–27.
- Wu Leijia. 2017. “A Contribution to the Study on *Sanguo yanyi*: Its Political Standpoint, Character Evaluation, and Character Development.” *Monumenta Serica* 65 (2017) 1, pp. 43–60.
- . 2019. “Re-examining the Meaning of Sunzi’s *Bu zhan er qu ren zhi bing* 不戰而屈人之兵 and Its Practicality.” *Monumenta Serica* 67 (2019) 2, pp. 293–317.
- Yang Xin 杨新. 2013. “‘Sheng’ jie Sunzi bingfa junshi sixiang tixi” “胜”解《孙子兵法》军事思想体系. *Binzhou xueyuan xuebao* 滨州学院学报 29 (2013) 5, pp. 6–15.

CHINESE ABSTRACT

「速」與「久」的選擇——對《孫子》和三國時期戰爭實踐的綜合研究

本文對當前盛行的認為《孫子》主張速決戰反對持久戰或認為《孫子》在攻勢戰中主張速決反對持久的觀點提出了質疑。通過對《孫子》以及三國時期軍事實踐的研究，本文認為以上觀點並不具有說服力。《孫子》既不傾向於速決也不傾向於持久而是強調「變」。主將應該根據不斷變化的戰場形勢來決定是採用速決還是持久作戰。這一原則被三國時代的優秀統帥廣泛應用於戰爭實踐中。

關鍵詞：《孫子》、軍事戰略、速決戰、持久戰、變、三國

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Wu Leijia (Ph.D. 2011, University of Technology Sydney) is a Casual Academic at the University of Technology Sydney. His current research interests include ancient Chinese military philosophy, the history of the Chunqiu period, and the history of the Sanguo period and the novel *Sanguo*. A recent publication is “A Study of the Battle of Changping,” *Journal of Chinese Military History* 1 (2024), pp. 1–27.

Correspondence to: PO Box 123, Broadway NSW 2007, Australia. Email: Leijia.Wu@uts.edu.au