

KEY TERMS

Here are highlighted only several of the more important words and subtle concepts used in the book. Other technical terms and proper nouns are defined in the notes or in the introduction. For a superb handbook of basic Chinese philosophical terms, including many that are featured in the *Sun Zi*, see Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Edmund Ryden.

BIAN. Variation, variety, transformation.

BING. The earliest form of the character used to write this word depicts two arms holding up an adze. The basic idea conveyed by this graph subsequently developed from the concrete and limited to the more general and abstract: weapon → soldier → troops → war.

FA. Law, method, model.

BINGFA. The combination of the previous two terms, it is usually rendered as “art of war” in English but may more literally be rendered as “soldierly methods,” “military methods,” etc. For further discussion of *bingfa*, see the introduction, n. 2.

GUI. Deceit, deception; something contrary to the norm.

- Jī*. Pivot, moment of change (functions somewhat like a tipping point); the instant just before a new development or shift occurs; the nodal point of a situation in flux. *Jī* also refers to the first, imperceptible beginning of movement in an unstable situation. In organic metaphors, it means “seed, germ.” The sage or superior man can recognize the immanence or incipience of these crucial moments before they become manifest to others. It cannot be stressed too heavily that *jī* by itself does not mean “opportunity” nor does it mean “crisis,” although it is closer to the latter than to the former because of the extreme instability of a given situation and the unforeseen consequences that may follow.
- Jì*. Count, calculate; plan; intention. Another word in the *Sun Zi* sometimes rendered as “plan” is *mou* (as in the title of chap. 3), though it tends more in the direction of “scheme” or “counsel.” Depending upon the context, *jì* and *mou* may also convey the idea of “strategy” or “stratagem.”
- Lǐ*. A traditional measure of length equivalent to 300 paces (hence “tricent” in English). It is easy to think of how long a tricent is (about a third of a mile) by recalling that the English word “mile” is derived from Latin *milia, millia* (“a thousand [paces]”). For those who are not familiar with miles, a tricent is equal to approximately half a kilometer.
- Lì*. Advantage, benefit; profit, interest (the basic meaning is “sharp,” which is why the character used to write it has a “knife” radical).
- MOU*. See *jì*.
- Qì*. Unformed, energetic substrate of matter; material energy; the primal “stuff” of the universe; configural energy. In the *Sun Zi*, it usually refers to the vital force, energy, or morale of the men in the army. For more information on *qì* and its metaphysical implications, see Mair (1990:137–38) and Zhang (2002:45–63).

Qí. See *zheng*

QUAN. Power, expedient (assessment)—exerted by the commander in the field. The literal meaning of the morpheme is “horizontal balance,” hence “weigh, judge, (exert) power/authority.” *Quan* is often associated with *bian* or *qí* (qq.v.).

SHI. Configuration, circumstances, efficacy, inertia, power/force (of circumstances), authority, (strategic/positional) advantage. The subject of chap. 5, but also discussed elsewhere in the text, this is one of the key concepts of the *Sun Zi*. It is also one of the most ineffable.

TIANXIA. All under heaven, i.e., the empire (writ large).

WEN. Civil, culture (contrasts with *wu*). The evolution of the primary meanings of the graph used to write this word, in simplest terms, is as follows: tattoo → pattern → culture/civilization/writing. The earliest meaning of *wen* as “tattoo” still survives in the expression *wen shen* (“tattoo the body”). By the time of the Warring States period, however, when the *Sun Zi* was written, tattooing had become a form of punishment, and different words were used to refer to it, *wen* itself having transmuted into one of the most exalted terms in the language. See chapter 9, n. 12 and the biography of Sun Bin in the introduction.

WU. Martial, military (contrasts with *wen*). The character used to write this word shows a shafted weapon and a foot, i.e., a man going off to fight in a war.

XING. Form, shape, disposition. One of the most important tactical concepts in the *Sun Zi*, it occurs with particularly high frequency in chapter 6, where it means mainly the arrangement of forces, and in chapter 10, where it signifies different types of terrain. There is another word, meaning “punishment,” that is pronounced exactly alike (*xing*) and is written with a very similar character that one might well expect to find in a work of strategy such as the *Sun Zi*, but it does not occur even once.

The *xing* meaning “form, shape, disposition” occurs a total of thirty-one times in the *Sun Zi*. In stark contrast, the *xing* meaning “punishment” occurs a total of twenty-four times in the *Wei Liao Zi*, a work which has very little to say about the *xing* meaning “form, shape, disposition.” Thus the *Sun Zi* and the *Wei Liao Zi*, which probably coalesced at approximately the same time (the second half of the fourth century and the early third century, though with the *Wei Liao Zi* being slightly later) may be said to be in mutual complementarity with regard to the advocacy of these two key concepts of strategy. Clearly the *Sun Zi* is concerned with tactics but not punishment, and vice versa for the *Wei Liao Zi*. Similar analyses could be carried out for other principal concepts in all of the extant military treatises from the Warring States and Han periods.

ZHAN. Battle; specific military actions and engagements, in contrast to *bing* (q.v.), which is more general and abstract.

ZHENG. Used in combination with *qi* to signify contrasting types of warfare; variously translated as “direct/indirect,” “regular/irregular,” “conventional/unconventional,” “orthodox/unorthodox,” “ordinary/extraordinary,” and so forth. Of these two terms, the more difficult to grasp is *qi*, which may be thought of as signifying “odd, strange, singular, unique, craft(y)” or whatever is not *zheng* (“straight, upright, correct, right, orthodox, normative,” etc). In purely military applications, *qi* may be thought of as “special operations” or “unconventional warfare,” whereas *zheng* are main force deployments and maneuvers. The counterposing of *qi* and *zheng* was not restricted merely to military operations but was applied to politics and morality as well:

Rule the state with uprightness,
 Deploy your troops with craft
 Gain all under heaven with noninterference.

(*Tao te Ching/Dao de jing*, 57)

When there is no uprightness,
correct reverts to crafty,
good reverts to gruesome.
(*Tao te Ching/Dao de jing*, 58)