

The Art of War is one of the oldest, shortest and most frequently translated of all Chinese classical texts. But what sort of a book is it? And who wrote it? Neither of these questions is easy to answer. Indeed they may be the wrong questions. In many ways it is hardly a book at all. Master Sun's *The Art of War* is certainly not a methodically organised, easily useable and applicable treatise on warfare. It is more like a series of gnomic utterances on the art of survival, and of interior (and exterior) methods of dealing with conflict and strategic decisions in general. By extension, it is a more generalised book of proverbial wisdom, an ancient book of life. As for the author, he may not even have existed. What "biographical" information we have about Master Sun as a person is fragmentary, colourful, and highly unreliable. The often quoted story from Sima Qian's *Historical Records* shows him training the King of Wu's harem. It makes for wonderful reading (Sima Qian was a superb storyteller), but is almost certainly apocryphal. Since probably the fifth century BC, *The Art of War* has been one of the key texts of Chinese strategic thinking. Widely read in Japan since the eighth century, it has also since the eighteenth century held a deep fascination for the Western reader. Napoleon is reputed to have possessed a copy of the earliest French translation by a Jesuit. It has also exerted a huge influence in the modern Chinese world. Both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong are known to have studied the book carefully, and Chiang was an avid collector of its editions. As for Mao, he learned many lessons from Master Sun, applying them to the dialectics of guerrilla warfare. In the twentieth century, the relevance of Sun Tzū was widely acknowledged across the globe, and his book has now become prescribed reading internationally for students in Management Studies.

The Giles translation of *The Art of War*, now almost a hundred years old, has stood the test of time very well. Lionel, like his more famous father Herbert (1845 – 1935), was a fine sinologist of the old school. He was born on the 29th of December 1875, and was educated privately in Belgium, Austria, and Aberdeen, and subsequently completed his education at Wadham College, Oxford University, where he studied Classics, obtained his BA in 1899 (First Class Honours in Mods, Second Class in Greats). He seems to have been a self-effacing individual. It is interesting to note that Herbert Giles, in his Memoirs, confesses that his son acted as a "devil" for him in writing the substantial 1910 China entries for the new edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His willingness to be a "backroom boy", to work quietly for others, seems to have characterised Lionel's life as a scholar.

During almost his entire professional career, he worked in the British Museum (which then incorporated what is now the British Library), entering it in 1900, and eventually rising to become Keeper of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts in 1936. There he worked with such distinguished "orientalists" as Laurence Binyon (1869 – 1943) and Arthur Waley (1889 – 1966). He retired officially in 1940, but continued to work informally in the Museum until a few years before his death. Unjustly neglected by today's students of China, he represents an era of sinology when a scrupulous respect for and familiarity with ancient texts was combined with a broad reading in several European languages, engagement with major intellectual issues and trends of the day, and a fluent English prose style. He produced a series of translations for the general reader of some of the great classics of Chinese philosophy — *The Sayings of Lao Tzū* (1904), *Musings of a Chinese Mystic: Selections from the Philosophy of Chuang Tzū* (1906), *The Sayings of Confucius* (1907), *Taoist Teachings from the Book of Lieh Tzū* (1912), *The Book of Mencius* (1942), and *A Gallery of Chinese*

Immortals (1948). He also published a vast number of scholarly articles and shorter translations, and several valuable bibliographical studies. He quietly helped many other workers in the field, as when he undertook the huge task of proofreading W E Soothill (1861 – 1935) and Lewis Hodous's (b. 1872) *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* (1937). Soothill, who was Professor of Chinese at Oxford, in his Preface dated 1934, gave thanks, hailing Lionel as the "illustrious son of an illustrious parent", and referring to his "ripe scholarship and experienced judgement." Three years later his collaborator Hodous wrote another Preface, praising Lionel's work in glowing terms: "Dr Giles ... has had to assume a responsibility quite unexpected by himself and by us. For two to three years, with unflinching courtesy and patience, he has considered and corrected the very trying pages of the proofs, while the *Dictionary* was being printed. He gave chivalrously of his long knowledge both of Buddhism and of the Chinese literary characters."

Lionel Giles wrote countless excellent book reviews and was capable of being most generous in his appraisal of others (more so than his father). Of Lin Yutang's *The Wisdom of China* he wrote: "Brilliant and versatile as ever, he is able to give us a better insight into the hearts of his countrymen than any other writer." On the subject of Pearl Buck's version of the novel *Shuihuzhuan*, he wrote: "One feels that the author of *The Good Earth*, with her broad and tolerant outlook on life, was the predestined translator of this work [*All Men Are Brothers*], instinct as it is with a warm, comprehensive humanity." But he could also be severely, if politely, critical, as in his review of E R Hughes' *Chinese Philosophy in Classical Times*: "Though his fluency never deserts him, one cannot help feeling that it is being used not so much to fill the gaps in our knowledge as to conceal the deficiencies in his. We begin to wonder if the writer is fully competent to undertake a piece of work involving so much translation from the Chinese." In a lengthy review of Arthur Waley's *Catalogue of Paintings Recovered from Tun-huang*, he begins by singing his Museum colleague's praises: "It is fortunate that the *Catalogue* has been prepared by a scholar of the calibre of Mr Waley. Indeed, it is hardly too much to say that he is the one man in this country who combines sufficient knowledge of Buddhism, Oriental art, and the Chinese language to undertake such a task." But Giles goes on to devote fourteen pages to a list of polite but precise, fearless and judicious corrections.

From time to time, Lionel used the occasion of a book review to put forward a well-considered argument on some general matter, as when writing about Xiao Qian's *Etchings of a Tormented Age*:

"He begins by telling how the collapse of the Manchu Empire led to a further revolution in the world of letters, in which the plain vernacular was universally adopted in place of the age-hallowed classical style. This is putting it too strongly. Chinese as it is actually spoken is too clumsy and diffuse to be suitable for most forms of literary expression, especially poetry; and although the old allusive, carefully balanced style of composition has been generally abandoned, it cannot be said that its place has been taken by the language of the market-place. There are many gradations between these two extremes, and even in journalism some compromise has been found necessary. Admittedly some change in the direction of greater simplicity was called for; but now that the first flush of revolutionary enthusiasm is over the

reformers are beginning to realise how difficult it is for a nation to cut itself off from tradition and make an entirely fresh start. Our own great innovator, Wordsworth, found it impossible in the long run to use the language of common speech consistently for poetic purposes, and it may reasonably be doubted whether poems will ever be written in the vernacular to compare with those of the great T'ang masters. All the more must our sympathy go out to those ardent spirits who are struggling to solve so complex a problem, in order that Chinese literature may continue to prove not unworthy of its glorious past.”

During his long tenure at the British Museum, Lionel Giles worked on an exhaustive catalogue of the priceless collection of some seven thousand manuscripts dating between c. 400 and 1000 AD, which the explorer Aurel Stein had brought back from the oasis of Dunhuang. This life's work of his finally bore fruit in 1957, a year before his death, with the publication of the magnificently produced and impeccably researched *Catalogue of the Chinese Manuscripts from Tunhuang in the British Museum*. “It was no light task”, he wrote in 1941, “even in a physical sense, for the total length of the sheets which had constantly to be unrolled and rolled up again must have amounted to something between ten and twenty miles.”

The Giles translation of *The Art of War* was first published in 1910. Lionel dedicated it to his younger brother, Capt. Valentine Giles, officer in the Royal Engineers, “in the hope that a work 2000 years old may yet contain lessons worth consideration by the soldier of today.” It is one of his most thorough and scholarly works, and unlike his various popular translations, contains not only the complete Chinese text, but also an extensive and excellent textual apparatus and commentary. It is quite remarkable how deeply and thoroughly Giles enters into the (often intractable) text, recognising the quality of the Chinese writing. In some ways, and surprisingly, this is a superior sinological achievement to anything by his father, the great Cambridge Professor. The care with which Lionel reads, translates, and sometimes synthesises the often rambling and contradictory commentaries, is remarkable. On top of all of this, he enlivens the book with many stimulating, sometimes controversial editorial asides, references to episodes in western history.

Some of us today are striving to bring back into Chinese Studies something of the depth (and excitement) of the best early sinology, to create a New Sinology, that transcends the narrow concerns of the prevalent Social Sciences-based model. We recognise (as did Lionel Giles) the urgency of applying the past to the present, the pressing need to understand today's China, as the world's rising power. In so doing, we are deeply aware of the need to understand the historical roots of China's contemporary consciousness. For these purposes, this work is a model study, scholarly but at the same time alive both to enduring humanistic concerns and to concrete present-day issues. To read *The Art of War* at all intelligently in translation, one needs to be familiar with its historical and philosophical context. And then its contemporary relevance becomes even clearer and even greater. Lionel Giles succeeds in providing the essential materials for this sort of informed reading. There exists no better representation of the old tradition of sinology at its most typical and at its best.

(John Minford, 2008)