

# Translation of Military Terms in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*

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## Abstract

*The Art of War*, renowned as one of the most influential military book in the world, has been extending its tremendous popularity and profound influence with over 30 English versions. In his book, Sun Tzu provided an overall view of military strategies to resolve contradiction and win battles. Through its spread across different countries, the military terms has remained as translation difficulties in various tasks. This paper will mainly focus on the translation of military terms in *The Art of War* from the comparative study of two translated versions with appropriate approaches to solving relevant issues in the task.

**Keywords:** translation, Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, military terms

## 1. Introduction

Composed of 13 Chapters of warfare coping strategies, *The Art of War* is a classic Chinese military text with key influential factors in military activity, business management, social administration, operating decision, etc. From the perspective of lexical level, the translation of *The Art of War* can be focused on military terms as a norm to perform further research on specific items accordingly.

Since the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (770-221BC) until present days, *The Art of War* and Sun Tzu have been recognized as one of the most important Chinese cultural inheritance. As mentioned in their book *Translation, History and Culture*, Bassnett and Lefevere claimed that culture was the “operational unit of translation”. (Lefevere & Bassnett, 1990). Among various English version translators of this book, Lionel Giles and Lin Wusun stand out from the others and their versions are widely accepted by the readers across the world.

As the language features of classical Chinese writing own distinctive styles, most modern readers from China and other countries are all facing difficulties in understanding the military terms in the book. Thus there is important implication to conduct a relevant research on military terms translation of this military classic for the better cultural communication.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Translation History of *The Art of War*

Since the first language version appeared in 1772, there has been a translation boom of *The Art of War* in western countries. As war gradually became a common occurrence in the early 20th century, many English translators began to focus on this ancient Chinese military book. According to the Sun Tzu researchers in Europe, there have been 33 English versions appeared since 20th century.

In 1750, Jean Joseph Marie Amiot, a French missionary, came to China and served as the chief translator of Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799). With abundant experiences in China, his book *Art Militaire des Chinois* was later published in 1772. In his book, he firstly introduced *The Art of War* to French people. As language barrier still existed at that time, the culture impact did not cause too much feedbacks from the English translators and military expert.

In 1905, an British artillery captain named Everard Calthrop translated *The Art of War* when he served in Japan. Limited to his Chinese level, he asked his two Japanese assistant to help him in dealing with the original text and translated the English version from relevant Japanese materials and his personal views. The unfortunate result of its historical evaluation is that there are various misunderstanding and errors in this first English version. After three years, he revised the early book and published a new one titled with *The Book of War; The Military Classic*

of the Far East. With the complete content loyal to the source language text, this version can be seen as the real academic research of *The Art of War* in the 20th century.

In 1910, Lionel Giles, a British scholar and translator, offered his own insights of *The Art of War* and published a new English version. This book was the first English version widely accepted by the western academic circles. He insisted that there were many mistakes in Calthrop's two versions, saying frequent omissions and distorted passages topped the others as the obstacles for the readers to know the original text. Influenced by his book, Samuel Griffith, a US brigadier general of the Marine Corps, published his translation work and attracted the extensive attention in 1963. During his service in China, he began to show great interest in Chinese culture and history. The western world was stirred up with an emerging craze in learning *The Art of War* among the general public.

Apart from the western scholars, many Chinese translators also devoted their tremendous efforts in advocating external publicity of traditional Chinese culture. Since 1980s, the Chinese-English translation research has been initiated. Compared with other counterparts, Lin Wusun published a widely acclaimed version in 1994. Many Chinese and western scholars praise highly on his version for its faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance which all lead to the effective cultural communication between the readers and the original text.

## 2.2 Translation Studies of *The Art of War*

### 2.2.1 Translation Studies Abroad of *The Art of War*

Since Chinese culture brings more and more to the whole world's attention, many translators and sinologists has dedicated themselves to the study of Chinese classics, such as Jean Joseph Marie Amiot, Everard Ferguson Calthrop, Lionel Giles, Samuel Griffith, Alastair Johnson, Ralph Sawyer and Roger Ames. According to Li Guifeng (2009), all of whose efforts are devoted to the spread and improvement of *The Art of War* for the target readers in the western countries. For instance, Ralph Sawyer published his version in 1983 and clarified the connotation which was rarely mentioned in other counterparts. It marked a new stage of the military and culture communication between the East and West. In addition, many international journals related to translation now begin to receive articles of *The Art of War* translation studies, including *Babel: International Journal of Translation, Across Language and Cultures, Language in Contrast*, etc.

From the year 1970 to 2000, English college scholars and researchers also noticed the translation studies of *The Art of War* and other military classics. For example, in America, there were five doctoral dissertations focusing on seven military classics in China, including *The Art of War*. The authors, though mentioning their points from various perspectives, all had intensive studies of the military strategies and practical application in their thesis.

### 2.2.2 Translation Studies of *The Art of War* in China

Studies of *The Art of War* in China can be traced back to Qin Dynasty (221-206BC). According to *Literature Summary of Sun Tzu Study*, there are 1849 published documents since Qin Dynasty to 1990s. It proves that the study of Sun Tzu and *The Art of War* owns a long history and substantive research branches in Chinese. Meanwhile, The first attempt in the translation studies of *The Art of War* in China initiated in 1940s. In the last century, many scholars commit themselves to the translation work of *The Art of War*, such as, Zheng Lin (1945), Yuan Shibin (1987), Lin Wusun (1999), etc.

Besides the translation work, the research of word connotations in *The Art of War* has become another study perspective. For instance, Huang Haixiang (2009) analyzed the cultural misreading of the word "deception" and discussed the human-oriented value of the English version from the perspective of cultural translation. Li Huiguang (2010) held that the faithfulness of the translation work in the topmost criteria, especially for the military-related terms. Zhang Guojun (2014) chose the perspective of comic rewriting in the retranslation of *The Art of War* and raised the translator Leong Weng Kam as an example to illustrate the competitive mechanism in translation could be pluralistic. Liu Xiaoxia (2014) made a diachronic research of various versions in the 20th century from the perspective of descriptive translation studies. It provides a reference for the following researchers to choose the appropriate version as a blueprint.

As mentioned above, the translation work of Chinese classics has attracted a large number of researchers from China and other countries to delve into the studies of books like *The Art of War*. There are numerous unsolved questions, however, that scholars can express their own views to minimize the language and culture barriers.

## 3. Sun Tzu and *The Art of War*

Sun Tzu (544-496BC) was a famous general, philosopher and military strategist in ancient China who was born in the late Spring and Autumn period and performed as an active militarist in the early Warring State period, an

age of secession and conflict among seven local regimes. All the states struggled for the power to control China by winning over their opponent counterparts. To build a prosperous state with a powerful army, Sun Tzu analyzed his philosophical thinking and wisdom of battles in *The Art of War*.

*The Art of War* is a classic work on military strategy principles and applications. There are 13 chapters, each of which contains arcane and smart thoughts on the coping strategies of war. All of the highlights in the book has been co-opted by not only the generals and soldiers but millions of business people from different cultures.

As a classic work of military culture, *The Art of War* has exerted great influence on China and other neighboring countries. The Chinese version was brought to Japan, Korea and Vietnam for about a thousand years. In Japan, there are a great number of readers of *The Art of War*, which significantly influences Japanese business operation and military strategies. Konosuke Matsushita, the founder of Panasonic Corporation, once commented this book as “the first god to worship” in his speech and urged his employees to follow the principles mentioned in *The Art of War*.

In the last century, many European countries reprinted the book on the account of its tremendous social and cultural influence. Great influence could be seen in the aspects like military practice, sports, foreign affairs, commerce and trade, etc. The followers of Sun Tzu became a popularity in Europe and Professor Von Senger from University of Zurich called *The Art of War* as “the only book can be compared favorable with the Holy Bible”.

#### 4. Translation of Military Terms in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*

As one of the most significant features in *The Art of War*, military terms is the technical term applied in military domain and related with military system and wars (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 2014). It is also an essential component of *The Art of War* that demonstrates its seriousness and professionalism, such as “曲制”, “分数”, “三军”, “官道”, “委积”, “形名”, etc. The earliest application of military terms can be seen from the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046BC). The Spring and Autumn and the Warring States Period witnessed the development of weapons and military establishment and many new terms of military terms appeared. Those terms are good reflections of economy, society and culture at that time. With the passage of time, many of them have evolved into set structures and idioms nowadays.

The military terms in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* can be divided into two categories, classic military terms and borrowed ones from common words. This article will discuss the translation of the two categories from the versions of Lionel Giles (Giles as follows) and Lin Wusun (Lin as follows).

##### 4.1 Translation of Classic Military Terms

According to the statistics of classic military terms in *The Art of War*, there are 41 classic terms employed by Sun Tzu. Some of the terms has remained its original meanings while others has changed in various context.

Table 1. Translation of military terms with original meanings

Chinese Term	English version
Bing (“兵”)	Soldier
Shi (“师”)	Division
Jiangjun (“将军”)	General
Shengfu (“胜负”)	Victory or Defeat
Fujian (“伏歼”)	Annihilate
Guan (“关”)	Pass
Shou (“守”)	Defend
Ying (“营”)	Battalion
Shiren (“士人”)	Officer

The table above indicates that many military terms applied in *The Art of War* are still frequently used in modern context. For example, the word “general” used to indicate the commander of the army in ancient China and now people use the similar meaning to describe a person who owns great power in the army. According to Peter Newmark (1988), translation is a work of both science and art. Based on this method, the two translators adopt the English version in the table. For the target readers, the appropriateness and accuracy are two essential parts for their reading.

According to the analysis of different communicative purposes, Lin (2007) hopes to spread sinology and Chinese culture with literal translation to the readers home and abroad while Giles (1993) adopts more free translation to

be in accordance with the thinking habits of English readers. As a result, the version of Lin is more faithful and simple, using more Pinyin in brackets when there are military or culture-related terms to allow the readers to know the original expression of *The Art of War*. In the version of Giles, all key terms are marked with notes elaborating military terms for the readers' reference. This embraces the needs and habits of non-Chinese readers and receives good response from all walks of life.

Despite similarities with most military terms of the two translators, they still have divergence of opinion about some specific terms. For example, Lin deems the translation of Xingjun (“行军”) as “deploying the troops” while Giles takes it for “the army on the march”. The version of Lin conforms to psychological need of target language readers and expresses the meaning of the original text. Thus it is more acceptable and understandable by the readers. Giles applies the literal translation to express only the meaning of the word with understatement of source text. From the above, the prime task of translators in dealing with the military terms is the key to enlightening the readers about traditional Chinese military strategies and cultural characteristics.

#### 4.2 Translation of Borrowed Military Terms from Common Words

Before *The Art of War* was known to the world, common words were rarely used in military books. For the first time, Sun Tzu analyzed the characteristics and details of battles according to his experience, borrowing other terms from common words to make his book more full and accurate.

Table 2. Translation of military terms from common words

Chinese Term	English version
Min (“民”)	Soldier
Weiji (“委积”)	Military Supplies
Sisheng (“死生”)	General
Kaihe (“开阖”)	Gap
Dili (“地利”)	Geographical Advantage
Zhaoqi (“朝气”)	Morale
Xingming (“形名”)	Fighting Tool

According to the statistics of Oxford English Corpus, there are over 2 billion words in various writing samples. Among those astronomical words, only about 3,000 words are frequently used as common words. In Chinese, the common words and terms happen to convert in a particular condition through language development. As illustrated in the table, some military terms used in *The Art of War* were previously applied in daily life with different meanings. For example, Min (“民”) indicated ordinary people in the general context while Sun Tzu used it to refer to the soldiers. These words greatly enriched the treasure house of this military classic.

For the two translators, their different purposes lead to distinctive process, methods and strategies. In *The Art of War*, fa (“法”) is a commonly used word. Lin uses related reference materials of traditional Chinese cultures, especially from Taoism, translating it as “rules and regulations”. As legal society enjoys popular support among westerners, Giles is influenced by what he constantly sees and hears and translates it as “methods and discipline”. With different translation strategies, the two translators have built their effective approaches for the target readers to understand the military terms.

All in all, the two English versions of *The Art of War* share many things in common while reserving differences for the sake of target readers. Both of them have exhibited a reliable reference of military terms to the researchers and enthusiasts of *The Art of War*. As an inventive work, this military classic boasts a significant status for its unique expression and content. The author, Sun Tzu, also endows this book with aesthetic feature of literature, focusing more on its form with the military forms. It is advisable for the translators to follow a faithful approach of translation. (Munday, 2007)

#### 5. Conclusion

By conducting the analytical research and study in the translation of military terms in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, the argument can be stated that the flexible translation strategies applied in various tasks are effective approaches to express the original intention of the author. As *The Art of War* is a comprehensive military treatise with traditional Chinese culture and wisdom, English readers usually meet more difficulties in the process of understanding. As a consequence, translators need to pay more attention on the relation of military terms to other items, such as sacrificial ceremony, hierarchy, productivity, social custom and so forth. This study hopes to make contribution to the Chinese academic translation and international cultural exchanges.

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