

THE ART OF WAR

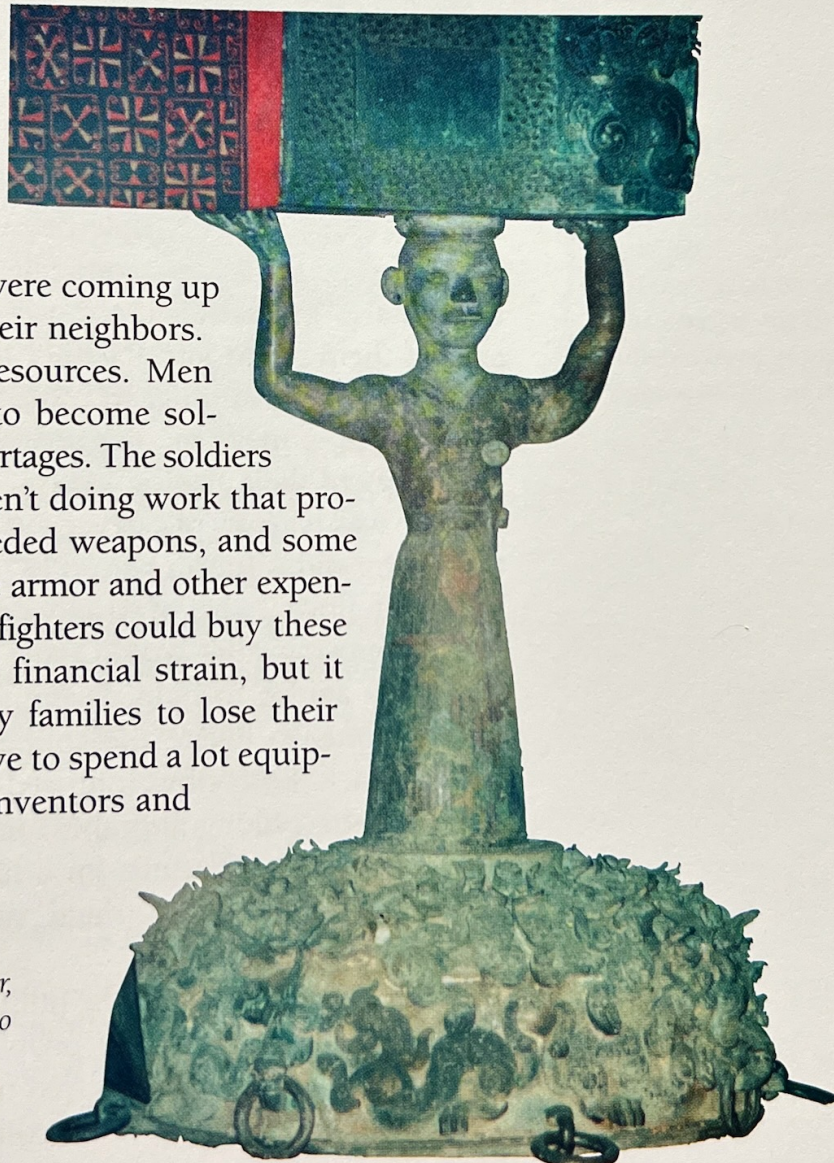
“ SUN WU

WARFARE IN ANCIENT CHINA

It would probably be good for humankind if more people could spend time like the Chinese philosophers, wondering about life and trying to figure out the best way to behave. Unfortunately, in ancient China as in most societies, conflicts often arose between people, and many times those conflicts were settled by war.

The ancient Chinese states frequently fought against each other and against outsiders, so while some people were thinking about how to get along, many others were coming up with ways to conquer their neighbors.

War took a lot of resources. Men left their normal work to become soldiers, leading to labor shortages. The soldiers had to eat, but they weren't doing work that produced food. Soldiers needed weapons, and some of them also had to have armor and other expensive equipment. Wealthy fighters could buy these arms without too much financial strain, but it was a hardship for many families to lose their wage earner and then have to spend a lot equipping him for battle. So inventors and



Although a mere common soldier, this young man appears proud to be holding up the set of bells found in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng.

A strategist is a person
 who plans how to carry out
 a military operation. }

strategists had a real incentive to come up with better weapons and more efficient ways to fight.

One tool that gave early Chinese soldiers an edge over the competition was the chariot, which entered China sometime between 1600 and 1450 BCE, during the Shang dynasty. Each chariot could hold three men, and at first ten men went along on foot with each one. Chariots worked well on the flat North China Plain, but South China is covered with mountains, rivers, and lakes. So in those areas where driving a wheeled vehicle was difficult, another invention helped soldiers who were fighting at close range: the sword. Innovations in bronze working led to swords that could hold a sharp edge. These weapons were prized and many had beautiful decorations.

Rulers during the Western Zhou period (about 1045–771 BCE) had a lot to fight for. The first members of the dynasty had taken the throne from the Shang by force, and they knew that many people resented their rule and would have been happy to have someone else in power. The Zhou leaders also knew that there was a chance that the states around them might join together to fight against them as a unified force. So in order to protect themselves and to gain even more power by expanding their kingdom, they strengthened their armies.

The way wars were carried out started to change during the Spring and Autumn period (770–481 BCE). Before, warfare had followed a set of strictly defined rules. First, leaders of the opposing sides would issue challenges to each other until they agreed to fight. Drummers would beat out stirring rhythms to excite the soldiers, and then the armies would attack. Both sides followed certain rules of fair play, such as not attacking at night. Each army was supposed to have up to 1,000 chariots, for a total of more than 10,000 soldiers. Foot soldiers armed with spears and daggers accompanied the chariots.

As conflicts increased, the military became too large and too important to be run by people who just happened to have been born into families that traditionally supplied war leaders. Kings began choosing commanders based on their

This bronze flask was probably used to serve warm wine and could be hung from the chain attached to the handle. The bird on the stopper and carvings around the base are examples of the skill of the creator.



qualifications, not their birth. One of these strategists was Sun Wu, also known as Sunzi (Master Sun), who wrote *The Art of War* in the fifth century BCE. This book has long been a favorite of military leaders, including Mao Zedong, the leader of a revolution that toppled the Chinese government in the mid-20th century. He studied it to learn tactics of **guerrilla** warfare.

Sun Wu had many thoughts about how to be victorious in war. Some of them are:

- Warfare is the Way of Deception. If you are capable of accomplishing something, seem incapable; if you are close, seem distant; if you are distant, seem close.
- Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight a hundred battles with no danger of defeat.
- He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.
- Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.
- One cartload of the enemy's provisions is equivalent to twenty of one's own.
- To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.

LEARNING FROM THE ANCIENTS

Since 2002 *The Art of War* has been translated into English at least five times. In 1999 an author named Gerald Michaelson examined how Sun Wu's advice could be applied to business. His book, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War for Managers*, was a best-seller.

guerrilla = "little war" in Spanish
An unofficial or semi-official war carried out by small, independent groups or a fighter in one of those wars.

☞ Sun Wu, *The Art of War*, fifth century BCE

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

Sometimes combat was carried out for personal reasons. Men lived under a strict moral code that ordered them to seek vengeance for wrongs done to them or their families, and feuds might last for generations. The second-century BCE *Record of Rites* is clear about the need for revenge, saying: “Do not share the same sky with the mortal enemy of your father.” When a king unjustly killed a man in the sixth century BCE, the murdered man’s son was thirsty for vengeance. For this and other reasons, he waged war against the king. He won, but by then the king was already dead. This didn’t stop his revenge, though—he ordered that the body be dug up and gave it 300 lashes with a whip.

Sun Wu didn’t just sit around thinking of things to say about war—he put his ideas into practice. The earliest surviving story about Sun Wu says that a king asked him if he could demonstrate his theories, even using women as soldiers (women were considered unfit to fight). Sun Wu responded by dividing the ladies of the court into two groups, each led by one of the king’s favorite women. He then gave them orders, and when they burst out laughing, he had the two leaders beheaded. Not surprisingly, after that the surviving women did whatever he told them to do.

With men such as Sun Wu in charge of strategy and with advances in weaponry, war became more deadly. And as states grew more powerful and more wealthy, they had more money to spend on their armed forces, leading to large numbers of casualties. In a single battle in 341 BCE, the loser could expect 100,000 of his soldiers to be killed. This was already a huge loss, but by 295 BCE that number more than doubled to 240,000. In just one more generation—260 BCE—the number again rose dramatically, to 450,000. The winners also lost many soldiers, but nobody took an accurate count of them. The winners would cut off the left ear of each dead enemy, and then would count the ears to make the final tally.

Naturally, this slaughter alarmed everyone, not just soldiers and their military commanders. Leaders ordered large walls built across the countryside to slow down the advance of enemy troops, and existing walls around cities were strengthened and enlarged. A drawback to these walls was that while they kept attackers out, they also kept people in, so an army could surround a city and starve its inhabitants into submission.

Soldiers also worked hard at protecting themselves. Although the Chinese were experts at working bronze, the metal was too heavy and too expensive to be practical for a full set of armor. Most soldiers relied on thick pieces of leather stitched together. They needed good protection, because the weapons in use were very effective. Imagine a spear, with a straight blade sticking out the front, and then a second razor-sharp blade pointing straight out from the side,

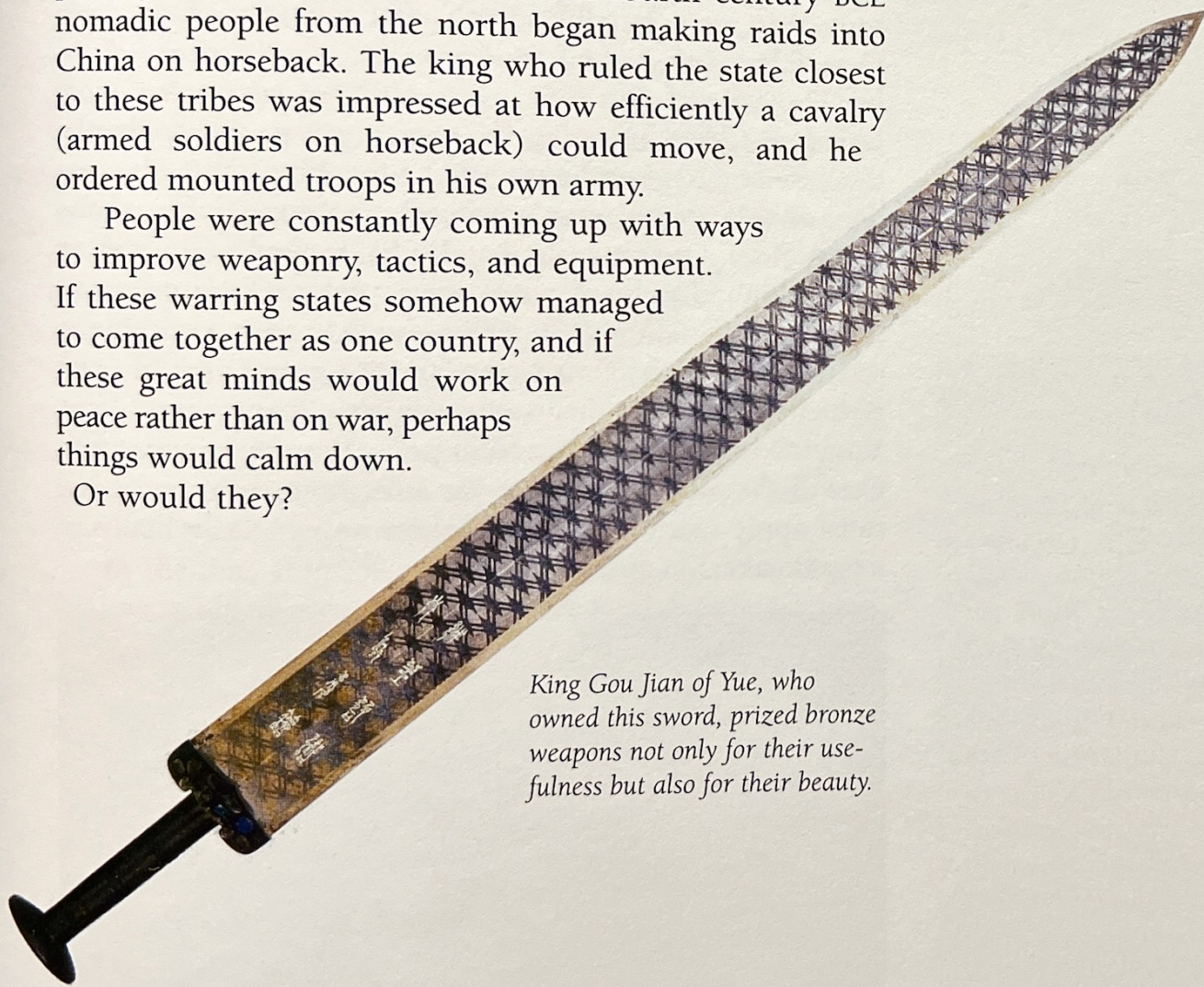
and you'll be picturing the fierce dagger-lance. A soldier would swing it in a large arc to build up speed to strike his enemy. It's hard to believe that these garments offered much protection against such weapons. The application of a layer of lacquer would strengthen them further, but when the powerful crossbow was invented, these materials were not strong enough, and metal armor became a necessity.

Chinese horses were small and were mostly used for pulling chariots in teams. In the late fourth century BCE nomadic people from the north began making raids into China on horseback. The king who ruled the state closest to these tribes was impressed at how efficiently a cavalry (armed soldiers on horseback) could move, and he ordered mounted troops in his own army.

People were constantly coming up with ways to improve weaponry, tactics, and equipment.

If these warring states somehow managed to come together as one country, and if these great minds would work on peace rather than on war, perhaps things would calm down.

Or would they?



King Gou Jian of Yue, who owned this sword, prized bronze weapons not only for their usefulness but also for their beauty.