

Intelligence in Public Media

Lever of Power: Military Deception in China and the West

Ralph D. Sawyer (CreateSpace, 2017), 468 pp., notes, index.

Reviewed by Arturo Muñoz

Ralph D. Sawyer's self-published *Lever of Power: Military Deception in China and the West* is an extraordinary work that brings together a vast array of primary sources on the subject of military deception with insightful analysis of the content and relevance of each work. Sawyer, an expert on Chinese military and intelligence issues, has translated classic texts and written several books, including *The Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China*. In *Lever of Power*, he revisits concepts presented earlier in *The Tao of Deception* (Basic Books, 2007), providing new details and commentary. *Lever of Power* builds on *The Tao of Deception* to refine our understanding of Chinese thought. Both works are worth reading in sequence. Additionally, *Lever of Power* makes comparisons with Western history to show that both China and the West have relied on deception and have employed similar practices in order to deceive. A major difference, however, is that the West lacks the extensive body of theory on deception the Chinese have developed, and that deception "is not yet as integrated into military thinking and planning as it is in China."^a

Sawyer's deep expertise is evident in concise explanations of ancient Chinese aphorisms, legends, and allegories that are alien to most Western readers. His frequent use of examples and lessons learned enhances the narrative. However, this voluminous tome would have benefited from a concluding chapter clearly summarizing the main elements of classical Chinese theory and highlighting major similarities and differences between China and the West. Apparently, the last chapter entitled "Impressions and Speculations" is intended as a summation, but it contains so much new information and so many new "musings" that the main points fail to stand out.

The book follows a chronological structure initially and then switches to thematic chapters that focus on

a. Hayden Peake, "Intelligence Officer's Bookshelf" review of Sawyer's *The Tao of Deception*, *Studies in Intelligence* 51, no. 4 (Extracts, December 2007), 64.

specific techniques, such as concealment, disinformation, feints and misdirection, feigned retreats, false treaties, pseudo-peace initiatives, disguise, and "pseudo-vulnerability." (ii) This approach results in some repetition of quotes and data provided in previous pages. Because of the pervasive gap in our knowledge of the Chinese *tao* (way) of deception, this review focuses on China.

Ancient traditions of military deception spill over into other spheres of thought and behavior in contemporary China:

Articles in Chinese military and political journals, unrestricted PRC [People's Republic of China] books on strategy, postings on websites, open PLA [People's Liberation Army] online discussions, and anecdotal reports indicate that deception remains a focus of contemplation in contemporary China . . . Chinese military and political think tanks continue to assiduously study the theoretical formulations preserved in the classic military writings . . . [that] currently enjoy far greater readership among the general public than at any point in Chinese history. (iii-iv)

Given that the Chinese hold these writings in such esteem and read them avidly, it behooves Western analysts to at least be aware of them. Sawyer's list of most popular works—including a sampling of thought from each—follows the conclusion of this review.

The highly developed Chinese body of doctrine on deception is particularly relevant today because of China's long-term strategy to expand its influence worldwide through a well-integrated mix of diplomacy, propaganda, intelligence, technology acquisition and innovation, and commercial trade.^b Deception continues to play an under-

b. For a summary of China's unparalleled success in technology transfer and its economic and military ramifications, see the Arturo Muñoz review of Hannas, William C., et al, *Chinese Industrial Espionage: Technology Acquisition and Military Modernization* (Routledge, 2013) at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publication/csi-studies/vol-59-no-4/pdfs/>

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lying role, increasingly augmented by an unprecedented expansion of overt military power, as in the establishment of de facto control over disputed waters in the South China Sea, in violation of international law.^a

Munoz-Chinese-Industrial-Espionage.pdf.

a. The United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague ruled in August 2016 that China's building of fortified islands (by dumping thousands of tons of sand and concrete on what were previously uninhabited reefs) constituted an "unlawful occupation," particularly pertaining to the military-grade runway and port facilities built on Mischief Reef. China rejected that ruling in favor of the Philippines, whose coastline is adjacent to the disputed area, in contrast to the distant coastline of China. In the absence of a viable international law enforcement mechanism, it appears that China's

Finally, it should be emphasized that many Chinese thinkers in the past themselves questioned the morality of the practices they espoused, but concluded it was more immoral to lose a war because of "stupidity" or lack of will to do what needed to be done.

imperialistic claims of sovereignty, based partly on Ming Dynasty documents, will prevail. The creation of a formidable military infrastructure in this zone, in the absence of any comparable effort by China's rivals, puts them at such a disadvantage that China will be in a position to fulfill Sun Tzu's advice—to achieve victory without fighting a battle. See Euan Graham, "The Hague Tribunal's South China Sea Ruling: Empty Provocation or Slow-Burning Influence," Council of Councils, 18 August 2018, https://www.cfr.org/council-ofcouncils/global_memos/p38227.



Sampling of Popular or Noteworthy Readings Relating to Deception in Contemporary China

Art of War (Sun Tzu; written circa 500 BCE; first known and most-widely recognized formulation of deception in war.)

- "Warfare is the Tao of deception"—repeated in various forms for the next two thousand years by numerous Chinese military and civilian thinkers.
- Sun Tzu did not limit himself to deception; he counseled the ruthless practice of efficient warfare, as opposed to the efficient practice of ruthless warfare, which implies needless bloodshed contrary to moral values.
- Espionage and secrecy were paramount: "In employing the army, nothing is more important than not being knowable." (20)
- Sun Tzu advocated the use of intelligence, deception, and psychological operations to confuse and demoralize the enemy, ideally achieving victory without fighting a battle.

*Many translations of this work of Sun Tzu's exist. Ralph Sawyer's was published by Westview Press in 1994.

Tai-pai Yin-ching (Li Ch'uan, T'ang Dynasty, 618–907 CE)*

- "Military strategy must be kept secret and not promiscuously transmitted." The reason the author wrote down "unorthodox plans and deceitful Tao and discussed mental techniques that produce disastrous cruelty is that without them, the army could not be effective." (33)
- "When your mind is planning to seize something, feign being about to give it away." (307)

*Sawyer has translated portions of this work in his *Strategies for the Human Realm: Crux of the T'ai-pai Yin-ching* (CreateSpace, 2012)

Hundred Unorthodox Strategies (Sung Dynasty, 960–1126 CE)

- "Whenever about to engage an enemy in battle, first dispatch some emissaries to discuss a peace treaty . . . Whenever engaging in battle, if the enemy comes forth to surrender, you must investigate whether it is real or feigned . . . treat an enemy's surrender as you would an attack." (306)
- "Whenever engaging an enemy in battle during daylight, you must set out numerous flags and pennants

to . . . prevent the enemy from determining your troop strength.” (161)

*Sawyer’s translation appeared as *One Hundred Unorthodox Strategies: Battle and Tactics of Chinese Warfare* (Westview Press, 1996)

Tso-chuan [*The Commentaries of Tso*] (unknown authors; written during Warring States Period, ca. 403–221 BCE but it chronicles the Spring-Autumn Period, ca. 771–478 BCE.

- Describes deliberate manipulation of peace treaties and feigned covenants of alliance, including breaking non-aggression pacts.
- Most famous example is the attack on Yu territory after it had given permission to Chin’s army to cross its territory to attack neighboring Kuo. This treachery led to the often-repeated ch’eng-yu aphorism: “Having a nearby objective, yet making it appear distant.” (7–18) This also appears in the later *Thirty-Six Stratagems* as “Borrow a Road to Attack Kuo.”
- Documented first known cases of “feigned retreat,” which became a major strategic ploy used repeatedly over the centuries to ambush pursuing forces, discussed in many of the classic texts.
- Commanders were warned to scrutinize whether the enemy retreat was orderly or chaotic, and whether or not enemy officers shouted/drummed orders.

*The *Tso Chuan* is one of the classics of Chinese literature and possibly the earliest Chinese history ever assembled. It served as a prime text in the education of Chinese officials and intellectuals into the 20th century. It was first translated into English in the late 19th century by James Legge. Arguably the most accessible version is by Burton Watson (Columbia University Press, 1989).

Lectures on Seven Military Classics (compilation by Shih Tzu, Sung Dynasty 960–1126 CE)

- Widely disseminated through new woodblock printing by imperial order, included the *Art of War* and other classics, such as the T’ang Dynasty’s *Questions and Answers*.

- Provided instructions on conducting ambushes and pursuit of fleeing enemy forces.

- Emphasized deception off the battlefield, especially how to win over foreign emissaries and ply them convincingly with false or misleading information.

- Gave blunt advice for preparing a credible defector, including physically beating him in front of an emissary and even having his family arrested. The defector would either function wittingly as a double-agent or would be given false information, expecting that he would genuinely switch sides.

- This notorious ploy came to be known as k’u-jou-chi (Ploy of Suffering Flesh), included in the *Thirty-Six Stratagems*.

*Ralph Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Westview Press, 1993).

Thirty-Six Stratagems (unknown author, Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644 CE)

- Compilation of earlier works “considered the very embodiment of deception and final theoretical formulation.” (98–99) Contained 36 strategies of deception, subdivided into six categories, each marked by internal ying and yang progression, for example, advance and retreat, attack and defense.

- Enjoys “enormous popularity” today; numerous reprints; illustrated formats, even cartoon features in newspapers and television serializations dramatizing such ploys as:

- “Make a Sound in the East, Strike in the West”
聲東擊西／声东击西 [Shēng dōng jī xī];

- “Throw Away a Brick to Gain Jade”
拋磚引玉／抛砖引玉 [Pāo zhuān yǐn yù];

- “Feign Stupidity, not Lunacy”
假痴不癲／假痴不癲 [Jiǎ chī bù diān]; and

- “Empty City”
空城計／空城计 [Kōng chéng jì]. (101)

The “Empty-City” ploy deliberately fabricates the appearance of weakness by “making the vacuous (more) vacuous and spawning doubt amid doubt.” (356)

