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Review of Nylan, M. (2020) Sun Tzu: the art of war. A new translation by Michael Nylan

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Sun Tzu: The Art of War. A New Translation by Michael Nylan. New York: W. W. Norton, 2020. Pp. 157. \$24.95.

If the world ever ends, it will not be due to a shortage of *The Art of War* translations. The ancient Chinese military treatise has been rendered into almost any conceivable language, including Klingon. The first English rendition, a brave but flawed attempt by the hand of Captain Everard F. Calthrop (1905), appeared well over a century ago. Since then, several dozen translations have appeared in English alone, including Giles (1910), Griffith (1963), Cleary (1988), Ames (1993), Sawyer (1994), Minford (2002), Mair (2007), Huynh (2008), Ivanhoe (2011), Harris (2018), and MacDonald (2018). To this extensive yet hardly exhaustive list we may now add the work reviewed here. How does it contribute to the crowded field? Why should readers choose this translation over its many competitors?

First some basic facts about the book. The handy little hardcover is wrapped in a dust jacket with a plain yet powerful cover design featuring a pattern of scale armour. It counts a mere 157 generously spaced printed pages, and a few blank bonus pages to boot. Measuring 12 × 19 cm (4.7 × 7.5 inches), the book conveniently slips into a bag or coat pocket. It is not (yet) available in paperback, but e-book versions exist for multiple devices. The work is published by W. W. Norton, home to the so-called Critical Edition of *The Analects*, which was edited by Michael Nylan as well. Her translation of *The Art of War* contains a brief introduction, a note on the text, the translation proper, a thirty-one-word glossary, and well over a hundred endnotes. Chinese characters are sporadically added for clarification, but the Classical Chinese text is not reproduced in full. The copy-editing of the book is virtually flawless. Only an eagle-eyed nitpicker would spot typos such as “inconsistences” (p. 21) or bemoan the incidental definite article duplication in “the *The Art of War*” (pp. 15, 19, 29). As the Introduction and Translation make up the bulk of the book, this review shall now focus on these two components one after the other.

The Introduction is obviously written by a consummate scholar with a deep understanding of the ancient Chinese military text and its broader cultural-historical context, which makes for compelling reading. Written in a casual style, the Introduction is loosely structured around four questions, which serve as broad indicators—rather than strict delineators—of topics. For example, the section “Who Wrote *The Art of War*?” naturally discusses the text’s purported author Sun Wu 孫武 (“Sun the Martial”), but it also goes into changes in warfare in pre-imperial and early imperial China as a catalyst for the thrust of many ancient Chinese writings, not just *The Art of War*. Similarly, the section “What Is the

Work Ascribed to Sunzi Good For?” starts with an analysis of how the text can be read as pro-war or anti-war, only to end with a discussion of former US president Trump and several members of his administration—all of whom might have held on to their jobs longer if they had actually practised the military classic they love to flaunt. To some readers, the sneers at Team Trump for fanboying *The Art of War* might come across as a vent of frustration over his disastrous reign, especially since two high-ranking Democratic politicians, Clyburn and Pelosi, receive more favourable treatment in Nylan’s Introduction. However, the discussion of Trump and associates presumably serves to illustrate how *The Art of War* “participates in a much broader spectrum of the American imagination” (p. 18).

The Introduction is not the easiest of reading, as Nylan does not walk us hand-in-hand through every step of her reasoning. Instead, she makes readers—especially non-specialists—work hard to get the most out of what she writes. Simple statements such as “the second century of Western Han rule” (p. 10) require some grasp of Chinese history, or an effort to look up the dates of this dynasty, as they are not provided. Similarly, when the Battle of Boju 柏舉 is mentioned in passing (p. 12), beginning learners may not be aware that this is where Sun Wu’s employer, King Helu 闔廬 (r. 514–496 B.C.E.) of Wu 吳, gained a “stunning victory over his neighbor, mighty Chu, in 506 BCE” (p. 11).

As “hard work pays off in reliable ways,” to quote *The Art of War* (Ch. 8, p. 88), readers who put in the effort are rewarded with valuable insights based on state-of-the-art scholarship. For example, rather than narrating the entertaining anecdote of Sun Wu drilling a large troop of royal concubines into battle-ready warriors, as other translators tend to do, Nylan merely summarizes the fictional event while focusing on the function of storytelling instead. After plausibly suggesting that the long-standing tradition of *The Art of War* being compiled by Sun Wu is unlikely to be true, she explains that anecdotes about the famed general are, nevertheless, revealing about the presumptions of people in later centuries who circulated these stories. More importantly, she makes it clear that “closer acquaintance with the past—and especially the stories told about compelling figures in the past, whether good or bad, wise or too smart for their own good—helps to prepare the thinking person to become a better judge of options in the current sociopolitical realm” (p. 20). Another important lesson to be learned from Nylan’s Introduction is the great store *The Art of War* sets by the military commander’s responsibility for the commoner-soldier’s welfare (p. 29). More broadly, the text emphasizes the goodwill and mutual trust that binds leaders with those below them—an emphasis easily overlooked by militant fans who sport vanity plates that read “Art War” (p. 18).

Nylan's translation of *The Art of War* has certain characteristic features that shine through from the opening lines:

Arms are a vital matter for the ruling house, says Master Sun. As the arena of life and death, as the path to survival or ruin, this subject merits due reflection. (Ch. 1, p. 41)

One eye-catching feature of these lines is the choice of words. English translations of *The Art of War* conventionally render *guo* 國 as “state” or “nation,” but Nylan notes that the word “in early times refers to the court and capital, and therefore the ruling house” (p. 146). This lexical accuracy is characteristic of her translation. Indeed, the endnotes reveal reflection even on common words such as *wai* 外, “beyond,” or *za* 雜, “to mix up.” The notes also indicate significant textual variations between the standard edition of *The Art of War* that was used for the translation, and a manuscript copy found in the Yinqueshan 銀雀山 tomb that was sealed over 2,100 years ago. Furthermore, the notes reference other *The Art of War* translations—including those by Ames, Giles, Griffith, and Mair—which suggests that Nylan's translation builds on those earlier works and, pardon the military pun, is gunning to improve upon them. Most laudably, the notes readily acknowledge when words have been purposefully over-translated, when parts of the translation are tentative, and when alternative translations are possible. All these factors combined place Nylan's translation on a solid sinological footing. There are inevitably a few qualms, as no work is perfect and no translation will likely ever be. Readers may occasionally crave more explanation, or question her decisions as translator. This brings us back to the opening line, where the first word, *bing* 兵, listed in the glossary as “arms, war, troops” (p. 137), is rendered as “arms.” This unconventional choice is not explained in a note, which is a pity, if only because the same word is rendered as “war” in the title of the book instead. In any case, Nylan's word choices result in an opening line with a narrower scope than, for instance, Ivanhoe's “War is a major affair of state.”¹ Both translations are defensible, but each leads to a different appreciation of the focus of the military treatise.

Another striking feature of the opening lines is the order of words. The Chinese text starts with “Master Sun says” 孫子曰 and then tells us what he is supposed to have said. This is how direct speech is commonly presented in writings ascribed to the ancient Chinese masters, and other translators render it accordingly. Nylan boldly reverses the order, turning “Master Sun says” into “says Master Sun”

¹ Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Master Sun's Art of War* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), p. 5.

and moving it to the end of the sentence. She thereby cleverly emphasizes the topic that the main protagonist himself considers vital. Moreover, by creatively playing with the “Master X says Y” formula, she adds zest to the translation. The next sentence runs very smoothly in English as well: “As the arena of life and death, as the path to survival or ruin, this subject merits due reflection.” has a pleasant cadence to it. By comparison, stiffer translations such as Giles’s “It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected.” do not exactly roll off the tongue.² Overall, Nylan’s translation is a joy to read, as demonstrated by this line, my favourite one in the book:

As water’s flow follows the forms of the land, so, too, the winning army varies its tactics, adjusting to the enemy’s formations. (Ch. 6, p. 75)

With every new translation of *The Art of War* we should ask: Why opt for this version? The work reviewed here answers this question on the front flap of the dust jacket, which informs us in block letters:

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ANY MODERN LANGUAGE, A FEMALE SCHOLAR AND TRANSLATOR REIMAGINES *THE ART OF WAR*.

This statement, which also features prominently on the publisher’s website, presents the gender identity of the translator as a unique selling point. It draws attention to the gender imbalance in the field, where nearly all ancient Chinese texts are written by men, and the majority of scholars and translators are male as well. The statement also brings to mind oft-discussed issues in translation studies: How important is the identity (gender, race, age, etc.) of the translator? How does the identity manifest itself in the translation? Such questions are important, but a review of this book is hardly the place to discuss them, for there is a marked discrepancy between the all-caps front-flap statement and the book itself. While the dust jacket suggests that the text was reimagined by one sole scholar and translator, Nylan herself in the book gracefully acknowledges that the work came to fruition in close collaboration with others: “For three years, an international group of scholars drawn from multiple disciplines has pored over successive drafts of this translation, with the intention of making *The Art of War* speak more powerfully to general readers and specialists alike, East and West. Members of the working group included a former military officer and a poet, as well as the usual sampling

² Lionel Giles, *Sun Tzū on the Art of War: The Oldest Military Treatise in the World* (London: Luzac, 1910), p. 1.

of academics. . . . No word escaped the group's notice, and that is as it should be" (pp. 33–34). Ironically, judging by their first names, all principal members of the self-styled Berkeley working translation group appear to be men, which complicates the idea of a female translation. To be clear, the military classic does lend itself to being read through a female lens, as Chin-Ning Chu's *The Art of War for Women* or Huang and Rosenberg's *Women and The Art of War* show, but this is not one of those books.³

In my view, this new book instantly commands a strong presence in the crowded field of *The Art of War* translations. Not because of the translator's identity, but because it is based on solid scholarship and it brings out the literary qualities of the military text to a degree that I have not seen before. Overall, Nylan's translation has an appreciable literary, almost poetic, feel to it. Occasionally, the poetic feel is real, as *The Art of War* contains rhyme. Let me illustrate this with an example from Chapter 12, which focuses on incendiary attacks. To show the rhyme, I transcribe the last word on each main line in Baxter and Sagart's Old Chinese reconstruction.⁴

故	
以火佐攻者明，	*mraŋ
以水佐攻者強；	*N-kaŋ
水可以絕，	*[dz]ot
不可以奪。	*Cə.l'ot

Here is a selection of English renditions of these lines, in chronological order of publication:

Hence those who use fire as an aid to the attack show intelligence; those who use water as an aid to the attack gain an accession of strength. By means of water, an enemy may be intercepted, but not robbed of all his belongings. (Giles)⁵

³ Chin-Ning Chu, *The Art of War for Women: Sun Tzu's Ultimate Guide to Winning without Confrontation* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010); Catherine Huang and A. D. Rosenberg, *Women and the Art of War: Sun Tzu's Strategies for Winning without Confrontation* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2011).

⁴ William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart, *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 336, 347, 352, 356.

⁵ Giles, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, p. 156.

Those who use fire to assist their attacks are intelligent; those who use inundations are powerful. Water can isolate an enemy but cannot destroy his supplies or equipment. (Griffith)⁶

So the use of fire to help an attack means clarity, use of water to help at attack means strength. Water can cut off, but cannot plunder. (Cleary)⁷

He who uses fire to aid the attack is powerful; he who uses water to aid the attack is forceful. Water can be used to cut the enemy off, but cannot be used to deprive him of his supplies. (Ames)⁸

Thus using fire to aid an attack is enlightened, using water to assist an attack is powerful. Water can be used to sever, but cannot be employed to seize. (Sawyer)⁹

Therefore, supporting one's attack with fire yields obvious results; supporting one's attack with water yields impressive results. Water can break up enemy forces, but, unlike fire, it cannot deprive the enemy of his matériel. (Mair)¹⁰

Those who use fire to assist in attacks are intelligent, those who use water to assist in attacks are powerful. Water can be used to cut off the enemy, but cannot be used to plunder. (Huynh)¹¹

Using fire to support an attack brings clear and predictable results; using water to support an attack brings dramatic and powerful results. Water can carve up and cut off an enemy, but it cannot deprive them of their equipment and supplies. (Ivanhoe)¹²

So if you assist your attack by using fire, you are intelligent. If you assist your attack by using water, you are strong. With water you can cut the enemy off but cannot take things from him. (Harris)¹³

⁶ Samuel B. Griffith, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (1963; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 142.

⁷ Thomas Cleary, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), p. 165.

⁸ Roger T. Ames, *Sun-tzu: The Art of Warfare* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), p. 166.

⁹ Ralph D. Sawyer, *Sun-tzu: Art of War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 227.

¹⁰ Victor H. Mair, *The Art of War: Sun Tzu's Military Methods* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 126.

¹¹ Thomas Huynh, *The Art of War: Spirituality for Conflict, Annotated & Explained* (2008; reprint, Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2016), p. 185.

¹² Ivanhoe, *Master Sun's Art of War*, p. 86.

¹³ Peter Harris, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2018), p. 91.

Using fire as part of an offensive is a wise move. Flooding the enemy is also a powerful approach. However, while water may strand an opponent, it does not deprive that opponent of equipment and supplies in the same way that fire does. (MacDonald)¹⁴

Perhaps the closest resemblance to rhyme is Minford's indented rendition:

Fire

Assists an attack
Mightily.

Water

Assists an attack
Powerfully.

Water

Can isolate,
But it cannot
Take away.¹⁵

Nylan (p. 126) takes it to another level:

With fire's help, attack—and guide its course.
With water's help, attack—and wield its force.
Water can cut the foe off, true.
But will not seize his goods for you.

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¹⁴ Christopher MacDonald, *The Science of War: Sun Tzu's Art of War Re-Translated and Re-Considered* (Hong Kong: Earnshaw Books, 2018), p. 202.

¹⁵ John Minford, *Sun-tzu (Sunzi): The Art of War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 86–87.