Toward a Cross-Cultural Language of Power: Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Machiavelli's *The Prince* As Exemplary Texts

Ronald Glasberg

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

**Recommended Citation**


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
In attempting to grasp the fundamental assumptions of any civilization, one has to go beyond the purely theoretical sphere associated with philosophy, religion, science and the arts and turn to what might be called the practical-theoretical sphere associated with a civilization's understanding of power. After all, power is eminently a matter of practice because it is associated with getting things done by manipulating individuals or groups to do the bidding of other individuals or groups. While the historical study of war demonstrates an extreme form of this attempt at manipulation, one must also recognize that sociopolitical institutions and cultural values function in a manipulative capacity and, hence, are expressions of power within a given civilization. If the task is to bring this complex manifold into some kind of theoretical focus, a useful point of departure is to find exemplary texts on the use of power and, by way of comparison, shed some light on how power functions and is understood in different civilizations. An exemplary text pertaining to power may be called 'practical-theoretical' because it deals with the practical matter of getting things done and because at the same time it articulates a theory of power which in one way or another reflects basic cultural assumptions. The exemplary quality of the text is manifest in its being both a practical tool as well as the point of departure for much theoretical discussion in the culture of its birth.

The goal of this paper is to compare two such texts: Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Machiavelli's *The Prince*, with a view toward understanding basic assumptions about power in the civilizations of China and Western Europe. However, because the respective cultural contexts are radically different, a proper comparison must seek broad categories of analysis—categories that can cross cul-
tural boundaries without doing violence to the material being investigated and at the same time are sensitive to textual subtleties. In view of this our procedure will be as follows: the presentation of cross-cultural analytic categories pertaining to power, a brief discussion of The Art of War and The Prince as exemplary texts, a comparison of these texts by way of our categories and the appropriate sub-categories, and finally a conclusion which discusses the cultural differences brought forth by the comparison.

The Language of Power

Although power is a complex phenomenon, I believe it is possible to distinguish four basic types: political-military, social, cultural, and moral. Moreover, these types are not isolated from each other, but are structurally interrelated by way of two constituent elements, these being associated with necessity and meaning. These elements are, in effect, spectra where necessity and its opposite, freedom, define one line, and meaningfulness and meaninglessness define another line. How would these elements constitute the four basic types of power listed above?

Political-military power is perhaps the most fundamental, in that one immediately identifies it with the power of compulsion. The one who wields such power acts with a sense of necessity. Politics considers tasks that must be consciously done for the good of the society or state. A major part of the business of politics is the formulation of laws, and law is essentially a human rule compelling obedience to its precepts. Another dimension of politics concerns the execution of the laws, and here the weight of necessity makes itself felt in the police and court system. The military enters the picture when the necessity pertains to the defense of the state or when state survival seems to require an attack on another state. Although political decision makers do have a certain freedom of choice in defining the necessity and determining how they are going to respond to it, the freedom is strictly limited by a sense of urgency. On the one hand, the situation is of a complexity that does not allow for imaginative or profound solutions. If getting to the root of the problem requires wandering in a labyrinth of unsolvable issues concerning the ultimate nature of human society, political actors must formulate their solutions on the basis of
what is possible now, and that often means compromising with
the system. On the other hand, political revolutionaries, who seek
to cut the ‘Gordian knot’ of complexity, experience two funda-
mental limitations to their freedom: one is that of their guiding
ideology; the other is that of the complex forces which have been
unleashed by revolutionary action and which require immediate
attention before any new principles can be instituted. In any case,
political and military power is experienced as a necessity by those
who are its direct objects: the citizens who must obey the laws or
those who must come in the path of the military force.

What of the other dimension—that of meaning? If meaning in
human terms is associated with the development of a full and rich
identity wherein the human potential is realized to the maximum
degree, the aforementioned necessities associated with political-
military power are hardly fertile ground for such exfoliation. Just
as we are all more or less the same with respect to the immediate
necessities pertaining to the maintenance of life, so too does the
law of the state tend to negate difference (with respect to the cit-
izen) and military life to impose (with respect to the soldier) a
necessary uniformity. The law must be the same for everyone if it
is to be obeyed, and traditional forms of privilege tend to be abol-
ished as political control is maximized. If soldiers are to be effi-
cient in the performance of their duties, individualistic elements
standing in the way of team functioning must be accordingly re-
duced. Perhaps the holders of power might maintain a greater
degree of individuality, but the need to focus their attention on
the ongoing emergence of immediate problems requiring imme-
diate and often inhumane solutions would seem to harden the
soul and render political actors deficient in the areas of imagina-
tion and human sympathy. Political-military power, then, can be
defined as the capacity of certain individuals or groups to manip-
ulate others in such a way that both manipulators and those who
are subject to them live in a world characterized by necessity rath-
er than freedom and by a dearth of meaning with respect to a
fully individualized human identity. In short, political-military
power may be associated with meaningless necessity.

The opposite type of power would be characterized by mean-
ingful freedom, and this to me would be the essence of moral
power. The individual possessed of great moral strength has a
profound sense of a deeper reality or truth which gives meaning to the more superficial aspects of life. Not only is there a profound sense of that reality, but the individual also sees himself or herself as having a specific place or function within the pattern which characterizes that deeper reality. When the truth of that pattern is felt rather than being merely thought in the manner of an intellectual construct, the individual possessed of the feeling is empowered to stand up to anything or anyone opposed to that truth. We are referring here to the freedom of Gandhi or Martin Luther King—a freedom based on a profound involvement with truth (i.e., a deeper sense of meaning which provides a solid foundation for moral action). As exemplars of moral power, Gandhi and King were chosen to illustrate two points. First, moral power is not some kind of phantom in comparison with political-military power. Gandhi and King effected real changes in their respective struggles and overcame opposition from the sphere of political-military power. Second, they did more than personally embody moral power, for they also managed to empower others by getting them to consider a realm of meaning beneath the immediacies associated with the realm of necessity. By being in touch with a pattern of deeper meaning, such individuals would gain not only a foundation for more courageous action, but would also develop new dimensions of their personalities. Nonetheless, the struggle between political-military and moral power is an open-ended one. Just as the former can expand the realm of necessity (e.g., artificial economic scarcity) and trivialize the view that there might be any deeper meaning to life, so must the latter constantly try to keep that sense of meaning alive so that individuals might have a foundation on which to base their quest for freedom.

Between the opposing poles of meaningless necessity and meaningful freedom, there are two important variations: meaningless freedom and meaningful necessity. The first of these can be identified with the social power, while the second can be identified with cultural power. To begin, we may ask how meaningless freedom is associated with social power. The individual is related to the group, not only by laws framed in a political context, but also by social custom which acts as a kind of integrative power. When that integrative power reaches a maximum, the individual would experience a kind of social solidarity where the individual's be-
Behavior is controlled by the group, although the individual does not experience this power as a limitation upon his or her freedom. Instead, the power of social solidarity is experienced as a kind of liberating freedom.

A good example of this can be found in Elias Canetti’s *Crowds And Power*, where the crowd becomes a kind of embodiment of this process. Within the crowd the individual finds a kind of freedom to do things that would otherwise be forbidden. Yet the cost of this freedom is a loss of individuality as long as the crowd is in existence. Remembering that individuality is linked closely with meaning, we can now understand the association between social power and ‘meaningless’ freedom. And while Canetti’s mob-like crowd might be an extreme example of the power of social solidarity as a means of regulating individual-group relations, the same dynamic might be identified in such influential theories as that of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, where living in harmony with the ‘General Will’ might afford freedom, but again at the cost of limiting the more ‘selfish’ aspects of individuality. In any case, in comparison with political-military and moral power, social power manipulates at a more unconscious level without there having to be an individual manipulator.

The focus of cultural power is more in the direction of group-to-group relations rather than individual-to-group, although the dynamics are still more unconscious than conscious. We are now in the realm of meaningful necessity because, when groups have to define themselves with respect to each other, an emphasis is placed on meaning and identity. Not surprisingly, that very meaning, which makes up the richness of a culture’s possibilities, becomes a kind of limitation on an individual’s freedom if the individual’s culture stands in the way of personal development or if another culture offers those possibilities but is perceived as inherently alien. When speaking of national cultures, relations of inferiority-superiority are apt to develop, and this can easily play into the hands of those operating in the sphere of political-military power. However, it is not so much between national cultures that freedom-limiting relations of domination are experienced. Within any society are large groups, each having cultural identities which give meaning at the same time as they impose artificial constraints and engender thereby a frightful necessity. The wealthy
have their culture, just as do the poor, but it is a situation breeding resentment, anxiety, and callousness. Worse yet is the culture of gender, where patriarchal identity structures have placed a terrible burden upon all women. Must the power of meaningful necessity be oppressive? Not if the meanings associated with culture are seen as part of a larger whole or pattern (rather than being exclusivist). And that takes us back to moral power, which at its deepest levels transcends cultural barriers and has an ecumenical message.

It goes without saying that these four types of power closely interact in any human situation. However, we can be more sensitive to such interaction because we have identified these four interrelated elements of power. Indeed, the very interrelation has been cast in terms that are culturally neutral, for the oppositions of freedom and necessity as well as of meaningfulness and meaninglessness are of sufficient generality to be applicable to different cultures. With respect to Sun Tzu and Machiavelli, our emphasis will be on the relation between political-military and moral power, not because the social and cultural types of power are unimportant, but because their exemplary texts on the subject of power are primarily concerned with war, statecraft, and the moral questions associated therewith.

The Exemplary Quality Of The Two Texts

*The Art of War* and *The Prince* are exemplary in terms of their influence. With respect to the Sun Tzu text that influence is manifest, not only in the extensive commentary which has developed around it throughout the course of Chinese history, but also in the use made of *The Art Of War* by such figures as Mao Tse-Tung. The *Prince* has also been the center of controversy and commentary in the West; and, as Robert M. Adams has suggested, the world has become so ‘Machiavellianized’ that texts such as *The Prince* have actually lost influence because their precepts have become taken for granted. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to recount the influence of these texts in any detail, but I think it is fair to say that their influence is such that they have become a kind of myth in their respective civilizations. By ‘myth’ I mean a source of meaning that articulates the fundamental assumptions of the civilization wherein the text appears.
Of course, the articulation does not touch on all the fundamental assumptions, but primarily on those pertaining to what might be called 'political-military realism' in the use of power. And even though Machiavelli's statement appears relatively late in the course of Western civilization compared to Sun Tzu's relatively early appearance in the course of Chinese civilization, *The Prince* is hardly the first voice of such realism. The Melian dialogue in Thucydides' *History Of The Peloponnesian War* is an obvious example. Thus, the texts are exemplary because they are powerful statements of a perennial theme (i.e., that of political-military realism) in each civilization.

At this point one might ask why these texts are the best embodiments of the perennial theme for our comparative purposes. Did not Machiavelli write his own *The Art Of War*, apart from *The Discourses*? What of the book of *Han Fei Tzu* with its instructions for rulers to apply, in the most inflexible way possible, the precepts of a punitive law so that absolute control might be maintained over the people? With respect to the Machiavellian texts, there is much overlap. Moreover, our objects of comparison are not so much Machiavelli and Sun Tzu, but texts that have captured the imagination by their ability to inspire commentary and debate, and those are *The Prince* and (Sun Tzu's) *The Art Of War*. As for the *Han Fei Tzu* text, its emphasis on manipulation of the population has a Machiavellian bent, but its response to radical change is quite un-Machiavellian. In times of crisis, control must be re-established by a harsh and inflexible law, and that goes against the Machiavellian image of the princely figure using more subtle and varied forms of manipulation to attain his ends.

In the final analysis, what makes these two texts exemplary from the point of view of comparison is that they are both embodiments of power's response to the crisis of radical change. The political manifestation of that crisis is endemic warfare for both Sun Tzu and Machiavelli, but in their respective texts both go beyond the question of tactics and consider how what we have termed 'moral power' figures in this kind of situation. Radical change is not just the change of regime in the context of warfare. It is the change from one epoch to another, and that means a shift in the fundamental assumptions of the civilization in question. It is in *The Prince* that Machiavelli captures the mood of this shift for Western Civilization; and while Sun Tzu’s text appears to be less conscious of
such epochal transition, its historical context and recommendations bear witness to a comparable shift in the Chinese context.

It is unclear whether or not Sun Tzu ever lived, but his text can be dated at approximately 400-320 B.C. This was in the midst of the Warring States period (481-221 B.C.), when the Chou dynasty was in decay, various kingdoms struggled for predominance, and improved weapons (including the crossbow) made warfare more deadly than it had been previously. According to Samuel Griffith, when Sun Tzu appeared on the scene "the feudal structure . . . was being replaced by an entirely different type of society in which there was much more opportunity for the talented individual." A strong expansion of the mercantile element and an attendant increase in wealth must have added to the disruption of traditional ways, but it should be noted that this explosive period saw the formation of the Chinese cultural identity since Confucius (551-479 B.C.), Lao Tzu (5th Century B.C.?), Mo Tzu (468-376 B.C.), and Mencius (386-312 B.C.) were, among others, contributing to the dissolution of the old cultural identity and the formation of the new.

The parallel with Machiavelli's world is striking. The Prince, written in 1513 and first published in 1532, appeared in the midst of a Renaissance ferment that saw the decline of an archaic Christendom centered on the Papacy and the rise of new centralized monarchies. Italy, a kind of microcosm of the European scene, had its own set of 'Warring States': Venice, Milan, the States of the Church, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and, of course, Machiavelli's own Florence. The larger European monarchies (France and Spain, in particular) upset the delicate balance of power and ravaged the Italian peninsula in a series of wars that acted as a backdrop for Machiavelli's crisis. Through this political, economic, technological (e.g., printing), and aesthetic upheaval called the Renaissance, not only could men of talent rise to the top by way of their skill (as was the case in the China of the Warring States), but one might argue that Europe's secular identity was forged in the process.

As must be obvious, our exemplary texts were not the only ones to respond to the crisis of epochal change or transition. However, in terms of the problem of power in this kind of situation, they remain classic responses. With this background in mind, let us turn to the comparison itself.
Textual Comparison

With respect to 'political-military' power, which we have defined as 'meaningless necessity', the two texts display the greatest similarities. However, it is with respect to moral power—the realm of meaningful freedom—that the two texts and, by implication perhaps, the two civilizations differ the most. The similarities can be seen most clearly with respect to a general pragmatism, where moral questions have little or no role to play. For example, both texts disapprove of protracted war, especially those involving sieges of heavily defended urban centers. *The Prince* asserts that sieges are dangerous because too many things are changing and a long-term commitment of troops to such an enterprise puts the attacker in a dangerous position.14 *The Art Of War* notes that a long war will ultimately impoverish a country and that attacking a city should only be attempted when there is no other alternative.15 In terms of alliances, *The Prince* claims that the strongest state is one that can stand without help from allies,16 and at least one commentary which has worked its way into the text of *The Art Of War* says the same.17 However, when alliances are to be made, Sun Tzu talks about not contending with powerful combinations and not fostering the power of other states.18 In a more long-winded way, Machiavelli makes the same argument.19 Finally, with respect to knowing the land, both texts are clear on the importance of having an intimate familiarity with the terrain on which war takes place.20 Most of this seems like common sense—a rational response to the necessities of the situation. The tasks involved might be difficult, but they do not provide a milieu for individual identity or meaning to flourish. Hence, in the realm of meaningless necessity the two texts manifest a basic similarity.21

Once we enter the sphere of moral power, however, the differences between the two texts become quite notable. From the beginning it is apparent that moral power plays a crucial role in *The Art Of War*. Indeed, moral influence is the first of the fundamental factors, of which account must be taken, when appraising the power of the state to wage war:

By moral influence I mean that which causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders, so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear of moral peril.22
Just beneath this passage, the commentator Chang Yü writes that "When one treats people with benevolence, justice, and righteousness, and reposes confidence in them, the army will be united in mind and all will be happy to serve their leaders." In the fourth factor, which is command, Sun Tzu lists the general’s qualities, which are wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, and strictness; and the commentator Tu Mu writes that, if the general is humane, "he loves mankind, sympathizes with others, and appreciates their industry and toil." Further on Sun Tzu asserts that "those skilled in war cultivate the Tao and preserve the laws and are therefore able to formulate victorious policies." Tu Mu’s comment is as follows:

The Tao is the way of humanity and justice; ‘laws’ are regulations and institutions. Those who excel in war first cultivate their own humanity and justice and maintain their laws and institutions. By these means they make their governments invincible.

If war is undertaken, not only must the adequacy of the ruler’s benevolence be considered, the ruler’s responsibility for laws and orders devolves upon the general once the border has been crossed. Throughout The Art Of War an emphasis is placed on the separation of the general’s authority from that of the sovereign. Both must be possessed of a moral power, but in what appear to be complementary ways. Whereas the sovereign must provide a stable foundation for action (i.e., a people with confidence in their leaders), the general must direct that action in extraordinary ways to safeguard the state. Before we can link this moral power to our category of meaningful freedom, it is important to consider its counterpart in The Prince. With respect to moral questions, Machiavelli is well aware of the difference between right and wrong. His goal is to write something of practical value:

A great many men have imagined states and princedoms such as nobody ever saw or knew in the real world, for there’s such a difference between the way we really live and the way we ought to live that the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin, not his salvation. Any man who tries to be good all the time is bound to come to ruin among the great number who are not good. Hence a prince who wants to keep his post must learn how not to be good, and use that knowledge, or refrain from using it, as necessity requires.
The conclusion to be drawn from this is that moral power is not effective in the real world. Perhaps moral power exists with respect to ecclesiastical states since they "are sustained by ancient principles of religion, which are so powerful and of such authority that they keep their princes in power whatever they do, however they live." Because these "safe and happy governments" are ruled by a "heavenly providence" beyond the reach of reason, one cannot even talk of them. Thus, if moral power is effective in the world, it is not subject to rational analysis and cannot be brought to bear in practical situations.

With moral power relegated to the realms of idealism or mystery, cruelty, which is in itself clearly immoral, becomes a rational instrument of policy. In other words, immorality becomes an expression of 'political-military' power, especially when the ruler's immoral actions can prevent greater evils:

Thus, no prince should mind being called cruel for what he does to keep his subjects united and loyal; he may make examples of a very few, but he will be more merciful in reality than those who, in their tender-heartedness, allow disorders to occur, with their attendant murders and lootings.

If possible, the prince should avoid vices that will not lose him his state; but if they are unavoidable for the preservation of his state, the prince should not worry about indulging them. Machiavelli seems to respect those who have risen to power by way of a ruthless courage even if that courage involves savage behavior. Rather than condemning such individuals for their immoral acts, Machiavelli merely says they have failed to win true glory and cannot consequently be placed among the ranks of truly excellent men. Apart from the judicious use of cruelty, the prince's best defence is the good will of the people—something which can be obtained by not being hated or despised and by building a reputation based on appearance ("because the masses are always impressed by the superficial appearance of things ... [A]nd the world consists of nothing but masses ...").

One of the results of this negation of moral power has particular relevance to *The Art Of War*, and that is the relation of the sovereign to the general. We have seen that, in Sun Tzu's text, these two roles are separated, and that the moral power of the sovereign (i.e., his benevolence) is the basis for the more active moral
power of the general. In *The Prince* the ruler should have "no other object, no other thought, no other subject of study, than war, its rules and disciplines...". In effect, the ruler is or should be the general; and from what we have seen it is the attitude of the general that takes precedence over that of the ruler, in that life in the state is as much a war as is the struggle between states. Yet the two roles are bound to coalesce to the advantage of the general if moral power is absent.

Let us recall that our definition of moral power was that of meaningful freedom, where meaningfulness was associated with a deeper level of reality and freedom with an absence of urgency and compulsion. If these two elements are absent from the world of the sovereign (as indeed they are in the world of Machiavelli's prince), then he will begin to function as military leader responding only to the most immediate realities with a sense of urgency and compulsion rather than freedom. In the Chinese context, however, the situation is quite different. For the sovereign by definition represents and mediates this deeper reality (sometimes called 'Heaven' and at other times the *Tao*)—a reality which expresses the complex spatio-temporal links between all things. Thus, for *The Art Of War* to insist that the sovereign remain outside of or relatively separate from the world of the more superficial immediacies of the moment serves a double function: on the one hand, the separation allows the moral sphere its own locus of operations so that it will not get accidentally absorbed into the world of superficial and pressing immediacies; on the other hand, the separation preserves for the general a source of power that will ultimately make him more effective than the prince, who in Machiavellian fashion tries to draw his strength exclusively from the political-military sphere.

If we have just suggested that this moral power is oriented toward greater meaningfulness and thus involves a sensitivity to the deeper links underlying all things, we can easily imagine a human sympathy being associated with this stance. (After all, some of these links must be human links, and a sensitivity to them is likely to engender sympathy, compassion, or even love). The problem is to grasp how this power can make the general more effective in a world where one would think the very absence of moral sensitivity would be an asset. Yet Sun Tzu maintains this moral power for the very good reason that it ultimately expands the realm of freedom,
whereas without this moral power the freedom of Machiavelli’s prince is accordingly reduced. To put it another way, while The Prince admits that in the long run the most vigorous political actor will fail to adapt to changing circumstances, The Art Of War seems to place no such limitation on the most effective general.

To understand this let us note that Machiavelli tends to focus either on luck or on virtù as the chief means of attaining power. The former is self-explanatory, and the latter can be associated with a combination of shrewdness, strength, and courage. A wise prince can and should look ahead to problems looming on the horizon; but in the long run he is doomed to failure because, while times may change, human personalities are afflicted by a radical conservatism:

No man, however prudent, can adjust to such radical changes, not only because we cannot go against the inclination of nature, but also because when one has always prospered by following a particular course, he cannot be persuaded to leave it.

Machiavelli concludes that it is better to be rash than timid because Fortune is a woman who tends to yield to those who come forward boldly and brutally. She is also a friend of the young because they are less timid and take charge of her more recklessly. Nonetheless, the ultimate implication is that, as the young become old and set in their ways, Fortune will abandon them and they will pay for their rape with a fatal castration.

It is quite otherwise with Sun Tzu’s successful general. Indeed, we seem to be in a whole new world of power about which the Machiavellian prince could only dream. For example, with respect to offensive strategy, Sun Tzu writes that “those skilled in war subdue the enemy’s army without battle.” He goes on to say that these skilled war-makers capture cities without assaulting them and overthrow the enemy state without protracted operations. Generally, one uses what is called a normal force (cheng) to engage the enemy, but at other times an extraordinary force (ch’i) is used to attain victory. Moreover, “the resources of those skilled in the use of extraordinary force are as infinite as the heavens and earth…” But how does a successful general create victory (p. 100) or assume a position in which he cannot be defeated (p. 87)? The answer is foreknowledge, but this does not come from spirits, gods,
analogy with the past, or facile calculations. It can only come from those men who know the enemy situation. Once that knowledge is in hand, one can directly attack the enemy's strategy by the employment of deception. However, the key is still gaining the knowledge, and that means the utilization of spies and agents provocateurs. Because the danger of double agents is always present, Sun Tzu gives the following advice:

He who is not sage and wise, humane and just, cannot use secret agents. And he who is not delicate and subtle cannot get the truth out of them.

In an earlier section Sun Tzu concludes that, if one knows one's enemy and oneself, victory will never be endangered; and, if one knows the ground and weather as well, the victory will be total.

What we have then in *The Art Of War* is a freedom of action that is infinite in its potential, whereas that employed in *The Prince* is ultimately limited by the seductive wiles of Fortune. And it is in the last section of *The Art Of War* that we can see that this power is not some impractical dream, but a moral power which is ultimately more efficacious than one which is only based on mastering the necessities of the moment in a ruthless way. The reason that one must be humane and just (i.e., moral) to get the requisite foreknowledge from one's spies is that moral power entails getting in touch with a deeper reality whereby one can see the interconnections among all things. And it is only this kind of sympathetic vision which will allow one to distinguish truth from falsehood in the reports of one's agents. By contrast, it is difficult to imagine the Machiavellian prince being able to utilize such intelligence, for that figure is so burdened with a general cynicism that it would be impossible for him to make valid distinctions in the night where all souls are black. Indeed, spying is not one of the weapons in the arsenal of Machiavelli's prince.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, the basic difference elicited from a comparison of these exemplary texts is that pertaining to moral power. Whereas such power is absent, irrelevant, or unintelligible from the point of view of *The Prince*, it has a crucial role to play in *The Art Of War*. 

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol27/iss27/3
From the point of view of our categories of analysis, to be in touch with a deeper level of reality entails, not only experiencing a greater sense of meaningfulness, but also having the opportunity for more freedom of action. In other words, moral power can be associated with a greater sensitivity to the rhythms of change than can political-military power, which is more caught up with the necessities of the moment. Without that sensitivity, the freedom of the Machiavellian prince is accordingly limited because of the inevitable failure attendant upon an inability to adapt to the times.

What do these texts tell us about their respective civilizations? At one level there is the obvious point that Chinese civilization is more creative and hopeful with respect to the problem of adaptation to temporal rhythms than is the case in the West. This is obvious because the concept of the Tao is perhaps the central philosophical idea of Chinese civilization. In this connection Amaury de Riencourt makes the following points:

Every effort of the conscious Chinese is directed toward following the rhythm of nature, toward following his Tao. This Tao is the path which every Chinese must follow in life if he is to be successful—that is, harmoniously adapted to nature's inner rhythm.*

Deeper reality in the West is often associated with timelessness (e.g., Platonic forms) or with what might be called 'temporal singularities' (e.g., God's Creation, Incarnation, etc.). With such a heritage, how can Western Civilization learn to adapt in an effective way to temporal rhythms? Is not the Western sense of time associated with arbitrariness and fickleness—qualities personified in the seductive, and ultimately fatal, Lady Fortuna?

However, at another level the two texts illustrate a deeper problem concerning the relation between theory and practice in each civilization. On the one hand, in The Art Of War, the deployment of moral power promises much—indeed, everything and anything—but it is extremely difficult to put this theory of power into practice. On the other hand, in The Prince, the deployment of political-military power promises relatively less, but it appears relatively easy to put this theory into practice. True, not everyone has the courage, determination, and skill to be the prince. But there is a temptingly mechanistic quality to Machiavelli's model of political action because it does not require participation in a deeper level of reality as does Sun Tzu's model.
This leads us to the conclusion that with respect to the theme of power there is greater tension between theory and practice in Chinese civilization than in the West. And that lesser degree of tension in the West has probably been instrumental in allowing or even encouraging that civilization to subject the external environment to a greater degree of control. The cost, of course, has been a general sense of meaninglessness, a sense that our sphere of action in the world lacks a moral dimension. How many in the West are even aware of the existence of such a thing as moral power? To how many is moral power either an irrelevancy or an irrational mystery? Many, like Machiavelli, might believe moral power to be real; but, if it cannot be brought into some kind of relation with political-military power, the latter will ultimately become a force of destruction. And it is just such a destruction which we are now facing in our technologically inspired environmental crisis.

Turning to Chinese civilization, the greater difficulty in putting into practice a more profound theory of action has led to a lesser degree of control over the external world as well as a tendency for that civilization to veer between a Confucian moralism (meant to civilize on an individual or inter-personal basis) and a Legalist necessitarianism (meant to control at the level of the state by making a rigidly enforced law the embodiment of an artificial necessity). One might suggest that if there could be a balance of integration between these two tendencies, Sun Tzu's principles might be more readily put into practice.

At least the principle of moral power is articulated in The Art Of War, and this is something from which both civilizations can learn. Indeed, the text opens with a kind of parable that suggests how that learning might take place. Moreover, the episode is particularly apt because it relates well to the prince's fatal encounter with Fortuna.

The Art Of War begins with Sun Tzu himself playing the central role. Having secured an audience with Ho-Lü, King of Wu, Sun Tzu is asked by the King whether he (i.e., Sun) can conduct an experiment in the controlling of troop movements using the King's concubines. Sun Tzu agrees to do this, and, after forming the women into two companies each under one of the King's favorite concubines, he patiently explains some simple instructions. How-
ever, after giving the order, the women just break out into gales of laughter. After repeating his instructions and getting the same result, Sun Tzu orders that the two favorites be beheaded, much to the consternation of Ho-Lū, who accordingly communicates his desire that they not be executed because without them 'his food would not taste sweet.' To the King's request Sun Tzu defiantly replies that the commander, having already received his appointment, need not accept all of the sovereign's orders. Thus, the execution takes place, and the rest of the women follow the orders without hesitation. However, when the King is too mortified to inspect his 'troops' upon Sun Tzu's request, Sun Tzu chastises him by saying that the King likes only empty words and is not capable of putting them into practice. At that point the King becomes aware of Sun Tzu's merit and ultimately appoints him as general to the benefit of the Kingdom.

The meaning of his evocative parable is quite clear. The women represent the temptation of the moment, without which the monarch's food would not be sweet. It is only by giving up that temptation that the monarch assumes his proper function of taking the long view, which, by putting him in touch with a deeper reality, contributes to his ability to embody a moral power. The giving up is not easy. But the stakes are high. Machiavelli's prince cannot give up the temptation of his concubine, Fortuna, and this leads only to a short-term adaptation to the times. There seems to be no real possibility of a long-term adaptation. However, if we become aware of our temptation to go for the short term or even for the narrow perspective, we have a chance of transcending the fatalism which seems to afflict our civilization. It is hoped that ongoing work in the comparative study of civilizations might contribute to our assuming the deeper vision that lies at the heart of moral power.

The University of Calgary

NOTES


9. Bernard Crick, in his introduction to *The Discourses*, suggests that, whereas *The Prince* focusses on a personal kind of power associated with principalities, the emphasis of *The Discourses* is on rule in a republican context. (p. 19) On that basis *The Prince* is a more apt text for comparison with non-republican China. There is a technical quality to Machiavelli’s *The Art Of War* that shifts its emphasis away from questions pertaining to the relationship between sovereign and military authority—questions which are crucial for understanding how political-military and moral power interact and which are featured in Sun Tzu’s *The Art Of War*.

10. Dennis and Ching Ping Bloodworth write in *The Chinese Machiavelli* (p. 314) that Machiavelli differs with Han Fei Tzu on many questions for he (Machiavelli) “... argues for clemency against cruelty, republic against principality, man against matter, and he does not treat the people as expendable straw dogs whose nonexistent souls may be manipulated by the next Legalist Pavlov in line.”
11. This is the view of Samuel B. Griffith in his introduction to The Art Of War (p. 11).
13. Ibid., p. 23.
15. Sun Tzu, The Art Of War, pp. 73-74, 78.
17. Sun Tzu, The Art Of War, p. 139.
18. Ibid., p. 138.
21. Another such similarity occurs with respect to Machiavelli's The Art Of War. On p. 129 he talks about a technique of getting soldiers to fight—a technique which is exactly the same as one utilized by Sun Tzu (p. 135). If soldiers are placed in such a situation that they must conquer or die, a high level of performance may be expected of them. Clearly, a basic necessity is being imposed on them—that associated with fighting to live. In such desperate straits all would be reduced to a common animal will to live, and such commonality is the exact antithesis of individualized meaning. This is perhaps a more striking example of meaningless necessity.
22. Sun Tzu, The Art Of War, p. 64.
23. Ibid., p. 65.
24. Ibid., p. 88.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., pp. 63-64.
27. Ibid., pp. 81, 112, 142.
28. Machiavelli, The Prince, p. 44.
29. Ibid., p. 33.
30. Ibid., p. 47.
31. Ibid., p. 45.
33. Ibid., p. 51.
34. Ibid., p. 42.
35. Neal Wood makes this point in his introduction to Machiavelli's The Art Of War, pp. liii-lvii.
37. Ibid., pp. 8-9.
38. Ibid., p. 71.
39. Ibid., p. 72.
40. Sun Tzu, The Art Of War, p. 79.
41. Ibid., p. 91.
42. Ibid., p. 145.
43. Ibid., pp. 77, 66, 106.
44. Ibid., p. 148.
45. Ibid., p. 129.

47. Communism in China has certain affinities with Legalism. On this point see Dennis and Ching Ping Bloodworth, *The Chinese Machiavelli*, p. 82.