

The Art of War & The Book of Five Rings – Lessons from the Masters

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'Books are the legacy that a great genius leaves to mankind, which are delivered down from generation to generation as presents to the posterity of those who are as yet unborn'. *Joseph Addison (1672-1719)*

Whenever strategists sit down and talk, the two names that are always brought up are Sun Tsu's 'The Art of War' and Musashi Miyamoto's 'The Book of Five Rings'. Despite the fact that one was written two thousand five hundred years ago concerning the strategies of the warring kingdoms of China, and the other concerned the personal tactics required to defeat a swordsman in individual combat in 16th century Japan, there is no question that the problems they dealt with and the solutions that they developed have a resonance with warriors today, whether the enemies they are facing are in the military, political or commercial worlds.

Written in the 6th Century BCE, The Art Of War is as much a treatise on social justice and how to rule a kingdom as how to defeat enemies. It talks of how the support of the population is required in order for the military to work to its full effectiveness, and that the basis of a strong kingdom is a strong ruler, able to reward righteousness as well as punish wickedness. It was written in an age when the role of the king was to defend the borders, either through negotiation or war, where weakness was seen as an invitation to invade, and where strength was shown by either showing that you could not be defeated or in turn expanding through conquest into neighbouring states. Sun Tsu described how armies could move, maintain their provisions along the way, ensure adequate lines of supply, and allow the generals responsible for victory to be able to make their own decisions concerning their own fate as well as that of the armies that they commanded. It gives detailed instructions on how to maximise your own strengths and to minimise any advantage that the enemy might have.

Musashi, by contrast, concentrated on the tactics of individual combat. Much more concerned with the lie of the land, the direction of the sunlight, whether to move in or evade, Musashi honed his art, or so the stories say, by engaging freely in sword combat, where the rules were unclear and the only possibility was victory.

Breaking his book into five distinct chapters – Earth, Water, Fire and Wind, as well as 'The Scroll of Emptiness' - at its heart The Book of Five Rings sets out the two qualities of the successful warrior, namely to maintain tranquillity in the midst of battle, and to maintain readiness in the midst of peace.

Musashi wrote the book aged sixty, forty-seven years after he first killed an opponent (aged thirteen) in individual combat. In it, Musashi describes a series of challenges, during which he often gained a level of realisation that only comes about when facing your own imminent death. As much a description of a spiritual journey as a military one, Musashi defines a code of living that has an attractiveness for many people today.

In the 1980's, a whole cult of Musashi broke out, mainly (no surprise there, then!) in the United States. Suddenly, there were a whole series of books, articles and presentations being written tying in the Book of Five Rings with modern management, international trade, personal safety and family discipline. It seemed that every banker in New York was suddenly a disciple of Musashi. Although on one level it was just another passing fashion, there is no question that Musashi does in fact offer genuine truths (based as they are on universal principles) that can allow people to see the relationship between themselves and the society around them in another light.

For many people in combat positions today it would reap great benefit if they were to read, or re-read, these two books. Because they talk about universal truths of combat, they are not dependent on historical time or cultural situations, and therefore they are just as true today, and equally relevant, as when they were first written. Anyone faced with desert warfare, far from home, and in a territory where the local population is undecided and potentially unfriendly, will find immediate parallels with their Chinese counterparts two and a half thousand years ago. Anyone who has moved down a street, fearful of sniper or rocket attack, whether in Northern Ireland, Kosovo or Basra, will immediately recognise the strategies described by Musashi for use when moving through unknown territory, as will anyone who is faced by three drunken youths outside a pub.

Both books have been widely studied by strategists and soldiers over many centuries, and many of their ideas have entered common consciousness. It was Sun Tsu who stated 'Failing to know either yourself or your enemy, you will fail one hundred times in one hundred battles, know yourself but not your enemy, and you will find victory fifty times and defeat fifty times, but if you know both yourself and your enemy, you will remain undefeated for all time'. He was also the person who wrote 'The true art of

winning is not to gain victory through force of arms, but rather by avoiding the battle altogether'. Any fan of Bruce Lee will recognise the famous scene where he claims to be a student of 'winning through not fighting'.

In the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe horse race held on the 1st of October in France this year, the outstanding favourite was Deep Impact, a Japanese super-horse that had won ten out of its last eleven races. When asked whether the horse was ready, Deep Impact's trainer, Yasuo Ikee, could only find one person great enough to be able to give an idea of how good the horse was.

As the Guardian of 30/09/06 put it 'Yasuo Ikee, though, draws on a more traditional analogy as he prepares for what he believes is "the greatest race anywhere in the world". "I compare my feelings about him now to those of Miyamoto Musashi, one of the greatest Japanese swordsmen, who lived in the 17th century," he said this week. "We don't need to sharpen this great sword any more. I just put it back in the sheath and wait for the race day so that he will be able to run the race of his life."

Tactics go in and out of fashion, but strategy remains the same. If the Chinese generals twenty-five hundred years ago were facing the problems of controlling, though increasing oppression, hostile states that they had expected to offer them safe sanctuary, then any officer in Iraq or Afghanistan will be sharing those same thoughts on a daily basis. If Miyamoto Musashi was facing death as he confronted armed assailants in the hills of feudal Japan, then for the urban dwellers of the 21st century his lessons are as valid now as they were in the sixteenth century.

Great books survive because they are as true for each new generation as they were for the last. Take my advice – read these books!

From 'The Book of Five Rings'

You win battles by knowing the enemy's timing, and using a timing which the enemy does not expect."

Study strategy over the years and achieve the spirit of the warrior. Today is victory over yourself of yesterday; tomorrow is your victory over lesser men."

Perceive that which cannot be seen with the eye

From 'The Art of War'

When you engage in actual fighting, if victory is long in coming, then men's weapons will grow dull and their ardor will be damped. If you lay siege to a town, you will exhaust your strength.

Again, if the campaign is protracted, the resources of the State will not be equal to the strain.

Now, when your weapons are dulled, your ardor damped, your strength exhausted and your treasure spent, other chieftains will spring up to take advantage of your extremity. Then no man, however wise, will be able to avert the consequences that must ensue.

Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays.

To begin by bluster, but afterwards to take fright at the enemy's numbers, shows a supreme lack of intelligence.

