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The idea of genius in Clausewitz and Sun Tzu

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ABSTRACT

In mutual comparison, both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu have been critiqued for their individual notions of genius and of promises of victory, respectively. Yet both critiques are beside the point, as they misunderstand both Clausewitz's intellectual environment and the cultural milieu of ancient China in which Sun Tzu wrote. This article first provides an overview of Clausewitz's idea of genius, particularly within the context of Enlightenment theories of war, before discussing the traditional supernatural conception of genius in ancient China, into which Sun Tzu's work fits. The two concepts are then compared step-by-step through the process of strategic performance.

Ostensibly representative of the Western and Eastern strategic traditions, Carl von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu are often compared as the preeminent authors on war and strategy. Of the two, Clausewitz has enabled a much larger modern cottage industry of commentary in strategic studies, whereas in the West, Sun Tzu has been adopted most prominently by business strategists seeking to mine ancient wisdom for commercial success. Each is praised widely for his work, but each is also criticized, sometimes unfairly. This article will focus on two criticisms, one each concerning Clausewitz and Sun Tzu.

In the context of comparisons with Sun Tzu, Clausewitz has been criticized for his much-discussed notion of genius. Derek Yuen has suggested that Sun Tzu's use of contradictory pairs (e.g., friend-ally, weak-strong, etc.) provides a method of analysis in war which “contrasts greatly with Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil* (or intuition) of the military genius, or his concept of genius as a whole,” which Yuen considers a “super-concept” that “has largely remained an intellectual black box throughout [Clausewitz's] work.”¹ Yet this comparison is beside the point and misunderstands the full role of genius in Clausewitz's understanding of war.

Sun Tzu, on the other hand, has commonly been criticized for providing a “cookbook” of strategic tips, a how-to guide not just for winning in war but for winning easily and with style. If his prescriptions are followed, Sun Tzu *guarantees* victory. “If a general follows my [methods for] estimation and you employ him, he will certainly be victorious and should be retained. If a general does not follow my [methods for] estimation and you employ him, he will certainly be defeated, so dismiss him.”² That is, Sun Tzu effectively teaches genius and imparts it to the reader. This leads to the inevitable “gotcha!” moment, when critics inquire what happens when two Sun Tzu-educated strategists confront one another. Sun Tzu cannot guarantee victory to both. This criticism and question, like that concerning Clausewitz, is also beside the point. Sun Tzu's writing evolved and his strategic text existed in a roughly 550–500 BC Chinese cultural climate sufficiently dissimilar to our own that the criticism and question actually make no sense.

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This article works through both criticisms, respectively, of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. It does so first by discussing Clausewitz's notion of genius, followed by the ancient Chinese tradition of genius in which Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* must be placed. Thereafter, the two concepts of genius are compared in terms of their actual dynamics and how they are meant to "work." The article concludes by reflecting on the influence of Clausewitz's and Sun Tzu's notions of genius on the strategic traditions which followed them.

Genius in Clausewitz's *On War*

Clausewitz's idea of genius has been much discussed and its importance highly rated by numerous scholars, including Peter Paret, who described it as lying "near the source of [Clausewitz's] entire theoretical effort."³ Despite this importance, Clausewitz's treatment of genius appears occasionally contradictory: at times he seems to privilege genius's ability to wipe away old rules of strategy, whereas at other times he equates it merely with sheer strategic virtuosity. He never explicitly reconciled this difference. An overview of Clausewitz's idea of genius is provided, from its role within his theory to the sources and characteristics of genius, to its relationship with "the rules" of warfare, to the limits of genius.

Clausewitz's idea of genius was one aspect of his overall response to the overly scientific strategic theories which dominated military thought during the Enlightenment, with which Clausewitz vociferously disagreed. The Englishman Henry Lloyd (1729–1869), for example, divided his military theory into two branches: one of which was scientific, mechanical, and could be taught, and the other which was the realm of genius and therefore unexplainable by any rule, study, or experience. The German Heinrich von Bülow (1757–1807) sought to subordinate strategy to geometry, a logic based upon the increasing logistical support armies of his day required, which also excised the human dimension from warfare.⁴ While opposing the overemphasis on the scientific, Clausewitz simultaneously sought to moderate the excesses of German Romanticism as it was applied to strategy, which glorified and mythologized genius beyond measure: "Everything was a matter of individual genius that could be neither imitated nor analyzed. The appearance of a Frederick or of a Bonaparte was as unpredictable as that of a Shakespeare or a Mozart; they were exceptional, paranormal phenomena, and to seek for the secret of their success was a waste of time." Genius was a Romantic concept, but Clausewitz hoped to strip it "of the myths that had accumulated around it."⁵

Within Clausewitz's theory of war, genius occupied a special place because it was the concept which Clausewitz introduced as the antithesis to what he described as the climate of war—the classic juxtaposition of, and contest between, the individual and his environment. The climate of war is comprised of four main features: danger, physical effort, uncertainty, and miscellaneous sources of friction.⁶ Besides these elements, there is also the tactically and strategically independent and proactive enemy to consider. Although many strategists have historically proved capable of overcoming such adversity and adversariness—people have waged wars for at least the past 3,000 years—geniuses represent those who were most skilled, and often among the most original, at doing so.

The climate of war poses an existential danger to its participants: it threatens both the body and the soul, it endangers the physical as well as the moral. Genius, as Clausewitz's response to the climate of war, is similarly holistic:

Clausewitz does not start by focusing on a single competence, for example a specific area of military expertise. His starting point is the *whole* person. The genius for war comprises all aspects of personality, rational as well as emotional. There are no parts of a person which do not contribute to the military genius.⁷

Thus, in his chapter on military genius, Clausewitz discusses not only the well-known concept of the *coup d'oeil*, the imaginative inner eye which can pierce through the fog of war and allow the commander to understand the situation at a glance. He also discusses personal characteristics

such as boldness, determination, resolution, and the degrees to which such features, or their negative opposites, may contribute to or detract from genius. Clausewitz emphasized that for genius to occur, the mixture of qualities in the commander must be mutually constructive:

We have said in combination, since it is precisely the essence of military genius that it does not consist in a single appropriate gift—courage, for example—while other qualities of mind or temperament are wanting or are not suited to war. Genius consists in a harmonious combination of elements, in which one or the other ability may predominate, but none may be in conflict with the rest.⁸

The result of such a harmonious combination is that, as Clausewitz wrote, by definition “*talent and genius operate outside the rules*”; genius “*rises above all rules*.”⁹ Yet, this swiftly becomes problematic:

If genius rises above the rules, then that means the rules conflict with reality. If the rules proposed by a particular theory conflict with reality, then that theory is, as Clausewitz says, bad theory, unreliable, “shabby wisdom” [*dürftiger Weisheit*]. And if genius rises above *all* rules, then there can be no true theory, and without theory, there can be no good historical analysis, no criticism, not even any way to make rational decisions or to justify them in a council of war.¹⁰

The pertinent question becomes: What *are* the rules? The rules to which Clausewitz referred were the prescriptive rules which dominated the strategic theories written by men such as Lloyd and von Bülow, who ignored genius and other unquantifiable moral forces in favor of rigid, even mathematical, rules of action, with whose operation they identified strategic success. Genius is therefore not only Clausewitz’s in-theory counterpoint to the climate of war, but is also a repudiation of the “shabby wisdom” of theorists such as Lloyd and von Bülow.

Thus, genius is at first a destructive force as it sweeps away such mathematical rules for strategy, which appeared inapt after Europe’s long and bloody experience of a genius at war, Napoleon. Yet after destruction, the role of genius becomes creative. As Clausewitz vividly wrote,

Pity the soldier who is supposed to crawl among these scraps of rules, not good enough for genius, which genius can ignore, or laugh at. No; what genius does is the best rule, and theory can do no better than show how and why this should be the case.¹¹

The ability to operate beyond the established tactical and strategic conventions of the day, to crush them, and therefore to enable others to redefine them showcases the originality required of genius. Clausewitz

saw genius as an innate talent that established the rules, methods, and models for art, whether music, painting, sculpture, or military art. Genius was more than the proverbial soldier marching to a different beat. The rules genius established had to prove effective on a consistent basis, which would in turn lead others to emulate them. Otherwise, as Clausewitz acknowledged, we might mistake a lucky fool for a genius.¹²

The experience and performance of consistent genius, rather than of lucky fools, becomes the basis for subsequent new theoretical reflection on war and strategy, which leads in turn to the creation of new rules of practice.

Yet Clausewitz recognized, by the end if not early on, that genius had limits and could even fail. Clausewitz himself witnessed the failure of genius firsthand, albeit from the opposing side, during his limited participation as an officer in the Russian army fighting against Napoleon during the latter’s invasion of Russia in 1812. “The ruination of Napoleon’s empire in the frozen steppes of Russia was simply fate, a demonstration of how the uncertainties of war can exceed the grasp of even the greatest genius.”¹³ It was not just the climate of war which stymied Napoleon in Russia, but also other factors such as Russian strategy and the country’s climate and geography. While genius can rise above prescriptive rules of strategy as laid down by strategic theorists such as Lloyd and von Bülow, basic relationships such as between cause and effect, offense and defense, the culminating point of attack, etc. are inviolate. In Russia, Napoleon ignored the culminating point while the momentum of his offensive was worn away over distance

and time by friction and resistance.¹⁴ Genius might be able to ignore the strategic conventions of the day, but not these basic relationships of war and strategy.

Ultimately, Clausewitz's notion of genius is inherently performative in a dynamic and dangerous environment. Genius does not lie in individual character traits, whether the intuitive perception of the *coup d'oeil*, the boldness to risk action, or the determination and steadfastness to see that action through to its conclusion. The genius lies in the whole performance, from understanding all the way through to action, in an environment which makes that performance challenging at its every step. Strategic performance as a whole is necessarily greater than any spark of genius, but that spark is the highlight of the performance, one which elevates any practice of strategy above mere competence. The exercise of the *coup d'oeil* which allows the strategist to understand the present situation, as well as the way forward, is only the first element, after which comes action and the determination and boldness to see that action through despite uncertainty, despite danger, and despite all the other forces which inhibit action in war, and ends finally with the successful conclusion. This is why Clausewitz's idea of genius is a holistic concept which emphasizes harmony among the necessary qualities of perception, boldness, steadfastness, and general moral strength. War challenges all of these qualities of character; to be a genius in war means to overcome all of those challenges to act against the enemy not just with effectiveness but with virtuosity. To conclude with Clausewitz:

A prince or a general can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources, doing neither too much nor too little. But the effects of genius show not so much in novel forms of action as in the ultimate success of the whole. What we should admire is the accurate fulfillment of the unspoken assumptions, the smooth harmony of the whole activity, which only become evident in final success.¹⁵

Despite Clausewitz's proposition here that virtuosity in practice is privileged over novelty, often the ability to manage a campaign with precision walks hand-in-hand with relative innovation in tactics and operations as such novelty, compared to the standard tactical and strategic conventions of the day, has a greater chance of unlocking what Edward Luttwak considers the peak of strategic performance: "*the suspension, if only brief, if only partial, of the entire predicament of strategy,*" that predicament being the reciprocal, adversarial application of military force.¹⁶

Sun Tzu and Chinese notions of genius

Unlike Clausewitz, who largely concentrated his discussion of the qualities of the commander in his one chapter on military genius, Sun Tzu peppered his whole work throughout with reflections on the commander and his desirable qualities. Sun Tzu considers the appointment of the commander one of the most important decisions a sovereign can make, repeatedly emphasizing that skill is vital: "The general is the supporting pillar of state. If his talents are all-encompassing, the state will invariably be strong. If the supporting pillar is marked by fissures, the state will invariably grow weak."¹⁷ As a more specific example,

The general who has a penetrating understanding of the advantages of the nine changes knows how to employ the army. If a general does not have a penetrating understanding of the advantages of the nine changes, even though he is familiar with the topography, he will not be able to realize the advantages of terrain.¹⁸

Michael Handel concludes that "Clausewitz's 'military genius' and Sun Tzu's 'master of war' or 'skillful commander' actually have much in common when their superficial differences are stripped away," the greatest difference being that "Sun Tzu generally favors caution and measured calculation more than reliance on the commander's intuition."¹⁹ Sun Tzu accepted the notion of

genius in war, although he understood it as a thoroughly rational phenomenon in action, as opposed to Clausewitz's lengthy discussions of innate character traits and the powers of intuition.

That Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* does away with the concept of military genius by seeking to explain all military decision-making in a single coherent way, as posited by Yuen and others, belies the fact that the idea of genius did actually exist in Sun Tzu's ancient China environment, albeit with a metaphysical emphasis:

The quintessential military leader was not merely a physically strong and courageous man; he was also distinguished by a supernatural capacity to fathom an enemy's circumstances and foresee the outcome of a confrontation. The ideal general, in other words, had a sagely or *metaphysical* wisdom.²⁰

This metaphysical wisdom was to manifest itself in the sage-general's ability both to recognize and to create situations which accord with the Dao. Such a level of genius and perception reaches far beyond Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil*; in principle it would allow total control over adversarial interaction in war. Yet simultaneously the sage-general "cannot stray from the dynamics of Heaven and Earth without losing at once his capacity for creativity and his opportunity for victory. He is, in short an active participant in the microcosm of abstruse universal principles pertaining to Heaven and man alike."²¹ Much like Clausewitzian genius, the sage-general cannot, however, surpass the Dao, the basic rules of the universe, of fundamental cause and effect—although within those basic rules the sage-general seems invincible in a way Clausewitzian genius is not.

Particularly striking about this ancient Chinese notion of genius, which is at odds with Clausewitzian genius, is its *teachability*. Although "the origins of a sage-general's military prescience varied," one prominent source of metaphysical prowess stemmed from "the contemplation of esoteric texts" or from wandering sages themselves, who often were the providers of said texts.²² The beneficiary of a sage or his text had to prove himself morally worthy of the divine favor. T'ai Kung (or Tai Gong), the originator if not the author of the *Six Secret Teachings*, one of the seven military classics of ancient China, exemplifies this dynamic and the actual inaccessibility of Chinese sagely metaphysical genius:

As recorded in the *Six Secret Teachings*, the Grand Historian had noted signs portending the appearance of a great Worthy and accordingly informed King Wen. The king therefore observed a vegetarian fast for three days to morally prepare for the meeting and to attain the proper spiritual state of mind.²³

If one was not worthy of the teachings, then that person would not receive them, leading to sage-generals being quite rare despite their prowess being teachable in principle.

The Chinese themselves acted to strengthen this tradition of ensuring the inaccessibility of the texts purported to be the source of metaphysical wisdom.

First, military works were not normally permitted in private hands, and their possession could be construed as evidence of a conspiracy ... Second, almost all these teachings were at first transmitted down through the generations, often orally and always secretly. Eventually they were recorded ... Once stored away, they were accessible to a few professors of the classics, a restricted number of high officials, and the emperor himself.²⁴

Sun Tzu's contribution to Chinese strategic thought falls into the same overall tradition; it is an esoteric text whose lengthy contemplation was meant to produce heavenly genius.

The *Sunzi bingfa* highlights the preeminence of a sage-general possessing such superior psychical power ...

Thus psychical power and enlightenment are the primary factors in any battle. From the Zhanguo [Warring States] theorists' point of view, success in combat is not the summation of the efforts of his officers and men, but a general's *tour de force*. He controls through his psychical power all facets of the conflict and is totally responsible of the outcome.²⁵

Ever since *The Art of War* was written, throughout China's long history numerous generals have contemplated Sun Tzu's words and annotated his writings, keeping with the tradition of the

esoteric texts. “Dozens of scholars and generals have offered a huge body of commentaries to interpret, support and elaborate on Sun Tzu. These commentaries are usually included in the Chinese versions of Sun Tzu as indispensable paratexts.”²⁶ Among this number are famous individuals in Chinese history such as Cao Cao of the late Han Dynasty and Li Chuan of the Tang Dynasty. Sun Tzu’s work thus took central place among the ancient military classics and was valued highly. “This defence [*sic*, i.e., deference] to Sun Tzu’s work was common as late as the T’ang dynasty. A critical evaluation of Sun Tzu does not appear until the Sung dynasty (c. 1090).” Eventually, the tradition based on esoteric texts weakened, at least with regard to their accessibility. Under the pressure of consistent defeat against the Jurchen nomads who founded China’s Jin Dynasty, the seven ancient classics were compiled into one volume and a military academy was founded, all to improve Song military performance.²⁷ Nevertheless, the notion of two opposed Sun Tzu-trained generals, each guaranteed victory, was incompatible with the overall cultural milieu in which Sun Tzu’s work originated. The “gotcha” charge against Sun Tzu is a cultural nonsense.

Nonetheless, it must be recognized that metaphysical wisdom is not magic.

The sage-general is not solipsistic. He does not, after all, create vital energy; the objective circumstances are just as important in his overcoming the enemy as his capacity to metabolize those circumstances. Time and again the general is urged in the military treatises to determine his enemy’s dispositions and circumstantial power, and at the same time to conceal his own dispositions and circumstantial power.²⁸

The basis of metaphysical prowess is at least partially rooted in real considerations of, and skill in, tactics and strategy. Metaphysical wisdom alone is hardly enough for genius to shine in war. It must be combined with human agents, comprising the army itself, and the methods by which the army is used. Ancient Chinese strategic genius is ultimately performative, much like Clausewitzian genius.

On genius: Clausewitz and Sun Tzu compared

Clausewitzian genius is premised on the harmonious integration of various personal traits which result in the ability to perform exceptionally in war despite its adverse and adversarial climate. Genius in ancient China was founded upon metaphysical wisdom derived from ancient texts, which resulted in the ability to perform exceptionally in war by controlling its forces. Both are, and must ultimately be, performative because it is performance which creates results in war. To consider Yuen’s contention that Sun Tzu opens the black box of Clausewitzian genius, one may compare Sun Tzu’s approach to performance in war with genius. This would have four stages: first, the *coup d’oeil* to recognize the situation; second, a further exercise of *coup d’oeil* to identify the right solution; third, the boldness to make the necessary choice and give orders; and fourth, the steadfastness to commit to the course.

The mechanics of situational awareness and recognition in *The Art of War* are not the individual purview of the commander. Instead, Sun Tzu dedicates considerable attention to intelligence gathering and its potential to contribute to victory. To invoke heaven and the metaphysical in the same manner as the ancient Chinese notion of genius as a whole, some translations of Sun Tzu, particularly Samuel Griffith’s, describe the harmonious combination of the five types of spy identified by Sun Tzu as “the Divine Skein” or similarly mystic descriptions.²⁹ In claiming them to be the key to easy victory, Sun Tzu exaggerates the utility of spies and intelligence for rhetorical effect. Nonetheless, it is clear that intelligence is meant to play the same role as Clausewitz’s *coup d’oeil*.

Sun Tzu recognized that war was adversarial and that therefore intelligence gathering in war was similarly adversarial. Thus, he also emphasized deception and covert action to inhibit the opponent from achieving useful intelligence, and most famously stated that “Warfare is the Way

[Tao] of deception.” He continued in that vein: “Thus although [you are] capable, display incapability to them. When committed to employing your forces, feign inactivity. When [your objective] is nearby, make it appear as if distant; when far away, create the illusion of being nearby.”³⁰ Sun Tzu’s emphasis on intelligence as part of the battlefield, both in gaining useful information for oneself and denying it to the enemy, is a vital element of his work. In contrast, the powers of the Clausewitzian *coup d’oeil* are unilateral. Insight occurs against the enemy, in his presence, and despite his present and future action, but nonetheless stands apart from and uninfluenced by any adversarial interaction.

The Clausewitzian *coup d’oeil* is not simply about understanding what is going on; as an act of intuitive imagination it also identifies the solution. In Clausewitz’s understanding, these are not two distinct aspects but rather inseparable elements of a single whole. *Coup d’oeil* provides not just understanding or just the solution, but both in a single realization. The time dimension is also vital. “The challenges that a military chief faces force him to give quick practical answers rather than speculative and elaborated arguments.”³¹ If the moment passes, the answer must change because the situation confronting the commander has already evolved from that experienced just previously. Moreover, there is always an element of improvisation to every military decision in war.

The type of capacity that demands a practical reaction ... when confronted with a given situation, implies a similar kind of judgement to the one Kant calls aesthetic, since the understanding of a particular moment (or a given work of art), is never identical to the previous one. History contributes by offering the chief useful forms (models instead of concepts proper) to understand the present, but, even though the chief’s military reaction can be inspired by examples from the past, it is always specific.³²

Although Clausewitz considered all elements of genius approximately equally worthy in principle, the ability to provide the right answer *on time* is perhaps the most pivotal. Understanding, resolve, steadfastness, and such characteristics mean little if the course of action is truly inappropriate. This question of *what to do* has constantly been the focus of prescriptive strategic theories since Lloyd and von Bülow at the end of the eighteenth century, if not earlier, all the way to the present day. Clausewitz does not provide an answer to this question because he knew that one was impossible at the theoretical level. Any specific answer is a product of tactical, operational, or strategic esthetic. The act of providing the right answer in the contextual climate of war is the deepest, darkest core of the black box of genius.

Does Sun Tzu truly open this black box? Much of his work does provide prescription at a certain level, as if he wished to replace the moment’s esthetic insight suitable for a specific circumstance with a more general set of rules. For example, he mandates that,

In general, the strategy for employing the military is this: If your strength is ten times theirs, surround them; if five, then attack them; if double, then divide your forces. If you are equal in strength to the enemy, you can engage him. If fewer, you can circumvent him. If outmatched, you can avoid him. Thus a small enemy that acts inflexibly will become the captives of a large enemy.³³

Despite such sections, Sun Tzu also offers words of caution to any reader looking for an easy solution:

The notes do not exceed five, but the changes of the five notes can never be fully heard. The colors do not exceed five, but the changes of the five colors can never be completely seen. The flavors do not exceed five, but the changes of the five flavors can never be completely tasted. In warfare the strategic configurations of power [*shih*] do not exceed the unorthodox and orthodox, but the changes of the unorthodox and orthodox can never be completely exhausted. The unorthodox and orthodox mutually produce each other, just like an endless cycle. Who can exhaust them?³⁴

Yuen identifies Chinese dialectical logic, manifested through the School of Yin and Yang, as the methodology Sun Tzu advocated for the general to craft his strategy:

The importance of yin and yang lies in the concept's capacity to transform our way of understanding the important concepts on all levels of war. Almost all important concepts of Chinese strategic thought are expressed in the form of correlating pairs on the basis of yin and yang.

Correlating pairs are abstractly contradictory conceptual pairings, such as war and peace, victory and defeat, attack and defense, etc. On this basis, Chinese dialectical logic "unites correlating pairs and turns them into an organic, dynamic whole, in addition to helping envision future developments by creating a systemic view."³⁵

However, this system cannot replace insight, it can only provide it a foundation, as Yuen also recognizes:

There is a clearly a huge leap involved between identifying the contradictions in war to the utilization of these contradictions as a strategic scheme. ... Although the practical application of this dialectical system requires generals or strategists to make an intuitive judgment, the system has solid theoretical foundations that allow it to be explained throughout the process.³⁶

This contrasts with Yuen's characterization of Clausewitzian genius as a black-box super-concept supposedly without theoretical basis.

Yet, this appellation misunderstands the context in which Clausewitz was writing. The Enlightenment had thrown up numerous theories on war and strategy which were utterly inapt due to their focus on mechanistic, mathematical solutions which completely disregarded unquantifiable moral factors. Napoleon, who was for Clausewitz the personification of military genius, arrived on the scene and through his sheer dominance in the conduct of warfare effectively destroyed the old theories. Yuen lamented that "Handel himself [in *Masters of War*] has to clarify that the *coup d'oeil* of the military genius, is not irrational; it simply reflects a different mode of rationality in which intuitive decisions can be explained rationally *ex post facto*."³⁷ But that is part of the whole point—Napoleon was the engine to renew strategic theory from the ground up, and Napoleon drove Clausewitz's theory of war forward. In the context of discussing the preceding Enlightenment theories of war, Clausewitz wrote "What genius does is the best rule, and theory can do no better than show how and why this should be the case."³⁸ In Clausewitz's eyes, genius and its sheer intuitive comprehension and mastery of war—or at least warfare—had to be the basis of theory because only then could theory possibly be useful to future commanders by reflecting an accurate understanding of war and warfare as phenomena. In Clausewitz's lifetime, it had happened once—with Napoleon and through Clausewitz's own writings. In emphasizing genius in general, rather than Napoleon in particular, Clausewitz may have been open to the idea that *it could happen again*; i.e., that the practice of strategy might become ossified and conventional along certain lines or expected rules which no longer properly reflected war as a phenomenon, setting the stage for a new genius to come along and shatter the old rules all over again.

The third and fourth stages of genius in action—the boldness to make the right choice, having identified it; and the resolution to see it through to final success—are not emphasized in Sun Tzu's work to the extent that they are in *On War*. Although Sun Tzu did highlight the importance of the general having the right character traits and expounded on how negative characteristics may be exploited by a skilled commander, boldness and resolution are almost beside the point in the context of the Chinese notion of genius as metaphysical martial wisdom. Given the seemingly supernatural anticipatory and control abilities of the sage-general, the strategic situation should never deteriorate to the point that boldness or resolution are necessary at all, because the sage-general would have curtailed in advance his adversary's opportunity to threaten the sage-general's success. Thus, as Sun Tzu argued,

Those that the ancients referred to as excelling at warfare conquered those who were easy to conquer. Thus the victories of those that excelled in warfare were not marked by fame for wisdom or courageous achievement. Thus their victories were free from errors. One who is free from errors directs his measures toward [certain] victory, conquering those who are already defeated."³⁹

The ancient Chinese notion of genius celebrated not the ability to overcome the climate of war, but rather to evade it.

Conclusion

Clausewitz's idea of genius was adapted in the aftermath of Helmut von Moltke the Elder's victories over Austria-Hungary in 1866 and France in 1870–71 to focus entirely on the notion of perfection in war, which was to be achieved primarily through staff work and prewar planning.⁴⁰ Today, it has seeped into the West's perception of the strategist writ large. Thus, Harry Yarger has described strategy as “the domain of the strong intellect, the lifelong student, the dedicated professional, and the invulnerable ego.”⁴¹ Colin Gray likens the strategist to a hero and Fred Charles Iklé writes similarly strongly about the strategist.⁴² The Western tradition seems to emphasize the difficulties of war and of strategy in war, just as Clausewitz did in *On War*, including in discussions relating to genius.

The Chinese tradition differs. Instead of dwelling on the difficulties, it seeks to avoid them by preparing the environment in advance. “Chinese strategy aimed to use every possible means to influence the potential inherent in the forces at play to its own advantage, even before the actual engagement, so that the engagement would never constitute the decisive moment, which always involves risk.”⁴³ The result is that the conclusion is effectively predetermined, because the Chinese have manipulated the environment so that the propensity of the course of events favors them over their enemies. This preference continues to exist today, manifested through China's three warfares (i.e. legal, psychological, public opinion) as well as geopolitical designs such as its Belt and Road Initiative and the building of artificial islands in the South China Sea. That the Chinese have had uneven success in achieving this ideal is readily apparent in their long strategic history. It nonetheless retains a strong influence on Chinese practice.

In the end, both interpretations of genius represent ideal forms. For Clausewitz, genius was a real phenomenon—he believed he identified it in Napoleon—but he recognized that genius was hardly a common occurrence. His stipulation that genius should be explained by theory opens up the possibility for the less talented to try to emulate genius, beginning with the study of war and of strategy. The ancient Chinese ideal of the sage-general is similarly celebrated, in characters such as Zhuge Liang, the genius strategist whose stratagems grace the pages of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Far more archaic, and therefore seemingly less realistic, than Clausewitzian genius, Sun Tzu's concept of genius may free it from being imprisoned by the difficulties of war proper to reach into the political realm surrounding war, probably the most promising arena for minimizing the dangers of war itself. The world has witnessed the apparent successes of this approach not only in China's initiatives but also in Russia's so-called hybrid warfare. Looking beyond Western sources of strategic thought to other, culturally unfamiliar perspectives, such as to Sun Tzu and the larger Chinese tradition to which he contributed, remains a potential avenue of self-correction for strategic theory.

Notes

1. Derek M. C. Yuen, *Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read the Art of War* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 72.
2. Sun Tzu, “The Art of War,” in *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, edited and translated by Ralph D. Sawyer (Boulder: Westview Press 1993), 158.
3. Peter Paret, “The Genesis of *On War*,” in *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton University Press 1984), 3.
4. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 13–17.

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