Kung-fu – Musings on the philosophical background of Chinese Martial Arts

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Until the era of Mao Zedong, China had the reputation of a pacifist country. This image derives not only from the classical scriptures – Confucians have held a deep disregard for fighting and war, upholding instead harmonic relationships between people and nations. Daoists likewise despised aggression. But also early Western observers of China, such as the Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century, confirmed these impressions: They noticed that the Chinese, in their pacifistic attitude and disregard for military matters, lived up to the "higher teachings of Christ". But as Louis Daniel LeComte, a French Jesuit, remarked warningly in 1696: "By these restraints, Chinese politics may prevent uproar in the interior, but it risks for its people being involved in wars with foreign powers which might be even more dangerous." Only two hundred years later, LeComte's prognostic warnings turned into reality during the Opium wars with the European powers.[1]

And yet, throughout Chinese history, there had been continuous struggles and wars just like everywhere else. This contradiction between apparent pacifism and warlike reality might be explained by the familiar contradiction between ideal and reality. To maintain certain ideals in a society does not necessarily mean that these ideals will be put into practice. Considering two thousand years of Christian history in Europe, one could dismiss the Christian ideals of peace and charity as rather unrealistic. At the same time, these very ideals are, in a secular manner, still the guidelines of Western and even the United Nations' policy making, although they are still constantly being offended.

China wasn't any different. Harmony was cherished as the highest ideal, but at the same time one can find much literature which is preoccupied with aspects of fighting and war, in particular the so-called School of Strategy (*bingjia*). But war and fighting as a philosophical topic also appears in the writings of other schools, such as the Mohists (the theoreticians of the war of defence), the Legalists, and – even if only marginally so – with Mencius, the main Confucian antagonist of the Mohists, who said: "The true ruler will prefer not to fight; but if he do fight, he must overcome " (*zhan bi sheng*)[2].

And lastly the Daoists, the advocates of *wuwei*, of non-action, one could hardly want to bring into context with fighting. Yet, as we shall see, the entire philosophy of war and fighting is imbued with philosophical thought from the central Daoist books, namely the *Canon of the Way and its Power* (*Daodejing*) by the legendary Laozi and the *Zhuangzi*.

The relationship between Daoism and strategy had been acknowledged very early, for example by Wang Zhen (9th century), an author of the Tang Dynasty, who wrote a book entitled: "The Essentials of Military Science as Expounded in the *Canon of the Way and its Power*" (*Daodejing lun bingyao yishu*). Furthermore, in the great encyclopaedia of the Qing

[1] LeComte described the Chinese preferences as such: The scholarly elite of the country would only be educated and trained with books; none of the literati-officials would ever put a sword in his hand. Thus, "a neighing Tartar horse would be able to scare away the whole Chinese cavalry." Louis Daniel LeComte, *Nouveau memoires sur l'etat present de la Chine, II*, Paris 1696, p. 90 (German: *Das heutige Sina*, Frankfurt 1699, II, p. 90-91).
[2] *Mencius*, 2B.1.

period, the "Collection of Ancient and New Pictures and Books" (*Gujin tushu jicheng*), Laozi's *Daodejing* is categorized as "Art of War" (*bingfa*) in Chapter 82.[3]

The ideas of Sunzi, the author of the *Art of War* living at the end of the 6th century BC, show an intricate synthesis of Daoist, Confucian and Legalist thought. According to Sunzi, the ultimate goal of war and fighting did not entail the elimination of the opponent but the establishment of harmony and peace. Interestingly, the parts of his book concerning methods of fighting mostly have a Daoist background. Parallels between the *Daodejing* and *Sunzi bingfa*, i.e. between Daoism and the School of Strategy, have already been subjects of various studies by Chinese and Western scholars,[4] only to mention the advise of a modern Chinese author (Li Yuri) who once said, that "the theoretical principles of Laozi can be entirely applied to war; for learning Sunzi's theory it is necessary to study the book of Laozi, and for studying Laozi it is necessary to study Sunzi".[5]

In my paper, I will illustrate some of these Daoist influences on martial arts. The following aspects will be considered:

1. Perfection through steady practice
2. "Caring for Life"
3. Dialectical thinking
4. Winning without fighting
5. Psychology of fighting

I will conclude (drawing on the works of Krzysztof Gawlikowski) with a few general remarks on the philosophy of fighting in Chinese everyday culture, i.e. as a way of managing problems of everyday living. In this sense, martial art can be understood metaphorically as art of life or art of survival.

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1. Perfection through steady practice

What are martial arts? Two possible answers may be given:

1. Techniques or arts used in order to subdue others.
2. Techniques or arts used in order to not be subdued, hurt or killed by others.

Both answers cannot always be neatly separated; thus it might be necessary to kill someone in order not to be subdued. But in principle, two orientations in a struggle can de distinguished:

1. Winning
2. Surviving

The question which of these two will be the guiding principle in a combat situation is bound to respective contexts or goals. Orientation no. 1 (winning) usually is tied to aspects of power, such as gaining long term goals and advantages or enforcing the law. It thus entails an

[3] Krzysztof Gawlikowski, "The School of Strategy (*bing jia*) in the Context of Chinese Civilization", *East and West* (Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente), New Series, Vo. 35 – Nos. 1-3 (Sept. 1985), p. 178.
[4] Christopher C. Rand, "Chinese Military Thought and Philosophical Taoism", *Monumenta Serica*, 34 (1979-80), p. 171-218. The *Daodejing* was grouped together with the books *Guanzi* and *Sunzi*.
[5] Quoted according to Gawlikowski, p. 178.

approach to fighting from the vantage point of the stronger, from the more powerful; it is often connected with attack. The second orientation is the mirror image of no 1, held from the perspective of the weak; that is, the goal in a struggle is *not* to be subdued, hence its orientation is self-defence, or rather survival. This attitude is also relevant and significant for the everyday conflict situation, the proverbial struggle of life.

The modern Chinese term for martial arts is *wu shu*; thus it refers to certain techniques or arts (*shu* or *fa*[6]) used for martial (*wu*) purposes. The term *gongfu* (as the word kung-fu is spelled in *pinyin*) is also used to refer to martial arts, but not exclusively. *Gongfu*, rather, refers to practice, in particular to the effort put into any practice, resulting in the end in a perfect work or performance. This applies, for example, not only to the traditional arts of calligraphy, painting and poetry but to any task, as the proverb says: "If the effort (*gongfu*) you put into your work is great enough, you can grind an iron rod into a needle" (*zhi yao gongfu shen, tiechu mocheng zhen*). The artistic ability gained through such hard practice can be described, in the words of Richard John Lynn, as "intuitive control over the artistic medium"[7], which means that long practice enabled the artist to perform his art, also the martial art, in an intuitive – effortless – way; and observers recognize this magical naturalness of perfection. (In the Western tradition, we also have this notion that only "practice makes perfect"; for example a classical musician must have spent endless hours of study and practice before he can play fluently, naturally, wonderfully moving and with ease.)

As the Daoists were maintaining the principle of non-action (*wuwei*), one is reluctant – at first glance – to associate them with *gongfu* as effort making. And yet, in Chinese aesthetics (and kung-fu as a martial art forms an integral part of Chinese aesthetics) magical artistic perfection is usually explained with references to some Daoist stories. One of the origins of the concept of *gongfu* as perfection through effort is a well-known story in the book *Zhuangzi*, the story about Cook Ding cutting up oxen:

> Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee – zip! Zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Jingshou music.
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> "Ah, this is marvelous!" said Lord Wenhui. "Imagine skill reaching such heights!" Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, "What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. And now – now I go at it by spirit (*shen*) and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.
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> "A good cook changes his knife once a year – because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month – because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room – more than enough for the blade to play about it. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

[6] Cf. Roger Ames, *The Art of Rulership*, p. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983, p. 108-141.
[7] Richard John Lynn: "Orthodoxy and Enlightenment: Wang Shih-chen's Theory of Poetry and Its Antecedents", in: Wm. Th. De Bary (ed): *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, New York: Columbia UP 1975, p. 217ff

> "However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until – flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away."
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> "Excellent!" said Lord Wenhui. "I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!"[8]

The most neglected detail of this story is Cook Ding's saying that he has used his knife for nineteen years and that he has cut up thousands of oxen with it. We may safely assume, if there ever was such a butcher "magician" named Ding, that he did not gain this ability by pure genius[9]; much rather, his *gongfu* had been such that through years of practice he acquired this mastery of skill. But then, and this is the crucial point, he was able to go beyond mastered skill and technique, wielding his blade intuitively and effortlessly in the spirit of the *Dao*. In fact, this intuitive mastery, called *shen* in Chinese, means in its literal sense God-like, i.e., it appears to be so wonderful and unfathomable as if having been made by a God (*shen*).

2. "Caring for Life"

According to Fung Yu-lan, one of the earliest branches of Daoism is connected with a legendary figure named Yang Zhu and can be called, "caring for life" (thus also the title of the chapter about Cook Ding in the *Zhuangzi* and the insight of his Lord at the end). "Caring for life" means in its original sense to value life above all, as Mencius said about Yang Zhu's preferences: "The principle of Yang Zhu is: 'Each for himself.' Though he might have profited the whole world by plucking out a single hair, he would not have done it."[10] This attitude is, of course, highly egocentric (and un-Confucian, that's why Mencius severely criticises it), but this is only half of its significance; the other side is the preciousness of life. Yang Zhu must have valued life more than anything else. Put into practice, this caring for life means the cultivation of life-forces as well as of one's body and health.

In Daoist religion, this tendency of Caring for Life was further developed, for example in the search for longevity or immortality, and it is this aspect that today is still most prevalent in the various forms of Daoist inspired health exercises, such as *taijiquan* or *qigong*, for "caring for life" or cultivating life (*yangsheng*), after all, are synonymous with cultivating the vital force *qi* (*yangqi*), and this, precisely, is the meaning of *qigong*. Lastly, this preference is also manifest today in the Daoist monks letting their hair grow long without cutting it – in contrast to the Buddhists shaving their heads.

In the Daoist classics, particularly in Laozi's *Classic of the Way and its Power* (*Daodejing*), this principle of Caring for Life appears as a preference for the aspects of aliveness, that is, as a focus on the soft and weak (*ruo*). For example, in Chapter 76 of the *Laozi* we find:

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[8] Burton Watson (transl.), *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York: Columbia UP, 1968, p. 50-51.
[9] As Edison says, "Genius is one percent intuition and 99 percent perspiration."
[10] *Mencius*, 7A.26; Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan, 1943, p. 61.

> While alive, humans are soft and pliable, but, when dead, they are hard and stiff […] Thus it is that the hard and stiff are adherents of death, and the soft and pliable are adherents of life. This is why, if military power is stiff, it will not be victorious.[11]

Based on the observation that softness is the essential characteristic of life, Chapter 40 states: "Softness is the function of the *Dao*", and Chapter 36 further says: "Softness and pliancy conquer hardness and forcefulness."

The example for this prevailing power of softness is water; we find this mentioned at several places in the *Laozi*, such as in chapter 78:

> All under Heaven, nothing is more soft and pliable than water, yet for attacking the hard and stiff, nothing can beat it, so it is impossible to take its place.
> That the soft conquers the stiff and the pliable conquers the hard, none among all under Heaven fails to know, yet none can practice it.

How does "caring for life" manifest itself in the martial arts? If cultivation of life means cultivation of softness, then this translates into the language of martial arts as cultivation of flexibility, i.e. of pliant, evading movements as reaction to an attack, just like in *Judo*. *Judo* is a Japanese martial art, by now more a sport, but its philosophical background is Chinese Daoism: *Judo* (chin.: *rou dao*) means "way of softness". As a strategy, the way of softness does not propose attack as a means of defence (as we have it in our familiar saying: "The best defence is to attack") but rather: the best defence is not to be there.[12] We find this advice as the ultimate solution in a fight also in the so called "Thirty-six Stratagems" (*sanshiliu ji*). The last one of this compendium of tricks says: "Of the thirty-six stratagems, leaving is the best" (*zou wei shang*).[13] "Leaving" is just another way of not being there when attacked.

This is to say, in a defence orientated fight (orientation no. 2) the most important goal is to stay alive, that is, to make yourself invincible. This can only be achieved by the powers of softness: by flexible reactions and evasion. If done skilfully and successfully, even the strongest opponent will not be able to obtain victory. This kind of insight also comes through in the Chinese saying, "The fiercest tiger is nothing in comparison to a worm in the earth" (*meng hu bu ru ditu chong*). A worm is able to hide in its familiar surroundings; confronted with this situation, even the fiercest tiger will be powerless.

Hence, the quintessence of a strategy of survival will be: when attacked, not to be there, or to react flexibly and evasively. This means that in spite of one's prowess and ability to fight, surviving must always be the first goal, for only this can be achieved by one's own efforts. We find such a timelessly valid insight into the essence of fighting expressed in the great classic of strategy, Sunzi's *Art of War*:

> In antiquity those that excelled in warfare first made themselves unconquerable in order to await [the moment when] the enemy could be conquered. Being unconquerable lies with yourself; being conquerable lies with the enemy. Thus one

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[11] If not noted otherwise, the quotations from *Daodejing* are all from Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue. A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi*, New York: Columbia UP, 1999.

[12] Mr. Miagi to Daniel-san in the movie "Karate Kid".

[13] Concerning the "Thirty-six Stratagems" see Carl-A. Seyschab, "The 36 Stratagems: Orthodoxy Against Heterodoxy", Carl-A. Seyschab (et al), *Society, Culture, and Patterns of Behaviour* (East Asian Civilizations 3/4), Unkel: Horlemann, 1990, p. 98-155.

> who excels in warfare is able to make himself unconquerable, but cannot necessarily cause the enemy to be conquerable. Thus it is said a strategy for conquering the enemy can be known but yet not possible to implement.[14]

A deep understanding of this kind of art of life (or of survival) we find expressed in a saying by Sir Robert Hart, an Englishman who in the second half of the 19th century spent several decades in China (helping to build up the Chinese customs service):

> In my country it is usually said: don't let yourself be bent, even if you break. In China, it is exactly the other way around: Let yourself be bent, but don't break.[15]

The ability of bending but not breaking is more than just a means of self-defence, it's an attitude of life, and the bamboo is the most ubiquitous symbol for this ability in China. This is the reason for the popularity of bamboo as a subject of painting, often with an inscription evoking just this quality, just as in the following by Zheng Banqiao (18th cent.), entitled "Bamboo and Rock":

> Biting firmly into the blue mountain, not letting go,
> It sets its roots into the clefts of the bluff.
> Buffeted unceasingly, it still is firm and strong,
> Taking the wind from the east, west, south and north.[16]

3. Dialectical thinking

In the Chinese context, dialectics means the relationship between the two polar forces of *Yin* and *Yang* which stand for the polarity weak vs. strong, but also for female and male. Very Chinese is the notion that these two seemingly opposing forces, hard and soft, belong together and complement each other. In the section above on "Caring for Life", we have seen that of the two principles, *Yang* and *Yin*, Laozi values more the weak and soft *Yin* (such as water) in contrast to the *Yang*, the hard and strong. But in a combat situation, it might be good to be both, soft and hard, to evade and to hit, or to be soft towards the outside and hard internally, just as the bamboo is soft and pliable but at the same time of unequalled inner firmness and strength. Both has its value, "iron *and* silk" (thus the title of a book by Mark Salzman, summarizing his experiences trying to learn kung-fu in China in the 1980s and illustrating the relationship of softness and firmness).

Furthermore, in Chinese dialectics of *Yin* and *Yang*, there is the *paramount* idea of change or reversion, i.e., *Yin* can – or will eventually – turn to *Yang* and vice versa. The notion of reversion (*fan*) has even central significance in Daoist thought: We just had a quotation from Laozi, saying (ch. 40), "Softness is the function of the *Dao*." This sentence is preceded by the equally important notion: "Reversion is the action of the *Dao*." We also have this notion in a proverbial form: "When things have reached an extreme point, they will have to reverse" (*wu ji bi fan*), just like the sun will begin to sink once it has passed the zenith.

Laozi compares this "reversion" as the "action of the *Dao*" with the pulling of a bow (ch. 77):

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[14] Ralph D. Sawyer (trans.), *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, Boulder: Westview, 193, p. 163. Cf. Clausewitz: "Invincibility lies in the defence; the possibility of victory in the attack."
[15] Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*; German translation: *Chinesische Charakterzüge*, F.C. Dürbig (trans.), Würzburg 1900, p. II.
[16] Karl-Heinz Pohl, *Cheng Pan-ch'iao – Poet, Painter and Calligrapher*, Nettetal: Steyler, 1990, p. 211.

> The Dao of Heaven, is it not like when a bow is pulled? As the high end gets pulled down, the low end gets pulled up: so those who have more than enough are diminished, and those who have less than enough get augmented.

How does this insight into the workings of reversion translate into the language of martial arts? Strategically we find this notion of reversion elaborated in the *Laozi* (ch. 36):

> If you would like to gather him in, you must first resolve yourself to let him aggrandize himself. If you would like to weaken him, you must resolve yourself to let him grow strong. If you would like to nullify him, you must resolve yourself to let him flourish. If you would like to take him, you must first resolve yourself to let him have his way. Such an approach is called subtle and perspicacious.

This insight concerns the dialectical interrelatedness of life: Even the strongest, once it has reached its apex, will begin to weaken. Hence it is important to know about changes, about the natural reversion of things. Used strategically in a fight, this insight into reversion concerns the timing of decisive blows: Once one knows about the natural reversion from *Yang* to *Yin*, from strength to weakness, one has to wait for the right moment in order to accentuate this natural tendency. This also entails the knowledge that retreat can turn into advancing and thus into an advantage. Finally, one is well advised not to carry things too far, to act not too hard and not to conquer too much, for just then there arises the danger of reversion. Gawlikowski puts this insight into the following warning words:

> The Chinese theoreticians came even to the paradoxical conclusion that the side which achieves many victories will eventually be weakened, will face internal unrest and as a result will finally collapse, so that military victories have to be avoided as costly and dangerous. The best victory was that which passed unnoticed by the public, achieved without special efforts.[17]

Looking around at the various wars taking place in the world these days, the validity of this insight needs no further comment.

4. Winning without fighting

As already mentioned earlier, a central notion of Daoism is "non-action" (*wuwei*). In section one it was pointed out, however, that *gongfu* involves exactly the opposite of *wuwei*, i.e. constant practice and thus action. And yet, the idea of *wuwei*, of non-action, also enters into the martial arts, such as in chapter 69 of *Laozi*:

> Military specialists have a saying: "I dare not play the host but instead play the guest. I dare not advance an inch but instead retreat a foot." In other words, campaign in such a way that there is no campaign. Push up your sleeve so that no arm is exposed; wield weapons in such a way that no weapons are involved; and lead in such a way that you face no opponent.

Such paradoxical formulations are typical of Laozi's argumentation, particularly when dealing with the notion of non-action (for non-action, from a dialectical point of view, is also a form

[17] Gawlikowski, p. 184.

of – negative – action). The strategic meaning of this passage is that, if one has to fight, one should not emphasize it, with other words, one should not be fighting purposely, much rather a fight should be coming across as non-fight, advancing as non-advancing, campaigning as non-campaigning.

This notion not only has a strategic but also a deeper significance in terms of philosophy of life: The goal is winning without fighting, for this is also the "Way" of Heaven, as we read in Chapter 73 of *Laozi*: "The *Dao* of Heaven is such that one excels at winning without contending."

In Sunzi's *Art of War*, winning without fighting is the pinnacle of military excellence:

> In general, the method for employing the military is this. Preserving the [enemy's] state capital is best, destroying their state capital is second-best. […] For this reason attaining one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy's army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.[18]

Chapter 19 of *Zhuangzi* illustrates this magical capability with an interesting story about the training of a fighting cock:

> Ji Xingzi was training gamecocks for the king. After ten days the king asked if they were ready.
> "Not yet. They're too haughty and rely on their nerve."
> Another ten days and the king asked again.
> "Not yet. They still respond to noises and movements."
> Another ten days and the king asked again.
> "Not yet. They still look around fiercely and are full of spirit."
> Another ten days and the king asked again.
> "They're close enough. Another cock can crow and they show no sign of change. Look at them from a distance and you'd think they are made of wood. Their virtue/power is complete. Other cocks won't dare face them, but will turn and run."[19]

Again, the scope of this story goes beyond mere fighting but, as the title of Chapter 19, "Mastering Life" (*Dasheng*), suggests, it concerns the art of life in its broadest sense.

5. Psychology of fighting

Strategy is to a large degree psychology; and psychology of fighting involves first of all knowledge of your opponent. Hence Chapter 69 of *Laozi* says:

> There is no greater disaster than underestimating one's opponent (*qing di*).[20]

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[18] Sawyer, p. 160-61. See also the following passage from the *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (*Yan tie lun*): "The master conqueror does not wage wars; the master commander of the army does not use it; the master battle-leader does not fight. [All] should be regulated in the ceremonial hall and the resistance of the [enemy] army should be broken at a distance. If the ruler follows the politics of benevolence he will meet no opposition in the world." Gawlikowski, p. 184.

[19] Watson, p. 204.

[20] This is the wording of the standard text. Wang Bi, actually, has a version that is the same as in the Mawangdui texts: "There is no greater disaster than having no viable opponent (*wu di*)." Lynn, *The classic*, p. 176.

It is not enough, however, to know your opponent, but also to have a sound estimation of one's own strengths and weaknesses. Chapter 33 of *Laozi* says:

> One who knows others is wise, but one who knows himself is perspicacious.
> One who conquers others has strength, but one who conquers himself is powerful.

This type of psychological knowledge is also important for Sunzi:

> Thus it is said that one who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements. One who does not know the enemy but knows himself will sometimes be victorious, sometimes meet with defeat. One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement.[21]

Of course, there are also Confucian notions in the martial arts that can be linked to psychology, such as morality and loyalty, and in the *Sunzi* we find these aspects given as much weight as to the Daoist ones. And there are further Confucian ideas directly concerning training and the psychological attitude in fighting. For example, the idea of gaining an "unmoved mind" (*budong xin*) in battle is a topic in Chapter 2A.2 of *Mencius*. In one of the most famous passages of the book, Mencius talks about developing his "vastly overflowing vital power" (*haoran zhi qi*) by moral self-cultivation as well as about the important relationship between will (*zhi*), vital power (*qi*) and mind (*xin*) in a fighting situation. The idea of an "unmoved mind" had a great influence on the philosophy of martial arts in Japanese Zen-Buddhism.[22]

But generally speaking, psychology in the martial arts, and particularly in strategy, concerns more than a good estimation of your own and your opponent's capacities, it involves most of all the art of deception, that is psychological warfare; and a great part of Sunzi's *Art of War* deals with just this topic, such as the following central passage in Sunzi's Chapter I:

> Warfare is the Way (*dao*) of deception (*gui*). 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.[23]

Just because strategy largely relies on deception (*gui dao*) and unorthodox (*qi*) means, this kind of thinking also had the reputation of being not only un-Confucian but outright amoral. It was a form of heterodoxy, a secret knowledge that one usually did not confess to adhere to.[24]

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The strategic principles discussed above (as part of the *bingjia* as well as of Daoist philosophy) played an important role in China not only for the training and attitude in the martial arts but – just as the last example made clear – also for dealing with life in general. Hence they have been transmitted over the ages through countless proverbs and sayings. For example, the

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[21] Sawyer, p. 162. Cf. ch. 33 of *Laozi*: "One who knows others is wise, but one who knows himself is perspicacious. One who conquers others has strength, but one who conquers himself is powerful."
[22] Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970, p. 95ff.
[23] Sawyer, p. 158
[24] See also Seyschab.

"Thirty-six Stratagems" are almost all four character sayings (*chengyu*). This shows that they were an integral part of Chinese everyday culture, and its maxims were used in order to deal with problems of everyday living. Social life thus could be compared to a war-like process,[25] and in this way, martial art is only a metaphor for the art of life. Interestingly, even the sexual arts were also sometimes described in the terminology of fighting and strategy, as both – sexual and martial arts – were considered *Yin*-arts.[26] (This also underlines the Chinese tendency to see things related in an analogous or correlative relationship according to *Yin* and *Yang* or the Five Elements.) In this context, Chinese chess (*weiqi*, jap.: *go*) also has to be mentioned as a strategic game markedly different from Western chess: Not the check mating of the enemy king brings about victory but the encircling of the opposing forces; in this way the winner makes the encircled forces to his own.

Strategic maxims were also transmitted through the traditional popular novels. For example the highly popular *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguozhi yanyi*), basically a compendium of stratagems, is not only a book that every male Chinese youngster has grown up with, its stories also served as material for countless theatre plays for the general populace. The central and historical figures in the book are strategic masterminds, such as Zhuge Liang who at first does not want to fight but whose wisdom, in the end, prevails over the crafty and cunning Cao Cao, the latter, by the way, the compiler and first commentator of Sunzi's *Art of War*. Today, the kung-fu-novels by Jin Yong are the most popular books in China. Hence, Gawlikowski has the following assessment of Sunzi's book:

> In the 20th century it remains as the only antique theory still considered valid, and is still studied for practical purposes, not only as part of the history of thought.[27]

Mao Zedong and Ho Chi-min are strategist of whom we know that they waged and won their wars according to Sunzi's strategic principles. Last but not least, the Chinese used to bring these insights from strategy to the market-place. Today this involves, for example, negotiations with foreign businessmen. Twenty years ago, at the height of the Japan fever, it was popular in the West to read Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings*; today it has been replaced by Sunzi's *Art of War* as the Western businessmen's cult book. In spite of hard studies of this book by Western managers and even politicians, the Chinese still seem to have an advantage in this field, having grown up with martial arts and hence with the proverbial insight that "The market-place is like a battlefield" (*shangchang ru zhanchang*).

Generally speaking though, Confucian and Daoist (as well as strategic) thought always balanced out in the life of the Chinese, just like in the *Yin-Yang* model.[28] This concerns everyday life and statecraft, as can be seen in the traditional complementarity of civil vs. martial qualities, of *wen* and *wu*. In this dichotomy, *wen* is the Confucian civil, cultural or peaceful side, corresponding to *Yang*, and *wu* the martial side, corresponding to *Yin* (jap.: *bun* and *bu*). In the Chinese "Art of Rulership", to use the title of Roger Ames' book, it was important to balance both these sides – civil (i.e. peaceful) *and* martial means – like *Yin* and *Yang*. Thus, the essence of the *Sunzi* can be summarized in the proverbial saying: "Value the

[25] Gawlikowski, p. 196.
[26] Gawlikowski, p. 195, 204.
[27] Gawlikowski, p. 199.
[28] Gawlikowski offers this interesting observation: "'Public performances' were shaped by Confucian virtues and norms, real actions were shaped by the School of Strategy. Thus, beautiful speeches on high values usually disguised pragmatic immorality and trickery, raised to the level of a real art and sophisticated analysis, to the bewilderment of the foreigners." Gawlikowski, p. 197-98.

martial and cultivate the civil (or peaceful)" (*shang wu, xiu wen*).[29] As we have seen, though, valuing the martial does not mean cherishing belligerent ways of life, or to respond to violence with violence. Quite the contrary: The right way of training in the martial arts was to develop a kind of power like in Zhuangzi's gamecock: Other cocks wouldn't dare to face him, instead they would turn and run.

[29] The value given to both *wen* and *wu* is analogous to the estimation of the two famous founding fathers of the Zhou dynasty: King Wen and King Wu. Concerning the *wen* and *wu* dichotomy, see also Krzysztof Gawlikowski, "The Concept of Two Fundamental Social Principles: *Wen* and *Wu* in Chinese Classical Thought", *AION: Annali dell Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, 47 (1987), p. 387-433.