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Chinese and Western Ways of War and Their Ethics

C. Anthony Pfaff

ABSTRACT: US officials often portray the Chinese government as having few, if any, ethical boundaries in its pursuit of power. This article argues China, like Western countries, has a rich ethical tradition of constraining its use of military power. With a focus on the relationship between ways of war and ethics of war, this article relies on traditional and contemporary scholarship from both the East and the West to highlight differences in how each culture views the practical and ethical aspects of war and how these views can interact. Understanding the ethical logic available to one's rivals can enable US leaders and planners to leverage China's behavior and optimally shape US policies and actions.

Keywords: comparative ethics, just war theory, China, military ethics, strategic competition

The claim that the Chinese government cares little for ethical norms is commonly made in the context of national security. For example, in December 2020, then-Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe stated the Chinese government had “no ethical boundaries” in its pursuit of power.¹ As Ratcliffe further pointed out, the Chinese steal defense and proprietary secrets; suppress free speech, even outside China's borders; and regularly bully their neighbors over boundary issues. Thus, the Chinese government's apparent ethos is, as Ratcliffe describes it, a radical utilitarianism in which the good of the Chinese Communist Party is the only concern. Strategists might further conclude the behavior of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in war would be no less constrained.

The fact the Chinese government might not accept US norms, does not mean it accepts no norms. Ethics at the strategic level are about reconciling the demands of national security with the near-universal sentiment of limiting human suffering and the desire to conform to cultural values.² To understand another culture's military ethic, strategists must understand how the culture reconciles the achievement of success with those values and how a country's way of war shapes its ethics of war. Both Western and Chinese strategic traditions regarding armed conflict are rich with strategic and ethical analysis.

In general, a Western way of war emphasizes the imposition of one's will on an opponent, and the Chinese way of war emphasizes convincing an adversary to accept

1. John Ratcliffe, “China Is National Security Threat No. 1,” *Wall Street Journal* (website), December 3, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-national-security-threat-no-1-11607019599>.

2. Martin Cook, *The Moral Warrior: Ethics and Service in the US Military* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 21.

Chinese interests. The ethic resulting from the former is one of competing principles, where the task is to eliminate the enemy's ability to resist while avoiding harm to persons and things not necessary to this resistance and ensuring the least expense of blood and treasure. The ethic that arises from the latter is one of virtue that appears more permissive in terms of means and ends. The ethic, however, deemphasizes destruction and constrains means and ends—in the ideal, at least—by the demands of justice and benevolence.

Both East and West are inconsistent in following the practical and normative principles of these traditions. This article, therefore, avoids assessing how well either side lives up to its traditional ideal. Inconsistency, does not necessarily rob these traditions of their power. Rather, inconsistencies highlight an ideal against which state behavior can be assessed. The US commitment to human rights, for example, was used to criticize the nation's post-9/11 policies on interrogation and its use of air strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan—criticisms that led to policy changes. China has sometimes proved similarly sensitive. Despite Ratcliffe's charge that the Chinese government is conducting genetic experiments with its soldiers, the country established a bioethics committee after a researcher edited the genomes of two infants, an act the government also condemned.³

Ways and Ethics of War

Sociologist Martin Shaw describes a way of war as a method of organizing armed conflict that reflects patterns in the practice of warfighting. Ways of war are inherently practical and primarily focused on the threats a security community faces and the tools it has to confront them.⁴ How these tools are used depends on the security community's understanding of the character of war, which in turn informs its way of war, which is how it will compete and, when necessary, fight. These choices include how to organize and equip militaries, and they determine which strategies to adopt against a given foe. Presumably, state actors organize their militaries to respond to the most dangerous perceived threat, and, from any national security perspective, these threats (and the responses to them) determine the way of war the security community adopts.⁵

As an ideal, ways of war inform practice, but they do not determine it. If a country organizes to face its most serious threat, the country will not necessarily use the same capabilities in other contexts. The United States' commitment of military forces to peacekeeping missions in the Balkans, for example, does not suggest

3. Hepeng Jia, "China Approves Ethics Advisory Group after CRISPR-Babies Scandal," *Nature* (website), August 8, 2019, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-02362-5>; and Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 129–30.

4. Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005), 29, 42.

5. Colin S. Gray, "War—Continuity in Change, and Change in Continuity," *Parameters* 50, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 7.

the country has changed its view of international competition or warfighting. Moreover, the relationship is not unidirectional. Ethics also inform the way of war. For example, a commitment to minimizing collateral harms, however motivated, can encourage the development of increasingly precise weapons. Understanding the ideal helps strategists see why opponents choose capabilities, strategies, and—most important for this discussion—practical and ethical norms that guide how opponents compete and fight.

Western Way of War

Drawing on the Prussian general Carl von Clausewitz's writings, the US military, (and Western militaries more generally) tends to view the aim of war as imposing its will on the enemy.⁶ While the logic of this kind of war is simple in expression, it is difficult in application. A state has imposed its will successfully when the enemy no longer has the capacity to resist and when it eliminates the enemy's capacity to resist by shutting down the enemy's combat capability faster than the enemy can eliminate its own. Doing so relies on a strategy of annihilation and attrition that destroys as much enemy military capability as possible.⁷

The existential nature of the threat the enemy poses is another critical aspect of this view. To underscore the close association of existential threat with the Western way of war, Pamela Creed notes how President George W. Bush positioned the 9/11 terrorist attacks as an existential threat that created "character polarities" between the American people (who sacrifice to defend their rights) and the enemy (who was fueled by an "irrational hate" for the American way of life).⁸ Rather than adjudicating whether this characterization of al-Qaeda was fair, this description was as much a response to the feeling the United States was at war as it was a reflection of the cultural views of what it takes to win wars.

The point here is not that the United States only goes to war against existential threats. Rather, organizing to fight such a threat shapes the capabilities the US military creates and the strategies it adopts. When conflict arises, an existential threat provides little room for negotiation, leaving little else to do but eliminate the enemy's ability to resist. This approach closely identifies military objectives with political ones because destroying military capability, in this view, entails victory. This point is important. Imposing one's will on the enemy does not mean the enemy must adopt new goals. It simply means eliminating the enemy's ability to prevent the realization of goals.

6. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Anatol Rapoport (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books, 1968), 101.

7. C. Anthony Pfaff, *Resolving Ethical Challenges in an Era of Persistent Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2011), 9.

8. Pamela Creed, *Ethics, Norms, and the Narratives of War* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 23.

Put another way, imposing the United States's will means preserving its freedom of action while limiting the enemy's. Imposing this will is like Max Weber's concept of domination. For Weber, domination entailed involuntary obedience. He contrasted this obedience with power, which reflected an actor's ability to obtain voluntary compliance.⁹ For example, whether Saddam Hussein accepted regime change did not matter because he could do little to prevent it. The refusal of many, if not most, Iraqis to accept the new order did matter. Thus, the annihilation-based strategy that worked so well in 1991 and 2003 failed against terrorist and insurgent groups. The United States' 2003 description of its strategy to defeat Hussein as "shock and awe" was probably no coincidence.¹⁰

Western Ethic of War

The Western just-war tradition began with Aristotle and the tradition took form as St. Augustine and his successors in the Roman Catholic Church wrestled with the demands of state. Then, thinkers such as Hugo Grotius secularized its principles. Grotius is generally credited as being one of the first jurists to describe a set of laws for armed conflict. Beginning in the 1860s, when Henri Dunant proposed the first Geneva Conventions and Francis Lieber drew up a code of conduct for Union soldiers in the American Civil War, the principles of the just-war tradition found their way into international law.¹¹

In general, the just-war tradition permits war for self-defense or the defense of others against an act of aggression, which is understood as a violation of political sovereignty or territorial integrity.¹² Although not every violation of sovereignty or territory represents an existential threat, the idea of such a violation is central to justifications for war. For example, though Iraq was not an existential threat to the United States in 1991, the existential threat it posed to Kuwait featured prominently in the rationale for war.¹³ Violating another's sovereignty or territory may be permitted to prevent a gross violation of human rights or a humanitarian disaster, both of which are existential in nature. Other conditions must also hold, including legitimate authority, public declaration, last resort, likelihood of success, proportionality, and proper intent, for some just-war thinkers like

9. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 53.

10. John T. Correll, "What Happened to Shock and Awe?," *Air Force Magazine* (website), November 3, 2003, <https://www.airforcemag.com/article/1103shock/>.

11. Brian Orend, *The Morality of War* (Peterborough, CA: Broadview Press, 2006), 9–26; and "The ICRC and the Geneva Convention (1863–1864), International Committee for the Red Cross (website), December 29, 2004, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/57jnv.htm>.

12. Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace, Book II*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), quoted in *The Ethics of War: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Gregory M. Reichberg, Henrik Syse, and Endre Begby (Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2006), 401–404; and Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 62.

13. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 220.

St. Augustine.¹⁴ Taken together, these conditions constrain when the US military may pursue even a just cause, thus ensuring violence is not committed for trivial or futile ends.

In this view, winning wars emphasizes the destruction of enemy military capability and logically excludes things that do not directly contribute to this capability. Combatants must discriminate between targets associated with the enemy's military capability and those that are not, and only use force proportional to the value of the military objective. The Western just-war tradition also excludes other things, regardless of how they contribute to enemy military capability, such as hospitals and infrastructure associated with food and water, even if they are used by the military. Justifications for these exclusions include human rights and setting conditions for a better state of peace.¹⁵

For ethical decision making, the Western military ethic places three imperatives in tension: the imperative to win, the imperative to protect the force, and the imperative to avoid noncombatant and other collateral harms. The imperative to win draws moral justification from the justice of the cause. The imperative to protect the force draws justification from both the conservation of forces from the standpoint of the first imperative and soldiers having the right not to be sacrificed for inadequate reason. Finally, the imperative to avoid harming noncombatants and committing other collateral harms draws justification from the notion that doing so is gratuitous in some cases and unethical in others. Even when excluded things might facilitate the destruction of enemy forces, avoiding them does not prevent it.¹⁶

The United States and its partners have not always used force as discriminately as their ethics generally require, but violating a norm is different from rejecting it. Normative power is expressed both in terms of compliance and in terms of how others respond to violations. For example, Sir Arthur Harris, also known as "Bomber Harris," who directed an indiscriminate bombing campaign against German cities in World War II, was "slighted and snubbed" after the war and did not receive the honors others of similar rank and experience did. Moreover, though the names of the fighter pilots who died during the Battle of Britain are inscribed on plaques at Westminster Abbey, the plaques do not mention the Royal Air Force Bomber Command or its crews.¹⁷ In fact, despite conducting indiscriminate bombing campaigns against Japanese cities after the war, the

14. Orend, *Morality of War*, 31–62, 90–96.

15. Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 135; and Jeff McMahan, "Realism, Morality, and War," in *The Ethics of War and Peace: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, ed. Terry Nardin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 88.

16. Pfaff, *Resolving Ethical Challenges*, 8.

17. Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 323–25.

United States endorsed additions to the Geneva Conventions that reinforced the protection of civilians as a legal requirement.¹⁸

Chinese Way of War

Both Western and Chinese views on military matters have a long, complex, and intellectually rich history. Strategists must be careful about reducing these matters to one school of thought, much less one thinker. Nonetheless, just as Clausewitz has an outsize influence on Western thinking, Sun Tzu has the same effect on Chinese thought. Ping-cheung Lo, a contemporary scholar of Chinese military ethics, remarks that contemporary Chinese discourse on *The Art of War* is “dominated by PLA authors.”¹⁹ Of course, both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu are read in both the United States and China. Sun Tzu’s methods, however, have not informed the US way of war in the same way they appear to have informed the Chinese way.

Western readers are likely familiar with *Unrestricted Warfare*, one of the most prominent applications of Sun Tzu. Written by Chinese then-colonels Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, this book contrasts Sun Tzu with Clausewitz, arguing China should follow an unrestricted warfare strategy because no competitors are able to impose their will on the United States, given its conventional superiority. The colonels call for “using all means, including armed force or nonarmed force, military and nonmilitary, and lethal and nonlethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.”²⁰

This view would exploit the point where the Western way of war closes the gap between military and political objectives. Since political and military objectives do not have a necessary connection, success depends on bringing to bear other elements of national power and integrating them into the military effort. This feature necessarily draws in nonviolent means of competition that emphasize coercion and deception, which Weber would have referred to as “power,” as opposed to brute force and attrition, which he would have referred to as “domination.”²¹ While brute force has its place, its use reflects a failure of the ideal and, thus, should be the exception rather than the rule.²² Moreover, this view connects the nature and quality of civil governance with military capability because the civil government wields the full range of the tools of conflict. In this

18. Adam Roberts and Richard Guelff, ed., *Documents on the Laws of War* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1989), 271–72.

19. Ping-cheung Lo, “Warfare Ethics in Sunzi’s Art of War? Historical Controversies and Contemporary Perspectives,” *Journal of Military Ethics* 11, no. 2 (August 2012): 124.

20. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare* (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, February 1999), 7.

21. Weber, *Economy and Society*, 53.

22. Lo, “Warfare Ethics,” 122.

context, Confucian writers notably prefaced their works on military affairs with discussions of statecraft.²³

Additionally, each way of war seeks to realize the ends of war differently. In *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, François Jullien contrasts Western “means-ends” thinking with Chinese “opportunism.”²⁴ Although the term “Western” may not accurately and completely describe US strategic decision making, Jullien observes Western military thinking determines the right objective and then tries to organize the resources available to achieve it. In this way, a general engaging in battle is much like a ship captain undertaking a voyage. As Jullien observes, “[B]oth operate within constantly shifting fields, full of unpredictabilities, to the very end never certain of triumphing over the enemy or making it to port.”²⁵ Success is never guaranteed; friction and chance can always undo the best plans.

According to Jullien, Chinese thinking analyzes a situation in terms of the potential to gain from it. The generals’ role here is to understand what factors promote their interests and then act when those factors align to advance the interests. Sun Tzu captures the difference in chapter four when he states, “The victorious troops thus begin by winning and only then engage in battle, whereas the defeated troops begin by engaging in battle and only then try to win.”²⁶ Put another way, the troops see the potential first, and then they engage to realize the potential. Like Jullien’s description of the Western view, the Chinese view acknowledges some factors will always be uncontrollable. Rather than trying to control or to minimize the factors’ effects on achieving the intended objective, the Chinese view avoids setting a single, discrete objective in the first place and seeks to identify and act on opportunities to improve one’s situation relative to the enemy. In further describing the Chinese view, Jullien states, “[C]ircumstances may often be unforeseen, even unforeseeable, and unprecedented, which is why it is not possible to draw up a plan in advance. Rather, they contain a certain potential from which, if we are agile and adaptable, we can profit.”²⁷

The approach described here is reflected in Chinese doctrine. In response to superior US conventional capabilities, the PLA employs a concept of *shashoujian* or “assassin’s mace,” an umbrella term that refers to the doctrinal development and acquisition of weapons systems aimed at enabling the inferior to defeat

23. Ping-cheung Lo, “Varieties of Statecraft and Warfare Ethics in Early China,” in *Chinese Just War Ethics: Origin, Development, and Dissent*, ed. Ping-cheung Lo and Sumner B. Twiss (New York: Routledge, 2015), 8.

24. François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004).

25. Jullien, *Treatise on Efficacy*, 40–41.

26. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1971), 55, quoted in Jullien, *Treatise on Efficacy*, 42–43.

27. Jullien, *Treatise on Efficacy*, 38–39.

the superior.²⁸ This doctrine relies on surprise and deceptive and unorthodox methods “unknown to an adversary.” The means employed under this doctrine—such as those described above—are intended to achieve the effects of deterring, decapitating, blinding, paralyzing, or disintegrating enemy forces. Interestingly, disintegration in this context refers to breaking down command and control.²⁹ “Destroying” the enemy does not make this list. This omission fits into a view that sees the use of force—and the other elements of national power—as a means to limit conflict and avoid escalation to conventional war—which, being the weaker power, the PLA would likely lose.

Paradoxically, a view that seeks to limit conflict can expand the roles force can play. As Zheng Wang argues in *Never Forget National Humiliation*, China’s perceived humiliation by the West serves as a barrier to negotiation and trust and places the West and China in conflict from which they cannot escape. Consequently, future perceived humiliations could paradoxically escalate into war. For example, in 1995 after the Clinton administration permitted then-President of Taiwan Lee Teng-hui to travel to the United States to deliver the commencement address at his alma mater Cornell University, China recalled its ambassador from Washington, rejected the appointment of a new US ambassador to China, and conducted large-scale military exercises. As Wang describes, “A very strong sense of crisis and insecurity has become an important theme of the national political discourse in China.”³⁰ Nothing indicates the situation would have escalated to violence; however, the inclusion of the military in China’s response to the perceived political affront underscores the seriousness with which the Chinese take such offenses. Imagining a set of circumstances that would lead to a greater crisis is difficult.

Fear of future humiliation is not the only normative principle driving Chinese foreign policy. Moreover, nothing in this analysis should suggest China’s competition with the United States is motivated by anything but a desire to surpass it as a global power, as described in Jonathan Ward’s *China’s Vision of Victory*, or to establish an international order China considers more favorable, as described in Rush Doshi’s *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*.³¹ Nor should this analysis suggest China and the United States’

28. Andrew F. Krepinevich, “The Pentagon’s Wasting Assets,” *Foreign Affairs* 88, no. 4 (July–August 2009); and Jason E. Bruzdinski, “Demystifying *Shashoujian*: China’s ‘Assassin’s Mace’ Concept,” in *Civil Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*, ed. Andrew Scobell and Larry Wortzel (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College Press, 2004), 333.

29. Bruzdinski, “Demystifying *Shashoujian*,” 341, 344.

30. Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 132, 165, 184.

31. Jonathan D. T. Ward, *China’s Vision of Victory* (Arlington, VA: Atlas Publishing and Media Company LLC, 2019), 20; and Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China’s Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 3.

views of just order are moral equivalents. However, an ethic exists that can guide both the ends China seeks and the means used to seek them.

Chinese Ethic of War

In practice, the PLA grounds its military ethics in Marxist-Leninist ideology, which typically expresses itself as a kind of utilitarianism in which socialism is to be advanced to the maximum extent practicable.³² Nevertheless, since the 1980s, traditional Chinese thought, especially Confucianism, has found its way back into Chinese civic culture as an antidote to encroaching Western values.³³ Not surprisingly, such thinking has migrated to the military, which has integrated traditional views with its military ethics programs that reflect a socialist foundation with Chinese characteristics.³⁴ These traditional ethics took shape largely during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), during which boundaries were in flux, leading to brutal wars as larger states consolidated power. This competition gave rise to schools of thought that asked the question, “Can a nation govern so well that it becomes a great power, and how should it moderate the destruction that works against its great-power status?” Eventually, Confucianism would be established as a kind of state religion that informed how dynasties that consolidated power would govern and fight.³⁵

The writing of contemporary PLA scholar Zhao Feng reflects these ethics. Zhao Feng argues for “moral warfare,” in which one seeks to be morally superior to one’s enemy.³⁶ Such a view may appear on the surface as a particularly cynical form of information warfare. Yet, for moral warfare to be effective, practitioners must make an honest attempt to be moral. If not, they must present a stronger moral case than the enemy does. This observation opens the door to the kind of traditional just-war thinking described above, which, like its Western counterpart, generally favors avoiding aggression and employing means that limit destruction and the loss of innocent lives.

On the surface, an ethic of war based on Sun Tzu’s work seems odd. Indeed, Chinese works on war during the Warring States period often offered no moral justifications for the resort to, or the use of arms, against another state and often argued resorting to war to increase the state’s territory or power was equally

32. Mark Metcalf, “In the Service of Military Combat Readiness: A Survey of 21st Century PLA Scholarship on the Role of Military Ethics in Warfare” (unpublished manuscript, December 6, 2019), Microsoft Word file.

33. Yi-Huah Jiang, “Confucian Political Theory in Contemporary China,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 156–63; and Metcalf, “Military Combat Readiness.”

34. Metcalf, “Military Combat Readiness.”

35. Lo, “Varieties of Statecraft,” 3–7.

36. Zhao Feng, “军事伦理学应当研究道德范畴” [Military ethics should investigate the scope of moral war], *南京政治学院学报* [*Journal of Nanjing Institute of Politics*] 19, no. 4 (2003): 86–88, quoted in Metcalf, “Military Combat Readiness.”

justified as wars of defense.³⁷ Sun Tzu's work falls into this category of amoral analysis of warfare. Of the seven military classics, Sun Tzu's is best known for the absence of ethical thought and was criticized by contemporary Confucian thinkers for this absence.³⁸

Confucian thought makes an important contribution to Chinese military ethical traditions. For example, Mencius, an early Confucian thinker, condemned aggressive wars intended to expand territory and, in the spirit of the Western concept of *jus ad bellum* (or the "justice of going to war"), "encourage[d] wars of self-defense against aggression" as well as "punitive expeditions" undertaken by rightfully authorized state actors to address a perceived wrong.³⁹ The *Spring and Autumn Annals*, believed to have been written by Confucius himself, specifies self-defense, rectifying an injustice, and humanitarian intervention as conditions for a just war while excluding preemption. Also, like Western just-war traditions, these works include conditions such as legitimate authority, right intention, and public declaration.⁴⁰ Unlike the Western tradition, Confucius's view, at least as expressed in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, qualifies the granting of permission to go to war with the concept of *ren*, which places an emphasis on humanity. So, even a putative just cause like self-defense may fall short of being moral if its pursuit diminishes human flourishing.⁴¹

Mencius advocated for *jus in bello* (or "justice in war") notions of immunity for noncombatants and limited destruction. Other thinkers, like Xunzi, contributed concepts such as "legitimate authority," which includes justice and humanity as a prerequisite for this legitimacy—an inclusion compatible with Western views.⁴² Moreover, this justice and humanity extend from the character of the ruler to the conduct of war itself.⁴³ In this way, the just (*yi*) and benevolent (*ren*) character of the ruler constrains both when he can fight and how.⁴⁴

Although this Confucian contribution arose out of concerns that views like Sun Tzu's did not adequately address ethical matters, the interpretation of *The Art of War* as amoral may not be the best one. Prudential and moral norms are found throughout the entirety of the text. Emphasizing restraint, Sun Tzu argues at the beginning that war should be avoided, but when this fails, one should only rely "on

37. David Graff, "The Chinese Concept of Righteous War," in *The Prism of Just War: Asian and Western Perspectives on the Legitimate Use of Military Force*, ed. Howard M. Hensel (New York: Routledge, 2016), 196–97.

38. Lo, "Varieties of Statecraft," 115.

39. Aaron Stalnaker, "Xunzi's Moral Analysis of War and Some of Its Contemporary Implications," *Journal of Military Ethics* 11, no. 2 (August 2012): 98.

40. Kam-por Yu, "Confucian Views on War as Seen in the *Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*," *Dao* 9, no. 1 (March 2010): 104–5.

41. Yu, "Confucian Views on War," 110.

42. Stalnaker, "Xunzi's Moral Analysis," 98.

43. Graff, "Concept of Righteous War," 200.

44. Lo and Twiss, *Chinese Just War Ethics*, 8.

smart strategies and tactics rather than a display of maximum force.” Moreover, Sun Tzu, argues for a way of war that prefers preservation to destruction, even when considering enemy formations.⁴⁵ Of course, practical reasons for preferring preservation exist. As Andrew Seth Meyer observes, Sun-Tzu insists “every casualty of battle represents a loss for the victorious commander and his ruler: every friendly soldier killed was of course an asset lost, but every enemy soldier killed, every enemy provision destroyed, and every enemy fortification razed were also potential assets forfeited.”⁴⁶

In this regard, the interpretation of Sun Tzu’s work as “coldly pragmatic” is not surprising.⁴⁷ His concern was armies consume resources, and, as a result, their use of resources must generate more resources than have been consumed; otherwise, both war and the state are unsustainable.⁴⁸ Understanding the continuity between governance and military affairs not generally present in Western thought is important. For both Sun Tzu and Confucian thinkers of the time, “virtue, benevolence, and righteousness” served a “force multiplier” that increased one’s chance for, if not guaranteed, victory. Sun Tzu may have diverged from Confucian thinkers on the last point. He saw moral superiority as an advantage, but one that was neither a necessary nor sufficient requirement for victory.⁴⁹

Mencius and Xunzi, like others at the time, did see moral superiority as such a requirement.⁵⁰ Sun Tzu’s preference for restraint seems to arise from previous moral commitments to a just and benevolent order, not simply a means of effective resource management. Thus, Lo sees Sun Tzu’s ethics as similar to those argued for by Henry Sidgwick, whose utilitarian “two-fold rule” insisted force should only be used in pursuit of objectives that will lead to victory, which serves a just cause—and, even then, only as much as is proportional to the value of the objective.⁵¹ Although such an ethic does not fully account for all intuitions about the morality of war, it does prohibit attacking purely civilian targets and the disproportionate uses of force, regardless of the argument made about the overall effect on ending the war successfully. Moreover, as Michael Walzer notes, Sidgwick’s rule—and, by extension, Sun Tzu’s preferences—at least establishes rules of war exist, which further distinguishes it from murder or robbery.⁵²

45. Lo, “Warfare Ethics,” 118.

46. Andrew Seth Meyer, trans., *The Dao of the Military: Liu An’s Art of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 13.

47. Graff, “Concept of Righteous War,” 202.

48. Meyer, *Dao of the Military*, 14.

49. Graff, “Concept of Righteous War,” 209, 201.

50. Stalnaker, “Xunzi’s Moral Analysis,” 101; and Graff, “Concept of Righteous War,” 200.

51. Lo, “Warfare Ethics,” 120–22; and Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 129.

52. Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 128.

Sun Tzu's account is not entirely utilitarian in the same way Sidgwick's is. Maximizing victory in service to a just cause says nothing about the justice of an act. Indeed, a major criticism of Sidgwick's view is it permits too much: No act, no matter how vicious or indiscriminate, would be impermissible as long as it contributed to victory and the harm that was committed was proportional to the contribution. If strategists accept Sun Tzu's view is—or at least can be—compatible with the Confucian concerns described, then acts of violence and coercion maximizing a just and benevolent order would be insufficient because these conditions would not stray very far from Sidgwick's view. Rather, to the extent acts of violence and coercion serve justice and benevolence, they must retain the character of these virtues.

Many of these ideas have been expressed in some form in official Chinese documents. Three scholars from the PLA Army Engineering University pointed out China's 2013 national defense white paper intentionally promulgated a military ethic centered on the ideas of "justice, peace, and humanitarianism" that drew on both historical and contemporary texts.⁵³ These sentiments are reaffirmed in the 2019 national defense white paper.⁵⁴ Although neither paper specifically references military ethics, each expresses a set of norms Confucius would recognize. Thus, blending Sun Tzu and Confucian views on the conduct of war, strategists end up with an approach that more closely resembles neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, emphasizing the agent as opposed to the act.

Like utilitarian accounts, virtue ethics do not rule out any act. Unlike utilitarianism, virtue ethics include character traits associated with the human good.⁵⁵ This complex idea of human good, often described as "flourishing," rests on the notion that virtues facilitate the fulfillment of human potential. Thus, these traits would rule out acts that maximize a good, like happiness or interest, if the acts did not also reflect the virtue. Since agents must discern the best way to achieve an end, practical reason is inseparable from virtue.⁵⁶ What matters is what the virtuous person would do given the alternatives at hand. If all the alternatives are terrible, then the virtuous person may do terrible things, though the person would generally choose the least terrible alternative.

53. Zheng Zhen, Zhang Liping, and Hao Lihua, "Transcending Language and Promulgating Military Ethics from the English Translation of the 2013 China National Defense Strategy," *Journal of English Studies* 1 (2015), quoted in Metcalf, "Military Combat Readiness"; and State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (PRC), *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* (Beijing: State Council Information Office of the PRC, 2013).

54. State Council Information Office of the PRC, *China's National Defense in the New Era* (Beijing: State Council of the PRC, 2019).

55. Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 25.

56. Nancy Sherman, *The Fabric of Character: Aristotle's Theory of Virtue* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1989), 3–4.

Similarly, a Confucian ethic requires the authority who wages war to have the “mandate of heaven,” which requires rulers to possess the virtues of justice and benevolence.⁵⁷ Such virtues, when applied to war, may also appear utilitarian in application; however, they are constrained by nonutilitarian, humanitarian concerns associated with the relevant virtue. To the extent such an ethic is followed, it will constrain action where Sidgwick does not. Possessing these virtues requires rulers to subordinate their interests to the good of the people over whom they rule, suggesting an independent standard against which rulers can be criticized. For example, a ruler of the Zhou dynasty putting the interests of his concubine over the needs of his army was seen as a moral failure subject to criticism, if not remorse.⁵⁸

Although Sun Tzu’s ethics may not be as fully developed as those of other thinkers of the time, the privileging of just and benevolent governance as the authority for the use of force suggests his commitment to restraint is not merely pragmatic; rather it rests on a deeper notion of human flourishing. Considered this way, Sun Tzu’s work may be more compatible with Confucian thought than it first appears to be. This notion of restraint harmonizes with an understanding of war that sees its purpose as shaping interests rather than imposing will. Shaping interests requires the adversary to have sufficient capability and capacity to act in a desired way; widespread destruction would undermine this end.

Shifting the emphasis from imposing the state’s will to changing the enemy’s mind means focusing on engaging the people rather than destroying the enemy. Whereas the Western ethic seeks to employ the most force permissible; given the limits of discrimination and proportionality, the Chinese view seeks to use the least force possible given the demands of a just and benevolent order.

Conclusion

This article has avoided assessments of how well the United States and China uphold their traditions. The deceptive practices former Director of National Intelligence Ratcliffe complained about may be violations by traditional Chinese standards. The employment of these practices, however, can appear justified, given both their efficacy and their lowering of the chance of escalation. Still, when a government does not adhere to its ethics, it becomes vulnerable to moral critique, which can have practical consequences should the critique undermine the actor’s legitimacy.

57. Philip J. Ivanhoe, “‘Heaven’s Mandate’ and the Concept of War in Early Confucianism,” in *Ethics and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Religious and Secular Perspectives*, ed. Sohail H. Hashmi and Steven P. Lee (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 272.

58. Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1993), 3–4.

This article should clearly convey Western and Chinese just-war traditions have more similarities than differences. Whatever happens in practice, both cultures rely on long traditions that specify when war is justified and constrain the actions taken in its conduct. In addition, these permissions are similar because they incorporate conceptions of justice and permit war only to promote this justice, and both traditions recognize certain persons and things should be excluded from harm, independent of how this exclusion would impact the chances for victory. To the extent Western and Chinese war-ethics traditions are different, these differences may lie in the Chinese emphasis on humanity and human flourishing that can look like consequentialist reasoning and, when done poorly, likely is. In fact, the Marxist-Leninist ethic, which clearly places the party's good above just about everything else, is frequently in tension with China's more traditional ideals, often resulting in catastrophic decisions, such as the one to intern ethnic Uighurs.

This article has focused on ideals within two rich and complex traditions. As a result, the utility of its analysis is limited to the extent the practical and moral traditions discussed here have impacted Western and Chinese views. The literature suggests this impact has been influential in each case. Human difficulty with ideals, however, ensures there will be numerous exceptions to the ideals. Moreover, war is evolutionary, and no way of war or its ethic is static or enduring. Although a way of war like Sun Tzu's which relies on coercion and deception, may prevail over one that emphasizes firepower and destruction, a new way will evolve in response. Strategists developing this new way of war will be responsible for ensuring the resulting ethic is one that harmonizes with both the requirement to win and the demands of human flourishing.

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