

## Four Classical Military Texts

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**Abstract.** To what extent can we detect text relations by studying word relations? As an experiment, I here take up the four classical Chinese military texts: Sūndž Bīngfǎ 孫子兵法 (Sūndž), Wúdž or Wú Chǐ 吳起 (WC), Szmǎ Fǎ 司馬法 (SMF), and Wèi Lyáudž 尉繚子 (WLZ). I find that the experiment yields suggestive results.

**Common Lines.** One test of relatedness between two texts is identity of nontrivial sentences or phrases. An example is 日費千金 (“at a daily cost of a thousand in gold”), which occurs in Sūndž 2 and 13 and in WLZ 9. There are four identities of phrase between Sūndž and WLZ. Appendix 1 gives all such linkages among the four texts.<sup>1</sup> Ignoring some fine points and concentrating on the general pattern, we find that:

- Sūndž, WC, and WLZ are closely related. Each is linked to each of the others by identical phrases, and some phrases are common to all three.
- SMF, however, has significant word or phrase links *only* with the Sūndž.

Historical relationships which might give rise to this situation include:

- (1) (Date) SMF > Sūndž, and then Sūndž > Wú Chǐ and Wèi Lyáudž, each of the latter two relating to the more recent Sūndž, but not to the older SMF<sup>2</sup>
- (2) (Location) Sūndž > SMF (both Chí); separately Sūndž > Wú Chǐ and Wèi Lyáudž (both Ngwèi), all texts relating to earlier ones *in that line of descent*

The key difference is the relative age of SMF and Sūndž. The two options can be sharpened in this way: WLZ 3 mentions Hwán-gūng [Spring and Autumn], who won with an army of 100,000; Wú Chǐ, who won with 70,000, and “Master Wǔ 武子,” who needed only 30,000. The last named is Sūndž (also known as Sūn Wǔ 孫武).<sup>3</sup> Then WLZ *thought of itself* as coming after Sūndž and Wú Chǐ, so our options are more precisely (1) SMF > Sūndž > WC > WLZ or (2) Sūndž > SMF plus separately Sūndž > WC > WLZ > This does not yet distinguish between options (1) and (2).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For reasons given elsewhere (Brooks **Aetiology**), I ignore the SBTK variant of Sūndž 9 (coded in the concordance as “A9A”) and use only the Seven Military Classics text (“A9B”).

<sup>2</sup>This is close to the position in Sawyer **Seven** 17; my own conclusion favors a later date for SMF. I here acknowledge the assistance of Ralph Sawyer, who at WSWG 10 (April 1998) suggested that I give special attention to the term 客 “guest” in SMF. For his own doubts about its early date, see Sawyer **Seven** 17 and the notes to his translation.

<sup>3</sup>For the evolution of Sūndž’s name, see further Brooks **Sūn Wǔ**.

<sup>4</sup>The word links show that WLZ is aware of the names Sūndž and Wú Chǐ and the texts associated with them. By contrast, WLZ 8 and 22 mention Tàì-gūng 太公, the reputed author of the Lyòu Táu, but not that book. The reply of “Tàì-gūng” in WLZ 22 duplicates nothing in the Lyòu Táu. WLZ thus knows of a Tàì-gūng *persona*, but not a Lyòu Táu *text*.

**Sźmǎ Fǎ.** In Appendix 2 are lists of words unique to or notably common in SMF, as well as words which seem to be significantly rare or altogether absent from it. The following words are not unique to SMF but commoner in it than in the others:

- virtues associated with Confucianism: 仁, 義, 信, 讓, and 賢, also 善 in a moral sense and 至 modifying a following noun (as 至教).
- terms sometimes associated with Confucian political theory: 民, 正.
- references to ancient rulers and their constructions, a rhetorical device also common if not unique in Confucian political rhetoric: 夏后氏, 殷, 周, 靈臺.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the rhetoric of SMF shows Confucian influence.<sup>5</sup> This tends to suggest a late date. Among the words notably *absent or rare* in SMF are:

- Several of the numbers: 十, 千, 萬 (百 is also not common, and occurs mostly in a civil or political sense: 百姓, 百官).
- Several military terms: 將, 城, 圍, 彼 and 客 in the sense of “enemy” (the standard 敵 “enemy” is also relatively rare); the terrain types 山, 水, and 澤.

SMF here shows an evolution beyond such elementary matters (important in Sündž) as the influence of terrain on operations.<sup>6</sup> The general impression is that SMF is later in substance and content than Sündž, and is venturing into more theoretical areas. This argues for Sündž > SMF, which favors Possibility 2.

**Sündž.** Each Sündž chapter now begins with 孫子曰 “Sündž says,” but the Yínchywèshān text has this formula only in the outer chapters, both front and back (Sündž 1-2, 4, and 12-13), not in the interior chapters (Sündž 5 and 6).<sup>7</sup> It appears that a previously unascribed military manual was extended by someone who wished to associate it with Sündž, the victor of Mǎ-líng (0343). SMF is attributed to an earlier Chí figure, Sźmǎ Ràng-jyè (late 06c; see SJ 64). Given the advanced content of SMF, that earlier claim is not credible; here as often, a later work has been attributed to an earlier, more authoritative author. We have again Sündž > SMF.

**Wú Chǐ.** Association of this text with an 05c Ngwèi general is another competitive attribution, this time in favor of Ngwèi. There are three forms of that attribution. (1) Paragraphs beginning “Wúdž said,” in the manner of the Sündž. These do not mention a particular ruler of Ngwèi. (2) Paragraphs in which Wǔ-hóu of Ngwèi (r 0396-0371) asks a tactical question, and “Wú Chǐ” answers. (3) WC 1:1 has Wú Chǐ honored by Wǔn-hóu of Ngwèi (r 0425-0397), a still earlier association.

**Political Context.** Chí lost ground militarily after its triumph of 0343. In 0315, it entered the politically disturbed neighboring state of Yēn, pacified it, and annexed it, but was expelled in 0314 by a coalition of other states.

<sup>5</sup>The Confucian tone might also be due to later interference. This may have happened to the present WLZ, which seems more Confucian than the fragmentary Yínchywèshān text (Hàn), or the extracts included in the Chyǔn-shū Jǐ-yào (Táng, but probably based on a Hàn text).

<sup>6</sup>I have elsewhere shown (Brooks **Actiology**) how understanding of terrain types increased progressively through the stages of military knowledge represented in the Sündž, and how operational concerns were subsequently replaced by logistic and administrative matters.

<sup>7</sup>The incipits of Sündž 3 and 7-11 at Yínchywèshān are unfortunately lost, but the pattern (with specific attributions to Sündž only in the outer chapters) seems clear.

This was a major humiliation, and in c0313 the Chí King (Sywǎn-wáng) founded a study group at Jì-syà to provide statecraft theory to the throne. In 0286, Chí attacked and annexed Sùng, but was again expelled by a coalition; Chí Mǐn-wáng lost most of his territory, and died in a remote town. His colorless successor Syāng-wáng was followed in 0264 by the more energetic King Jyèn, who favored Confucianism. He rebuilt the Jì-syà study group, and in 0258 appointed the noted Confucian Sywǎndž to head it. These were conditions favorable to the writing of a new Chí work, rethinking the whole art of war in Confucian terms, and claiming to be the earliest military work, and I propose that scenario for the Sžm Fǎ. The following series of text attributions:

- Sündž: associated with Sūn Bìn of Chí (mid 04c)
- Wú Chǐ; early material attributed to the time of Ngwèi Wǔ-hóu (early 04c)
- Wú Chǐ: later material attributed to the time of Ngwèi Wǎn-hóu (mid 05c)
- Sžmǎ Fǎ: attributed to Sžmǎ Ràng-jyǔw of Chí (late 06c)

can be read as attempts to position each new work as older than the previous one.

**External Attestation.** The Sžmǎ Fǎ was known to the core of the pro-Confucian Lǚ-shì Chūn/Chyōu (LSCC 1-12; postface 0241), and must be earlier than that date. As noted, Wèi Lyáudž does not share sentences with SMF, but it is aware of some of the SMF ideas. Using war to correct unrighteousness (SMF 1) is taken up in WLZ 10, and the contrast between punishment in attack but virtue in rule (SMF 1) is given a new expression in WLZ 1. The probability is then that WLZ 1-10<sup>8</sup> came after the SMF, and sought to develop some concepts first advanced by the SMF.

**Conclusion.** We would then have the following chronology:

- 0343 Chí victory at Mǎ-líng; Sündž in progress
- 0314 Chí expelled from Yēn; humiliating defeat
- c0300 **Sündž** 1-12 associated with the Chí victor of Mǎ-ling (mid 04c)
- c0290 **Wú Chǐ** early layer associated with Ngwèi Wǎn-hóu (late 05c)
- 0285 Chí expelled from Sùng; disastrous defeat
- c0270 Wú Chǐ later layer associated with Ngwèi Wǔ-hóu (mid 05c)
- c0266 Sündž 13 (on espionage) added as an update to the Sündž
- 0264 Confucian-oriented King Jyèn comes to the throne of Chí
- c0260 Confucian **Sžmǎ Fǎ** associated with Sžmǎ Ràng-jyǔw of Chí (late 06c)
- 0241 Confucian-leaning LSCC 1-12 (Chín) knows SMF
- c0238 **Wèi Lyáudž** 1-10 (Ngwèi) develops some ideas from SMF

In sum, I find that word relations, if properly combined with other forms of evidence, may indeed be useful in the study of text relations.

### *Works Cited*

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 E Bruce Brooks. Sūn Wǔ 孫武. WSP v1 (2010) 242-244  
 Ralph W Sawyer. The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China. Westview 1993

<sup>8</sup>Its earlier segment (WLZ 10 concludes the address to a ruler with which WLZ 1 begins). Notice that developments of SMF occur at its endpoints: WLZ 1 and 10. The WLZ text was later expanded by the addition of WLZ 11-24 in Chín, probably c0232. Detailed arguments for these conclusions must await a future occasion; for the present, I offer them as plausible.

## Appendix 1

## Verbal Contacts in the Military Texts

## A. Phrase Contacts Among Sūndǔ, Wú Chǐ, and Wèi Lyáudǔ

## Sūndǔ and Wú Chǐ (WC):

百戰不殆 Sūndǔ 3; WC 2  
 故用兵之法 Sūndǔ 3, 7, 8; WC 3  
 以近待遠，以佚待勞 Sūndǔ 7, WC 3  
 以一擊十 Sūndǔ 10; WC 5

## Wú Chǐ (WC) and Wèi Lyáudǔ (WLZ):

何也 WC 1; WLZ 8  
 起曰 WC 1; WLZ 8  
 必死則生 WC 3; WLZ 22  
 橫行天下 WC 3; WLZ 22  
 在於一人 WC 4; WLZ 8  
 鼓之則進，金之則止 WC 5; WLZ 18 [expanded]  
 何者 WC 6; WLZ 1

## Sūndǔ and Wèi Lyáudǔ (WLZ):

善用兵者 Sūndǔ 2, 3, 4, 7, 11; WLZ 4  
 日費千金 Sūndǔ 2, 13; WLZ 9  
 未之有也 Sūndǔ 2, WLZ 24  
 覆軍殺將 Sūndǔ 8; WLZ 3

## All Three:

此五者 Sūndǔ 3; WC 1; WLZ 4  
 故曰 Sūndǔ 3, 4, 6, 10, 12; WC 1, 3, 4, 5; WLZ 2, 3, 4, 8, 17, 24  
 三軍之衆 Sūndǔ 5; WC 4; WLZ 8, 18

## B. Phrase Contacts Between Sūndǔ and Sǔmǎ Fǎ

## Sūndǔ and Sǔmǎ Fǎ (SMF):

不可用也 Sūndǔ 10; SMF 2  
 地之道也 Sūndǔ 10; SMF 2

## Appendix 2

## Some Word Usages in Sǔmǎ Fǎ

## Unique in SMF (and occurring more than 2x in that text)

8x: 誓  
 6x: 后 [5x in 夏后氏; 1x in 后土], 于 [cf 於, only 14x out of 247x for all four texts]  
 5x: 苟, 厥, 堪, 誦, 懾  
 4x: 技, 勉  
 3x: 否, 舒, 暇, 冢

## Absent from SMF (in a four-text total of 35x or more):

如 “if, like” (the four-text total is 97x); cf 若 (27x of a four-text total of 76)  
 十 “ten” (the four-text total is 60x)  
 萬 “myriad” (the four-text total is 59x)  
 千 “thousand” (the four-text total is 46x)  
 吏 “officer” and 數 “number” (the four-text total for both is 39x)  
 備 “prepare” (the four-text total is 38x)  
 何 “what” (the four-text total is 35x)