

Daoism to Maoism and Everything in Between:  
Operational and Strategic Thinking in the People's  
Republic of China

A Monograph

by

MAJ Eric S. McCall  
US Army



School of Advanced Military Studies  
US Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, KS

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Name of Candidate: MAJ Eric S. McCall

Monograph Title: Daoism to Maoism and Everything in Between: Operational and Strategic Thinking in the People's Republic of China

Approved by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Monograph Director  
Gerald S. Gorman, PhD

\_\_\_\_\_, Seminar Leader  
Heiko Diehl, COL

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies  
Kirk C. Dorr, COL

Accepted this 23rd day of May 2017 by:

\_\_\_\_\_, Director, Graduate Degree Programs  
Robert F. Baumann, PhD

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## Abstract

From Daoism to Maoism and Everything in Between: Operational and Strategic Thinking in the People's Republic of China, by MAJ Eric S. McCall, US Army, 45 pages.

After two centuries of humiliation and loss, the People's Republic of China is now a major political and economic actor. Western observers expected China to liberalize with economic growth, and for China's rise to be peaceful. China's economy is now second only to the United States, but China is increasingly authoritarian. While China's rise was largely peaceful for decades, China is increasingly belligerent and aggressively seeks territorial expansion. While Chinese leaders have worked diligently to understand the West, Western leaders have done far less to understand China.

Among the many ideologies, philosophies and ideas across China's long history, Daoism holds a unique and powerful influence even today. For Western students of China, Daoism is a good place to begin their study.

This monograph seeks to determine the extent of Daoist influence on contemporary operational and strategic thinking in the People's Republic of China. This monograph will address the research question, "How has Daoism influenced Chinese strategy and operational art since 1949?" To answer this question, this monograph includes an overview of Daoism, influences on military thought in China until 1850, influences on military thought from 1850-1949, and contemporary influences.

The central thesis is that Daoism substantially influenced contemporary Chinese operational and strategic thinking in three ways: through Daoist influence on Sun-Tzu and other ancient military thinkers, through Daoist influence on Mao Zedong's adaptation of Marxism into "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," and through the current hybrid of ancient and modern approaches that dominates current national security thought in the People's Republic of China.

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## Acronyms

CPC	Communist Party of China
KMT	Kuomintang (Nationalist Party)
NSS	National Security Strategy (United States government document)
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PLAAF	People's Liberation Army Air Force
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China (Taiwan)
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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## Introduction

There are five cornerstones of the United States open to exploitation: their military, their money, their talent, their voting system, and their fear of adversaries....China should use its strength to attack the enemy's shortcomings. Attack wherever the enemy is afraid of being hit. Wherever the enemy is weak.....What the US fears most is taking casualties. China should sink two US aircraft carriers. We'll see how afraid America is.

-Rear Admiral Luo Yuan, Deputy Commander,  
PLA Academy of Military Sciences, at the 2018  
Military Industry List, Shenzhen, China

The People's Republic of China (PRC), founded in 1949, inherited a rich and varied history spanning several thousand years. Over this time, China has seen the rise and fall of kingdoms, empires, and dynasties, often caused by war or followed by war. A large and powerful empire for much of history, China suffered tremendously during the "Century of Humiliation" brought by a series of defeats at the hands of Western powers and Japan. Grandeur, followed by humiliation, followed by a recent resurgence, have forged China into an economic powerhouse seething with resentment and determined never to be humiliated again.

This rich and varied history has led to different philosophical approaches to categorize and understand reality. Among these approaches, Confucianism and Daoism have been the most influential throughout China's history. They were surpassed, but not suppressed, by Communist thought adapted to the rural nature of early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. Despite the prevalence of Communism, China is still influenced by these philosophies. Leaders such as Xi Jinping frequently quote ancient Chinese philosophy, whether to remind China of past glories, tie the Communist regime to China's history, or for insight in military and political affairs.

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has gained considerable economic and political influence since 1949. This is especially evident since Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the early 1980s, which brought economic reform and new opportunities. Today, China is actively engaged within the global community, through global trade, global infrastructure such as the "One Belt One Road" initiative, and acquisition of territory in the South China Sea. China is currently the

world's second largest economy, and rapidly gaining on first place. The United States worked to integrate China into the global economic order in hopes that this would lead to political liberalization, but this has not occurred and does not appear likely.<sup>1</sup> While increasing economic liberalization has created substantial ties with the West, Chinese Communism remains politically intractable. Term limits no longer apply to President Xi, and China has perfected the modern surveillance state. Furthermore, an increasingly authoritarian but wealthy China seeks concomitant military power and now devotes tremendous resources to military modernization and expansion.

Strengthening Chinese military forces is a stated goal of President Xi Jinping, along with ensuring their political and ideological loyalty to the Communist Party of China (CPC).<sup>2</sup> The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has rapidly acquired equipment comparable to the United States and NATO allies, created training centers to replicate large scale combat, and implemented personnel reforms to promote leaders on merit instead of patronage like other modern military forces. The Chinese government has dedicated similar resources to modernization of the People's Liberation Army- Air Force (PLAAF) and People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN). The PLAAF now fields modern fighter aircraft and is poised to produce wide-body cargo aircraft. The PLAN is rapidly expanding with construction of the PRC's first domestically built aircraft carrier and a variety of surface combatants. Chinese military forces have grown increasingly belligerent in the South China Sea, including "near-misses" with both aircraft and naval vessels. In the crowded waters of the Pacific, this relentless and unreasonable behavior by an expansionist China raises concerns from Hanoi to London. This behavior is in stark contrast to China's espoused commitment to peace and stability.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The President of the United States, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Xi Jinping, *Governance of China*, Vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai Press, 2015), 240-244.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-273.

As the PRC grows in influence and military capability, it is imperative the United States and her allies understand Chinese cultural view of strategy and operational art. China's history varies substantially from the history of the West, and so does her view of war. An improved understanding of the Chinese strategic and operational "theory of reality" will reduce the chance of a war started by miscalculation by one or both parties. It will also reduce the chance the United States will unwittingly cooperate in the Chinese bid for ascendancy. Finally, and most importantly, understanding Chinese strategy and operational art will help the United States prevail in any conflict initiated by China.

While Communism has become the dominant ideology in modern China, this monograph contends that Daoism still influences China after two thousand years. In particular, this monograph focuses on the impact of Daoism on the view of strategy in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the view of operational art within the People's Liberation Army (PLA). The research question addressed in this monograph is "How has Daoism influenced Chinese strategy and operational art since 1949?"

The thesis of this monograph is that Daoism influences contemporary Chinese operational and strategic thinking in three ways: through Daoist influence on Sun-Tzu and other ancient military thinkers, through Daoist influence on Mao Zedong's adaptation of Marxism into "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," and through the hybrid of ancient and modern approaches that dominates current national security thought in the People's Republic of China.

To answer this question, this monograph first provides an overview of Daoism and Daoist influences on traditional Chinese military thought before 1850. For contrast, this monograph details other influences on modern Chinese military thought from 1850 to 1949. Finally, the monograph reviews official statements referencing Daoist principles or ideas from Chinese governmental and military leaders since 1949, with emphasis on China under President Xi Jinping. These include quotes from the *Tao Te Ching*, quotes from commentaries on the *Tao Te Ching*, references to Daoist parables or stories that convey Daoist principles, or references to

Daoist metaphysics. This includes Daoist principles merged with Communist thought by Mao Zedong or other influential Communist authors. Note that in order to identify the Daoist influences in Mao's work, this monograph discusses and defines his Communist influences so they can be filtered out. This monograph follows the "golden thread" of Daoism and the "red thread" of Communism through the tapestry of modern Chinese strategic and operational thinking.

## The "Golden Thread" of Daoism and Chinese Military Thought Before 1850

In order to understand contemporary Chinese military thought, it is essential to understand how the discipline matured throughout China's history. Throughout China's long history, there are an estimated 1,340 ancient military works containing 6,831 volumes. Most of these have been lost. However, the majority were written during the Spring and Autumn Periods (770-476 BC) or the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) and later works were simply analysis or addenda to these.<sup>4</sup> These conflicts set the stage for the Chinese view of war in much the same way that study of Alexander the Great or Scipio Africanus has shaped Western thought. Historian John Keegan defined an "Oriental" way of war that emphasizes deception, delay, and avoiding battle; in contrast to a "Western" model that stresses immediate and decisive resolution through battle.<sup>5</sup> While this is likely an oversimplification, it does highlight the varying views of conflict. This is not borne out in the actual execution of Chinese military history, which has as many direct engagements as Mediterranean and European wars of the same time periods. Furthermore, Western military thought has limited history of commanders that successfully avoided battle until conditions were fully set.<sup>6</sup> Even if not always displayed in practice, Chinese military thought does place a substantially greater emphasis on deception and misdirection.

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<sup>4</sup> Chen-Ya Tien, *Chinese Military Theory* (Oakville, Ontario: Mosiac Press, 1992), 21-23.

<sup>5</sup> David A. Graff and Robin Higham, ed. *A Military History of China* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

The scope of ancient China lent itself to massive conflicts. According a census under the Han Dynasty in 157 BC, China had a population of fifty-six million. For comparison, the Roman Empire of the time only number 46 million. Abundant natural resources in the eastern areas of China allowed for production of weapons, armor, and boats to utilize the rivers and canals that provided operational and strategic mobility.<sup>7</sup>

Over the vast scope of China's population, terrain and history, various Chinese philosophical schools developed or inspired ancient Chinese military thought, including Confucianism, Moism, Legalism, and Daoism. Confucianism advocates order, virtuous rulers, a return to structured past of the Zhou dynasty, and condemns war because of the loss of life and disorder.<sup>8</sup> However, some scholars argue that Confucianism views war as sometimes necessary, and a "good" Confucian leader was expected to have an understanding of military matters.<sup>9</sup> Confucianism advocates order and structure above all else, culminating in the Emperor. A now-defunct derivative of Confucianism, Moism influenced military thought by condemning offensive wars but allowing for defensive ones. Legalism advocates rule of law domestically, and military strength externally. Legalism emphasized professionalism and study in political and military spheres, and the two roles often blurred. Everyone in the kingdom, including the sovereign, was theoretically subject to the rule of law. The state of Qin was the first to adopt Legalist ideas, although eventually all feudal states adopted Legalist ideas with varying degrees of success. The Qin dynasty went on to unite China and end the Warring States period.<sup>10</sup> While the Qin Dynasty lasted only a short time, the ideas of Legalism would continue to influence Chinese governance

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<sup>7</sup> Graff and Higham, *A Military History of China*, 4-6.

<sup>8</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Edward L. Dreyer, "Continuity and Change," in *A Military History of China*, ed. David A. Graff and Robin Higham (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

for the next two thousand years.<sup>11</sup> However, the improvement and formalization of organization and bureaucracy in Qin, and later dynasties, resulted in an increase in the scope and cost of wars.<sup>12</sup> In ironic contrast to the other schools, Daoism condemns all wars and yet had perhaps the greatest influence on military thought of all of these political schools.<sup>13</sup> The metaphysical system provided by Daoism provided an extremely useful framework for understanding and explaining military affairs.

Daoism was first developed by the semi-mythical Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu and compiled in the second or third century BC. The *Tao Te Ching* was written and compiled in response to the Warring States period, a time of internecine warfare between states seeking domination of China. Warfare expanded in scope and scale during this period, resulting in widespread loss of life among both soldiers and civilians.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that *Dao* is a common term in ancient Chinese philosophy, and “to understand what and how a thinker means when [he or she] uses *Dao* is to understand that thinker’s philosophy.”<sup>15</sup> Daoism is one of several approaches to understanding reality by attempting to define the nature of the *Dao*. The metaphysical approach taught by Lao-tzu is the central tenet of Daoism.

Lao-tzu advocated for a return to a simpler society, and eschewed valuation of objects or titles believing that valuation led to desire to possess, which led to conflict.<sup>16</sup> Instead, Daoism argued that society should not pursue advancement or wisdom, but instead be content and simple.

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<sup>11</sup> Dreyer, “Continuity and Change,” 23.

<sup>12</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Lao-Tzu, *The Daodejing of Lao-Tzu*, trans. Philip Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. 2003), XVII.

<sup>15</sup> Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 45.

<sup>16</sup> Lao-Tzu, *The Daodejing of Lao-Tzu*, XV-XIX.

The ideal society is agrarian, dispersed, only as advanced as it needs to be in order to survive, and without intellectualism or study that might lead citizens to seek for more than they have.<sup>17</sup>

Daoism advocates a society free of striving, as striving leads to competition and conflict, which in turn leads to envy, resentment and bloodshed. A later Tang Dynasty text on Daoism argued that “The masses of people take what is unnecessary and turn it into something which is necessary, and this is the reason why war and invasion flourishes more day by day...”<sup>18</sup>

While Lao-Tzu as the foremost philosopher in Daoism argued that the best society is undeveloped, the pivotal Western philosopher Aristotle argued that progress is inherently good and the knowledge should be used to advance human action.<sup>19</sup> This continues in Western thought, especially in developed nations such as the United States, where advancement is presented as inherently good and not, in itself, an inevitable cause of conflict. Western capitalist theories of economics, developed millennia after Lao-Tzu, are built entirely on the concept of valuation and consistent improvement of goods and services to increase their appeal to customers.

Daoism presents the concept of *Dao*, or “the Way.” The Dao is the “source, sustenance and ideal pattern for all things in the world.”<sup>20</sup> Understanding the *Dao* requires adherents to view themselves as a part of the world, not as a separate entity able to cognitively separate from reality or understand it from outside. Adherents believe they are unable to enforce their will upon the *Dao* without causing significant hardship to themselves or others. This is substantially different from the Western, Platonic ideal of striving to turn goals into reality by shaping circumstances. Western philosophy requires the cognitive creation or acknowledgement of distinctions between the ideal and the real. Rather than shaping circumstances, Daoist teaching emphasize that

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<sup>17</sup> Lao-Tzu, *The Daodejing of Lao-Tzu*, XXIV.

<sup>18</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: The Princeton University Press, 1995), 67.

<sup>19</sup> Arthur Herman, *The Cave and the Light* (New York: Random House, 2013), 52.

<sup>20</sup> Lao-Tzu, *Daodejing*, XXII.

individuals must instead understand the potential inherent in reality. Within Daoism, it is not possible for an individual to view the world externally or to separate what is from what should be. Instead, the world has no “determinative beginning or teleological end.”<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Daoists will seek to move or exploit these trends over time to craft situations for their advantage.<sup>22</sup> This requires a level of patience and planning that tends to be underdeveloped in modern Western philosophies that advocate action and pragmatism.

This is also in stark contrast to Western philosophy which views the individual as inherently separate from the world. Daoism does not have a structure for the philosophical principle of “objectivity,” and instead views everything by its relationship to all else. The more an individual separates himself from the *Dao* to focus inward, the less he will be able to understand the Dao and the more damage he will do the world around him.<sup>23</sup> This is substantially different from the modern, Western emphasis on individual achievement, status, perspective or emotion.

The Platonic idea of “forms” is rejected in Daoism; what exists simply exists, and there is no perfect or right standard it must be judged against. There is no distinction in Daoism between what we observe and what really exists.<sup>24</sup> Roger Ames describes this as a “two world” theory in contrast to the “this world” theory observed in Daoism. In “two world” theory, there is a clear and marked distinction between a creator and creation, and between one who orders and the objects or concepts to be ordered.<sup>25</sup> Also, unlike Western tradition steeped in religious traditions

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<sup>21</sup> Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, trans. Roger T. Ames (New York: Ballentine, 1993), 50.

<sup>22</sup> Francois Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Zone Books, 1999), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Lao-Tzu, *Daodejing*, XXI.

<sup>24</sup> Herman, *The Cave and the Light*, 17-22.

<sup>25</sup> Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 48-50.

with stories of creation, there is no such tradition within Chinese philosophy. Within Daoism, God does not exist as a philosophical concept, much less a theological one.

The world simply “is” and things within it are understood by their relation to each other, not through debates concerning comparison to an objective goal or ideal.<sup>26</sup> This may reduce conflict, as it presents nature as inherently consisting of opposites eternally coexisting in tension rather than seeking domination. Rather than the Manichean concepts so prevalent in Western thought, Daoism allows for contradictory ideas to exist in tension, or as “correlative (as opposed to dualistic) opposites.”<sup>27</sup> This is more than superficially similar to Marxist ideas which heavily influenced Mao Zedong, discussed later in this monograph.

Lao-tzu analyzed relations among states from a framework that emphasized the good of humanity, not the interests of individual states. Lao-tzu argued that the perfect world order did not center around a few large and disproportionately powerful states. Instead, an ideal world consisted of many small states in equilibrium. In contrast to the Western idea that increased communication would lead to peace, Lao-tzu argued that provincialism and decreased communication would reduce or eliminate conflict. Lao-tzu was a “conceptual determinist” that argued human perception of goals was the source of conflict; if people desired to acquire more material goods or lands, they would inevitably fight.<sup>28</sup> Contrary to modern assumptions, his argument states that conflict is due to problems of human nature, not of insufficient communication.<sup>29</sup> His argument is not unique to Eastern thought, and echoes the Christian

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<sup>26</sup> Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 33-34.

<sup>27</sup> Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 77.

<sup>28</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, ed. Daniel Bell and Sun Zhe. trans. Edmund Ryden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 31.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

perspective in the book of James in the New Testament: “You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and wage war.”<sup>30</sup>

Lao-tzu places tremendous emphasis on human nature as a cause of conflict, and that understanding the Dao will lead to peace. Lao-tzu states, “When all under Heaven is without the Way, warhorses must give birth outside the city. There is no greater disaster than not knowing how to be satisfied; no greater misfortune than wanting more.” Going further, he clarifies, “Weapons are inauspicious instruments. Things like these are such that there are those who detest them. Hence one who has the Way does not touch them.” Lao-tzu makes no distinction between just and unjust wars, because he does not believe just wars are possible.<sup>31</sup>

Paradoxically, an originally pacifist Daoism heavily influenced military thought. While most philosophy (at least in theory) is designed to apply to daily life, military thinking took on a unique and powerful urgency during the Warring States period.<sup>32</sup> A system of thinking for understanding all of reality readily lends itself as a system for understanding the nature of war, as conflict is inherently a desire to change political or social reality against human opposition. In the Warring States period, military thought was only valuable to the extent it was applicable and effective. Chinese rulers, military leaders, and philosophers had no time for purely academic theories.

Daoism provides a lens to view reality as a linked whole, and to understand phenomena relative to all else. Daoism understands reality as immanent and in constant change, and this change can and must be understood and exploited by the successful commander.<sup>33</sup>

Understanding reality as a Daoist allows a skillful commander to view situations for their inherent

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<sup>30</sup> James 4:2 (Christian Standard Bible)

<sup>31</sup> Yan Xuotong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, 33.

<sup>32</sup> Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, 41.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

potential and to exploit things for his advantage over time. This is incredibly prescient, as it encourages sovereigns and military leaders to understand their environment and the likelihood and type of conflict. Through an emphasis on accurate understanding of your capabilities and the operational environment, Daoism warns nations and armies against believing they can simply “rise to the occasion” in the event of a war. The framework of Daoism implies that reality can be understood, and that leaders must consider the impacts of their own actions and dispositions on the enemy in an accurate, wise way. Furthermore, some scholars argue that the concept of winning with minimal violence (or no violence) displayed by military thinkers is based on Lao-tzu’ idea of “using softness to overcome hardness.”<sup>34</sup> This paradigm encourages military leaders to seek methods of blunting or discouraging violence through other means.

A truly great general will do this so adeptly that his victories appear easy, because they were a foregone conclusion due to his skillful exploitation of the *Dao* before the battle.<sup>35</sup> The first and most famous Chinese military work, Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, implies that a successful commander will ensure his opponent cannot successfully understand the *Dao*. Misunderstanding the *Dao* denies the enemy commander the ability to understand and manipulate circumstances in his favor, leading to eventual defeat. In contrast, the skillful general builds strategic power prior to an anticipated conflict through an understanding of the world around him, and effectively leverages it through deception and misdirection once the conflict begins.<sup>36</sup> The greatest general can so effectively shape and operate within their environment that they achieve victory without bloodshed. The *Wei Lao Zi* lists three methods of victory. The first, and presumably preeminent, is “victory by means of the *Dao*.” This requires a commander to so completely understand

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<sup>34</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 63.

<sup>35</sup> Jullien, *The Propensity of Things*, 26.

<sup>36</sup> Ralph D. Sawyer, “Military Writings” in *A Military History of China*, ed. David A. Graff and Robin Higham (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 100-101.

military affairs and so accurately estimate the enemy's capabilities that he can win through nonviolent means.<sup>37</sup>

A recurring concept in Sun-Tzu's *The Art of War*, and in modern Chinese military thought, is the concept of *shi*. This concept does not directly translate into English, but Roger Ames refers to it as "a level of discourse through which one actively determines and cultivates the leverage and influence of one's particular place."<sup>38</sup>

Dr. Michael Pillsbury provides another useful definition of *shi*. His definition includes an assessment of environment and geography, as well as the potential actions of your forces as well as the enemy's forces. *Shi* can be created through maneuver, posture, position, psychology and calculations, and stratagems can and must be designed to create additional *shi*. *Shi* is defined in the book *Campaign Stratagems* to also include relative efficiencies of each forces.<sup>39</sup>

Even if few modern Chinese would identify themselves as Daoist, Daoist concepts form a foundation for military thought in the modern era. The concept of *shi* continues to influence Chinese military thought until the present, part of the "golden thread" of Daoism in contemporary Chinese operational and strategic thought.<sup>40</sup> Daoism influenced Sun-Tzu, and both Daoism and Sun-Tzu influenced Mao Zedong. It is essential to understand this foundation before studying Chinese military thought since 1850.

## Chinese Military Thought 1850-1949

Modern China dates back to the end of the Qing Dynasty, and the decades of chaos that followed. This section provides historical context for the period that shaped Chiang Kai-Shek,

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<sup>37</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 81.

<sup>38</sup> Timothy Thomas, *Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of its Use* (Fort Leavenworth: US Army Foreign Military Studies Office, 2014), 55-56.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

Mao Zedong, and the warlords that dominated China. This period is marked by the blending of traditional Chinese military thought and practice with what China observed, learned or endured from Western powers. During the final years of the Qing Dynasty, Chinese leaders implemented Western technology and ideas in a piecemeal fashion, without the underlying structural and social changes to fully utilize them. While many Qing officials were impressed by Western weaponry, they were less interested in Western models for military institutions, military training and military education. As a result, military modernization occurred in fits and starts, with limited implementation of Western ideas and ineffective utilization of Western technology.<sup>41</sup>

By the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, Chinese forces were equipped with an eclectic mix of imported modern weapons and obsolete domestic ones, “Krupp mountain guns alongside bows and arrows.”<sup>42</sup> China relied on a dysfunctional collection of regional forces, out of fear that a centralized army would eventually overthrow the dynasty.<sup>43</sup> Despite the abysmal state of training and equipment in the Chinese Army, China held an unshakeable belief she would prevail through overwhelming resources and manpower.<sup>44</sup> The Qing dynasty lost much its prestige, with a military in tatters. China’s weakness was evident to the world, and Western nations immediately exploited this opportunity to gain new concessions.<sup>45</sup>

In 1895, the Qing Dynasty established “New Armies,” trained under the Western model and equipped with modern weapons. The Qing established military academies at Nanjing and

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<sup>41</sup> Richard S. Horowitz, “Beyond the Marble Boat: The Transformation of the Chinese Military, 1850-1911” in *A Military History of China*, ed. David A. Graff and Robin Higham (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 159-162.

<sup>42</sup> Meirion Harries and Susan Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun* (New York: Random House, 1991), 58.

<sup>43</sup> S.C.M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895: Perceptions, Power and Primacy* (New York: Cambridge, 2003), 144.

<sup>44</sup> Harries, *Soldiers of the Sun*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Horowitz, “Beyond the Marble Boat,” 159-163.

Wuchang. By 1906, China had ten divisions equipped with modern methods, five of which were concentrated in the Northern Army under Yuan *Shi-Kai* and the remainder scattered across China. These forces, however, were not as loyal as the Qing Dynasty expected.<sup>46</sup> However, Chinese military forces as a whole remained disparate in terms of equipment and training, and the army had no General Staff equivalent.<sup>47</sup>

In 1905, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen organized the Alliance Party, which sought to replace the Qing Dynasty with a republic, equalize land ownership, and modernize China. Dr. Sun Yat-Sen developed and popularized “Three Principles of the People,” which included political nationalism, popular representative government, and rapid economic development.<sup>48</sup> Dr. Sun created substantial confusion by referring to the economic portions of his theories as “socialist,” but he was extremely clear that he was not advocating Marxist ideas in any way.<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that these concepts are polar opposites to the Daoist principles discussed earlier.

In October 1911, while Sun was in Denver raising support, an uprising in Wuchang spread to Nanking and established a provisional government. While this uprising took Dr. Sun Yat-Sen by surprise, he returned to China and took the position of Provisional President of the Republic. Many of his supporters were students who had been educated in the West, or soldiers trained by Western militaries. While they largely resented the West’s treatment of China, not the Qing Dynasty itself, they increasingly realized that China could not be revitalized without replacing the imperial system of government.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Horowitz, “Beyond the Marble Boat,” 163-166.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.

<sup>48</sup> A. James Gregor, *Marxism and the Making of China: A Doctrinal History* (New York: Lagrave Macmillan, 2014), 74.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-86.

<sup>50</sup> Robert North, *Chinese Communism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 23.

Lacking political or military clout for the revolution, Sun later offered the position of president to the commander of Imperial forces, Yuan Shi-Kai, if Yuan would persuade the Qing dynasty to abdicate. Yuan Shi-kai accepted the offer, ending almost three centuries of Manchu rule and creating a republic with a very weak central government.<sup>51</sup> This nascent central government was weak and often ineffective, despite Yuan Shi-Kai's attempts to consolidate the central government and establish a dictatorship.<sup>52</sup> While former Qing soldiers from various forces had joined the revolution, many of them were not fervent revolutionaries. After the successful overthrow of the Qing Dynasty these soldiers found new employment under local warlords.<sup>53</sup> Lacking the funds to buy off the warlords or the military force to defeat them, Yuan Shi-Kai legitimized their authority by appointing them as "governors." For the next several decades, these warlords would fight, forge temporary alliances, and betray each other and the factions fighting the Chinese Civil War. Until the Chinese Communist Party fully unified mainland China in 1949, any attempt at central government required the cooperation or coercion of these warlords.<sup>54</sup>

While Yuan Shi-Kai served for a time as the President of the Republic, he did not support it and in fact planned to establish his own dynasty instead. This was not a historically unusual or farfetched idea, as China has seen many dynasties over the course of recorded history. However, his self-aggrandizing behavior provoked an outcry from former revolutionaries and various warlords began to mobilize. Few Chinese were interested in a return to the imperial system under

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<sup>51</sup> North, *Chinese Communism*, 22-25.

<sup>52</sup> Edward A. McCord, "Warlordism in Early Republican China," in *A Military History of China*, ed. David A. Graff and Robin Higham (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 178-179.

<sup>53</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 121.

<sup>54</sup> North, *Chinese Communism*, 25.

new management. In response, Yuan *Shi-Kai* abdicated. His “dynasty” lasted from 1 January 1916 to 22 March 1916, and he died shortly after his abdication.<sup>55</sup>

The fractured and chaotic nature of China hindered military modernization and development. Somewhat counterintuitively, warlords didn’t actively or effectively modernize the equipment of their forces, and largely consisted of ineffective militias or organized bandits. While warlord militaries were effective for fighting rival warlords, they were not effective for modern war. China was unified after Chiang Kai-Shek’s campaign in 1926. However, the former warlord forces united under the KMT’s banner performed disastrously against Japanese and Communists.<sup>56</sup>

In July 1921, various Marxist study groups in China met in Shanghai to discuss the formation of a Chinese Communist Party. This included a young Mao Zedong. These individuals discussed and debated the difficulty of importing Marxist thought into agrarian China, and the proper relationship with Dr. Sun Yat-Sen’s Kuomintang (KMT) Party. While the meeting was broken up by police shortly thereafter and reconvened on a party boat, the attendees were able to vote on both issues. They ultimately decided on an informal “alliance of convenience” with the KMT, acknowledging their ideological disagreement with some of policies but biding their time.<sup>57</sup> Communist leaders continued to debate how much effort should be dedicated to peasant rebellion, as their Soviet advisors and many within their ranks advocated a united front to unify China before pursuing revolution.<sup>58</sup>

Decades of struggle followed, both political and military. While the Communist Party existed with and within the KMT, it actively sought to strengthen leftist policies and thought

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<sup>55</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 124.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>57</sup> North, *Chinese Communism*, 30.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-79.

within the KMT. The Communist Party became increasingly concerned with the policies of Chang Kai-shek, but continued to bide their time.<sup>59</sup> After July 1927, the split within the KMT was impossible to overcome.<sup>60</sup> The KMT ruthlessly purged or killed Communist members.<sup>61</sup>

The KMT and Communism Party solidified into the two major groups fighting for rule of China. Chinese leaders realized the need for rapid and drastic change in the equipping and training of military forces.<sup>62</sup> Within each group, leaders and theorists acknowledged that bandit forces were not sufficient for total victory, and sought to understand modern war. The arch-rivals Chiang Kai-Shek and Mao Zedong demonstrated markedly different approaches to reality and conflict. Chiang Kai-Shek often referenced Chinese history and culture, but acted as if Western technology and values were readily apparent and appealing to China's people. In contrast, Mao Zedong adeptly blended traditional and modern thought. Mao's approach appealed to the metaphysics of his Chinese audience, as well as temporal needs such as land reform.

While Chiang Kai-Shek did not write extensively on military theory, he was a dedicated Nationalist and a prolific speaker. In 1924, Chiang Kai-Shek was appointed the head the new Chinese military academy at Whampoa, and he worked to instill revolutionary fervor in Chinese forces.<sup>63</sup> This academy was established with Soviet advisors, and included extensive political indoctrination within the curriculum. This emphasis on political indoctrination and use of a commissar system endured within the KMT even after the split with the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>64</sup> China had attempted to establish military academies earlier under the Qing Dynasty.

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<sup>59</sup> North, *Chinese Communism*, 67-70.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>61</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 210.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-166.

<sup>64</sup> Chang Jui-Te, "The National Army from Whampoa to 1949," in *A Military History of China*, ed. David A. Graff and Robin Higham (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 195.

However, the lack of central government standards and oversight meant wide disparity in quality and increased regional rather than national loyalty. The separate and distinct education and culture at these military academies only reinforced the trends which led to the fracturing of China after the fall of the Qing.<sup>65</sup> The political indoctrination at Whampao presumably sought to avoid this pitfall and create a national, unified officer corps.

Unlike his nemesis Mao Zedong, Chiang Kai-Shek's writings do not reflect Daoist principles or concepts, either directly or passed through Sun Tzu. Chiang Kai-Shek's priorities and perspective are captured in *The Collected Wartime Messages of Chiang Kai-Shek* published in 1946, a two-volume compilation of his public messages from 1937 to 1945. Throughout these messages, Chiang Kai-shek exhorts his Chinese audience to resist Japanese aggression, highlights Kuomintang political principles, and points to major figures in Chinese history as exemplars for modern Chinese. He does not reference Daoist principles or texts in any of his messages. He only quotes Sun Tzu in one message, "China Cannot Be Conquered," given on January 26, 1939 at the Fifth Plenary Session of the Central Executive Committee of the Kuomintang. In this speech, he quotes several of Sun Tzu's maxims to reinforce his argument that China will eventually prevail. However, does not provide context for the quotes or present them as part of a larger whole. More importantly, and unlike his nemesis Mao Zedong, he does not seem to be using the underlying principles to formulate his military strategy.<sup>66</sup>

For additional context, Chiang Kai-Shek authored *China's Destiny*, published in English in 1947.<sup>67</sup> In *China's Destiny*, Chiang explains to Chinese and Western readers the importance of the struggle against Chinese Communists and Japan, as well as China's increasing international

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<sup>65</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 167.

<sup>66</sup> Chiang Kai-Shek, *The Collected Wartime Messages of Chiang Kai-Shek* (New York: The John Day Company, 1946.), 158-173.

<sup>67</sup> Chiang Kai-Shek, *China's Destiny*, trans. Wang Chung-Hui (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), ix.

stature. Throughout this work, Chiang Kai-Shek articulates the political principles first espoused by Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, including nationalism, modernization and industrial development.<sup>68</sup> While Chiang Kai-Shek often appealed to Chinese history, he does so through the lens of Confucian ideals such as filial piety and civic duty. He does not cite Daoism except to criticize it, and to highlight periods of Chinese history where Daoism was ignored or superseded in favor of Confucianism.<sup>69</sup>

### The “Red Thread”: Political and Military Influence of Mao Zedong Before 1949

The writings of Chiang Kai-Shek have been completely overshadowed by the writings of Mao Zedong, which contain clear direct and indirect Daoist influences.<sup>70</sup> This is especially important as Mao has had the greatest influence on modern China, militarily and politically, of anyone. Mao was born in 1893 in Hunan Province, and grew up observing the humiliation of China through various conflicts with Western powers and the Boxer Rebellion. He was an avid reader, and his earliest influences were *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *The Water Margin*. A classic work of Chinese literature, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* discusses war and statecraft, heavily influenced by Daoist military thought such as Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. Principles from *The Art of War* are specifically referenced and applied to military engagements in *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.<sup>71</sup> Throughout his life, Mao considered *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* to be verifiable historical fact. Mao was also influenced by *The Water Margin*, a

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<sup>68</sup> Chiang Kai-Shek, *China’s Destiny*, 203-209.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>70</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 210-213.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

novel about a rebellion against dishonest and avaricious government officials.<sup>72</sup> Mao later quoted events from *The Water Margin* as examples to be followed by successful commanders.<sup>73</sup>

By the fall of 1933, Nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-Shek had Communist forces on the ropes with a potential victory imminent. Reeling, Communist forces departed on “The Long March” to escape Nationalist forces and to engage invading Japanese forces, shrewdly acknowledging the practical benefits of fleeing and the propaganda value in fighting the Japanese. Mao Zedong and Lin Biao commanded the main columns. Incredibly, the Long March crossed eighteen mountain ranges, twenty-four rivers, twelve provinces, and fought through Nationalist, Japanese, and warlord forces. The march took 368 days. After this monumental accomplishment and due to his remarkable political acumen, Mao’s Zedong gained tremendous influence within the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>74</sup> While Nationalist and Communist forces did later cooperate against the Japanese, it was a shaky alliance that even resulted in large engagements between them instead of Japanese forces.<sup>75</sup> Communist forces were always prepared to take advantage of Nationalist losses or weakness. While Communist forces sometimes acquired desperately needed equipment from defeated Japanese forces, Communist forces gained even more equipment by collecting rifles and munitions abandoned by fleeing Nationalist forces at other sites.<sup>76</sup> Once the United States entered the war, both sides assumed the US would defeat Japan and therefore turned most of their energies towards each other and positioning for post-World War II China.

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<sup>72</sup> William Wei, “‘Political Power Grows out of the Barrel of a Gun’: Mao and the Red Army,” in *A Military History of China*, ed. David A. Graff and Robin Higham (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky), 230.

<sup>73</sup> Mao Zedong. *Strategic Problems of China’s Revolutionary War* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1954), 63-64.

<sup>74</sup> North, *Chinese Communism*, 129-132.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-151.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

Later, in the closing days of the Chinese Civil War, Mao's strategic directive to the People's Liberation Army on 1 September 1947 on guerilla warfare is heavily influenced by Sun-Tzu and Daoism. Throughout, Mao Zedong advocates avoiding the enemy's strengths and only striking where he is weak. To do this requires an understanding of yourself and of your enemy, and a deliberate focus on overwhelming force where the enemy cannot defend.<sup>77</sup> This was not a new exhortation from Mao Zedong, as his 1936 lectures to the Red Army College at Shensi included exhortations to understand friendly and enemy forces, terrain, and politics to help ensure victory.<sup>78</sup> While this a pragmatic strategy for any weaker force to defeat a larger one, the structure and phrasing indicate the clear influence of Sun-Tzu and Daoism. This approach was not a new concept for Mao, as the Chinese Communist Party had executed this strategy during the fight against Japan. Nationalist forces were forced by political requirements to engage in a positional defense against Japan, which was extremely costly against qualitatively superior Japanese forces. In contrast, Communist forces were intimately familiar with constant movement and the use of rural sanctuaries. This approach was far more effective against the Japanese, as it allowed Communist forces to engage at times and places of their choosing. The Nationalist forces bore a far heavier burden fighting Japan and lost much of their relative superiority over the Communists as a result.<sup>79</sup>

It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the extent of Daoist influences without also filtering out any Communist influences on Mao Zedong's thought. Mao worked throughout his political career to adapt Communism to China, departing significantly from both Marx and Lenin. While Marx believed that urban workers, the "proletariat," would achieve class consciousness, Lenin did not. Lenin instead argued that mobilizing the proletariat required a vanguard to educate

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<sup>77</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 239-240.

<sup>78</sup> Mao Zedong. *Strategic Problems of China's Revolutionary War*, 17-18.

<sup>79</sup> Gregor, *Marxism and the Making of China*, 98-99.

and incite revolution. Stalin further developed this idea, and believed that a sufficiently effective party could mobilize the population even in less industrial, less developed nations. An appeal to nationalism was a useful and acceptable means to do so.<sup>80</sup> It is important to note that Mao Zedong's thought ended up a long way from the foundation laid by Marx, jettisoning Marx' ideas of an inevitable urban revolution in an industrialized nation.<sup>81</sup> Mao's Communism, with an emphasis on anti-imperialism and rapid industrialization, ended up closer to Stalin's ideas than to Marx'.<sup>82</sup>

Mao's theories not only refined Marx, Engels, Stalin and Lenin, but also borrowed heavily from Daoism by framing Communist ideals within the metaphysical framework of Daoism familiar to many Chinese peasants. In Mao's earliest writings, he references "basic laws of materialist dialectics."<sup>83</sup> These basic laws include, "The law of unity of contradictions; the law of the transformation of quality into quantity and vice versa; the law of the negation of the negation."<sup>84</sup>

Of these, Mao elevated the first above the others. In his writings in 1937 and after, he treated this law as the primary philosophical rule for understanding Marxist thought. This metaphysical and philosophical approach is illustrated in his speech, "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People," where he stated:

"Marxist philosophy holds that the law of the unity of opposites is the fundamental law of the universe. This law operates universally, whether in the natural world, in human society, or in man's thinking. Between the opposites in a contradiction there is at once unity and struggle, and it is this that impels things to move and change. Contradictions exist everywhere, but their nature differs in accordance with the different nature of

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<sup>80</sup> Gregor, *Marxism and the Making of China*, 100-103.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-106.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>83</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, ed. Nick Knight (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1990), 15.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

different things. In any given thing, the unity of opposites is conditional, temporary and transitory, and hence relative, whereas the struggle of opposites is absolute. Lenin gave a very clear exposition of this law.”<sup>85</sup>

While this concept originates in Marxist thought, the elevation of this principle likely reflects the Daoist influences in Mao’s thinking. While Mao was heavily influenced by Soviet thinkers, this was not the only influence in his work.<sup>86</sup> In his efforts to adapt Marxism to the cultural and practical realities of China, Mao blended Marxist concepts with traditional Chinese philosophy and metaphysics.<sup>87</sup> While scholars continue to debate the mixture, Nick Knight, the editor of *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, presents five critical areas that indicate the influence of Chinese philosophy. First, Mao directly quoted and employed concepts from traditional Chinese dialectics, albeit in a “sanitized” and scientific manner to make them compatible with dialectical materialism. Second, he elevated certain concepts in importance that fit best with Marxism, such as Lao-tzu’s proposition that opposites eventually transform into each other. Third, Mao borrowed traditional sayings and proverbs to explain concepts to a popular audience, a necessity when recruiting from a peasant population. He quoted traditional wisdom, axioms, and idioms to illustrate his points.<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore, Maoist Communism, like Daoism, rejects the Western duality between cognitive and material forms. In his writings, Mao argued that nothing exists except matter, and that the mind “is something that only emerges when matter has developed to a certain stage.”<sup>89</sup> While Mao’s ontology did not allow for a separation between mind and matter, his epistemology

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<sup>85</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-52. Mr. Knight discusses this in detail, following his explanation of then-current Chinese scholarship on the degree of Marxist influence versus the degree of traditional Chinese thought in Mao’s writings.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

did. Ontologically, Mao believed that thought was “matter in motion,” and that thoughts are directed to follow a rational structure inherent in the rest of the universe.<sup>90</sup> Epistemologically, Mao did believe concepts could be objectively true, and could be known with increasing certainty as cognitive ability grew.<sup>91</sup> Note that the materialism advocated by Mao inherently discards the idea of an external Creator or belief system that could provide an objective standard of morality. This is a critical component of military thought, and likely a direction never intended by earlier Daoist thinkers who eschewed violence. Mao’s approach provides moral certainty that makes violence permissible, but without any risk of accountability to a Creator or an afterlife of any sort. It is not surprising that this resulted in atrocities and massive loss of life.

Mao believed that matter exists independent of humanity and prior to humanity, and that this principle was the basis of scientific research. However, he resorted to tautological arguments to prove matter existed prior to humanity, as this could not be proved since no humans existed.<sup>92</sup>

Mao’s emphasis on contradictions and dialectics was easily relatable to Chinese hearers, because it is similar to Daoist concepts of opposites. Mao carefully utilized this pre-existing framework, while filtering out idealist and metaphysical concepts. He illustrates this clearly in his work *The Unity of Contradictions*, where he lists a variety of concepts as dualisms, such as life and death, above and below, good fortune and misfortune. However, he then applies this dualistic framework to imperialism and colonization, major themes of his work.<sup>93</sup>

Mao utilized this framework to argue that internal opposites within a nation can unite to oppose an external aggressor, such as the union cooperation between the KMT and the Chinese

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<sup>90</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, 26.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

Communist Party.<sup>94</sup> However, he tried to fit this into an anti-colonialist framework, arguing that imperialist nations would unite with the upper classes within a nation to jointly oppress the population.<sup>95</sup> This carried a powerful appeal to nation fighting Japanese aggression, and a means to galvanize the population as China did not possess the urban proletariat that Marx and Lenin deemed necessary.<sup>96</sup> Finally, he also utilized Chinese cultural references such as stories to illustrate these concepts.<sup>97</sup> As Mao came from a peasant background, he had a unique and accurate understanding of Chinese peasants in a way that Soviet advisors and contemporaries from the city lacked.<sup>98</sup> This provided him the tools to covertly and overtly recruit in rural areas with tremendous effectiveness. Peasants would understand the basic concepts of duality thanks to their pervasiveness in Chinese culture, and Mao could readily leverage this understanding to advocate for Communist thought.

Furthermore, Mao argued that “politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed.” While this idea is familiar to readers of Clausewitz and Lenin, it already existed in traditional Chinese culture.<sup>99</sup> Mao, like Lenin, held that the revolution must advance, and that revolutionary wars were inherently just and counter-revolutionary wars always unjust.<sup>100</sup>

Mao Zedong’s thinking would later be enshrined into Communist thought in China, and continue to shape Chinese strategic and operational thought until the present day.

## Chinese Military and National Security Since 1949

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<sup>94</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, 180.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>96</sup> Gregor, *Marxism and the Making of China: A Doctrinal History*, 106-109.

<sup>97</sup> Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism*, 51.

<sup>98</sup> North, *Chinese Communism*, 123.

<sup>99</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 217.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-219.

While Maoist military thought laid a foundation, the decades after the Chinese Civil War required the Chinese military to further adapt and change. After the Korean conflict, leaders within the People's Liberation Army began to modernize with a focus on military efficiency and less emphasis on political indoctrination. This rejection of CPC leadership, and the political purges that resulted, delayed modernization. In addition, the withdrawal of Soviet military aid in 1958 hindered efforts to field a modern military force. As a result, much of Chinese military theory during this period emphasized the "People's War" that had successfully won the civil war, and an emphasis of quantity over quality.<sup>101</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, China began to shift towards a modern, Western model of improved technology and professionalism.<sup>102</sup> This shift continues today. Furthermore, Mao's influence is not the last or only example of Daoist influence in Chinese operational and strategic thinking. To elaborate, this section will discuss statements from President Xi Jinping from his collected speeches, China's national security apparatus, and the policy and doctrinal documents which outlines Chinese strategic and operational thinking.

### President Xi Jinping, "The Governance of China"

Xi Jinping is arguably the most influential Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. Since his inauguration, Xi has consolidated his personal power, increased government surveillance and control of Chinese citizens, and presided over a rapid expansion of China's economy and national power. While Daoism influenced early development and promulgation of Communist thought, Xi's policies and platforms reflect a heavy Maoist influence. As Mao blended Marxist and Daoist ideas in his development of "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics," President Xi Jinping's ideas are Daoist "twice removed."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, 8-9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>103</sup> Thomas, *Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of its Use*, 302-306.

Xi Jinping's speeches are publicly available, and they provide a useful window into his thinking and policies. Xi builds upon earlier patterns of thought within "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" in his speeches. His speeches emphasize the sovereignty of China, the pre-eminence of the Communist Party of China, accountability to the citizens of China, and the "China Dream." The China Dream is a moderately prosperous society by 2021, one century after the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, and a great nation by 2049, a century after Communist victory in the civil war.<sup>104</sup>

Xi's speeches rely heavily on Communist doctrine, but he often cites Chinese classic works. He quotes Confucian works most often, although he references Daoist ideas to illustrate themes of persistence and patience. For example, his speech "Young People Should Practice the Core Socialist Values" from 4 May 2014 enjoins students to begin large undertakings with diligence in small tasks. The citation explains the reference from the *Dao De Jing*, and explains that Lao-Tzu advocated ideas such as "governing by doing nothing" and "going along with nature." This is interesting to highlight, given the CPC's increasing control of the lives of Chinese citizens.<sup>105</sup> Xi again quotes the *Dao De Jing* in a speech on 3 October 2013 called "Work Together to Build a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road." As with the former quote, Xi emphasizes patience and persistence.<sup>106</sup>

In his speeches, Xi repeatedly emphasizes that China does not seek hegemony or expansion. Instead, he argues that China seeks a path of peaceful development and economic growth. To detractors, he insists that China's desire for peace isn't due to a desire to hide its strength or deceive. To all audiences, Xi emphasizes that China will seek to be a stabilizing

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<sup>104</sup> Jinping, *Governance of China*, Vol. 1, 38.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 194-199.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 320-324.

influence, and China will oppose bullying of other nations or interference in their internal affairs.<sup>107</sup> Notably, China's behavior in the East China Sea is increasingly belligerent and aggressive, undermining the credence of Xi's statements.

Furthermore, Xi Jinping has been a consistent advocate of increasing China's military capabilities and ensuring the PLA's devotion to the Communist Party of China. Xi has outlined that the central focus of the military's political work is realize the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation.<sup>108</sup> The Chinese emphasis on political reliability would be completely foreign to most Western audiences, as Xi has stated clearly "Nobody is entitled to cross the red lines of political discipline and rules. Those who do will have to pay a price."<sup>109</sup> This sounds oddly similar to Lenin's insistence on the infallibility of the Party, and Mao's insistence on the omniscience of the Party.<sup>110</sup> While many Western observers hoped that increase trade with the West beginning under Deng Xiaoping would lead to increased political liberalization, this has not occurred. Xi Jinping continues to reiterate the CPC's dedication to Marxist ideals, both as a framework for understanding reality and as a framework for politics and economics. While he exhorts his audience to study socialism outside China, he echoes Mao Zedong's call for "socialism with Chinese characteristics," unique to China and steadfastly implemented.<sup>111</sup>

Xi Jinping, through his emulation of Mao Zedong and occasional references to Daoism, reflects a Daoist influence among senior Chinese leaders. In turn, these influences will inform and reinforce Daoist influences within China's national security structure.

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<sup>107</sup> Jinping, *Governance of China*, Vol. 2, 43.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 438.

<sup>110</sup> P. H. Vigor, *A Guide to Marxism and its Effects on Soviet Development* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 172-173, 179.

<sup>111</sup> Jinping, *Governance of China*, Vol. 2, 68-70.

## Modern Chinese National Security Structure

China's national security structure is considerably different from the United States, as is the Chinese process for dissemination and publication of strategic and policy documents. This is largely influenced by Leninist thought, and reflects the dominance of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in Chinese governance and politics.

First and most importantly, the People's Liberation Army belongs to the CPC. The CPC defines strategy and sets priorities, not the PLA. However, unlike the US system, military leaders from the PLA can also serve as Party members that influence the development and direction in strategy. This would be akin to an active duty American officer serving as a member of Congress or as Secretary of Defense.<sup>112</sup> Xi Jinping insists that the CPC retain complete control of the Chinese armed forces and ensure their ideological commitment and purity.<sup>113</sup>

Second, China publishes a mix of documents, and they do not directly correlate to US documents. China's term for national strategy is "socialist path with Chinese characteristics," a framework for understanding China's role in the world and relationship to other actors. China's national strategy can be found informally through state media outlets such as the *People's Daily*, academic journals, and work reports or documents published by the Central Committee. The most basic description of China's national security strategy can be found in the biannual "Defense White Papers," discussed below.<sup>114</sup> At the operational and tactical level, China publishes "operational outlines" and "combat regulations," although unlike the US equivalents, they are classified and are not published for dissemination.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> McReynolds, *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 9.

<sup>113</sup> Jinping, *Governance of China*, Vol. 2, 57.

<sup>114</sup> McReynolds, *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 13-14.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Figure 1, taken from page 15 of *China’s Evolving Military Strategy*, lays out the levels of strategy and the corresponding documents:

Strategy Level	Key Concept	Primary Sources	Guidance Focus
National Strategy	“Chinese Dream”	Party congress report, Central Committee Plenary Documents	General guidance to all party, government, military on ends, ways, means to realize national revitalization
Security Strategy [part of national strategy]	Holistic Security Concept	Party Congress report, national security strategy	How to achieve domestic and international security environments needed to support above
Defense policy [part of national strategy]	“Defensive” defense policy	Party Congress Report; Defense White Paper	How to construct and carry out defense-related activity to support above
Military Strategy	“Active Defense”	Defense White Paper, speeches by CMC members	How to construct and operate military forces to support above

Figure 1. Levels of Strategy in the Xi Jinping Era. *China’s Evolving Military Strategy*, 15.

## Modern Chinese Strategic and Operational Documents

China’s modern military thought is a blend of ideas propagated by Sun-Tzu, Karl Marx, and Mao Zedong. However, Marx’ ideas are “filtered” or refined by Maoist concepts as discussed earlier. One retired PLA general officer noted that the primary influences on modern Chinese military thought are Sun-Tzu’s *The Art of War* and Mao Zedong.<sup>116</sup> It is important to note that both of these influences were themselves heavily influenced by Daoism.

The blend of Sun-Tzu and Mao is discussed in the Chinese military publication titled *China Dream*, an expression of China’s national strategy that is an echo of President Xi Jinping’s call for Chinese resurgence. The book *China Dream* details the Chinese approach to strategy as foremost an effort to understand and manipulate both an adversary and his environment so the adversary acts in ways that he believes to be in his own interests, but is actually in China’s

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<sup>116</sup> Thomas, *Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of Its Use*, 61.

interest.<sup>117</sup> This is deception on a grand and deliberate scale, as it requires China to correctly identify and exploit trends in reality while making it difficult or impossible for opponents to do so.

The concept of dislocation and deception is further discussed in the seminal Chinese strategic publication, *The Science of Military Strategy*, published by the Chinese Academy of Military Science. This is an academic document, not a policy document, but it is used in the education of senior leaders. This document also discusses several models or approaches to strategy, specifically an “objective strategic thinking model” and a “subjective strategic thinking model.” This model cites Mao’s ideas, which in turn borrowed from both Marxian dialectics and Sun-Tzu. “Objective thinking” is focused on quantifiable metrics such as forces available, or financial and materiel resources. “Subjective thinking” involves the desire to manipulate the adversary’s perception of reality as a means to gain superiority of some kind.<sup>118</sup> Note this sounds remarkably similar to Sun-Tzu’s Daoist approach to understanding the *Dao* while ensuring the adversary cannot. While it is beyond the power of a commander to change reality, he can and must ensure that he understands it better than his enemy.

One of the most telling concepts within the 2013 edition of *The Science of Military Strategy* is the idea of “effective control.” This concept includes deterrence, military operations other than war, and crisis management. It allows for direct confrontation where necessary but avoids it when possible, based on an assessment of China’s capabilities and weaknesses. Three major components include:

- 1) A shift from emphasizing defense to emphasizing control.
- 2) A shift from emphasizing war to emphasizing power.
- 3) A shift from seeking victory in a war to “winning first.”

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas, *Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of Its Use*, 4-5.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

In execution, these principles direct China to continue expanding their power, but avoid open conflict unless absolutely necessary. Rather than a rapid expansion that would upset the international order and cause reactions from other powers, the goal of “effective control” is to gradually expand while keeping actions under the threshold of war or aggression.<sup>119</sup> This has worked extremely well for China in the South China Sea.

Whatever the reasons for China’s territorial ambitions, “effective control” is a blatantly Daoist approach to strategy and power. This approach achieves national goals and demonstrates a clear-eyed and shrewd use of power within the current international political and legal framework. China understands that domestic audiences among neighbors and rivals will not permit armed conflict against China simply to seize or defend small islands. In time, China can then adjust the narrative to present the islands as de facto Chinese territory.

Western militaries, particularly the US, are avid readers of Clausewitz’ *On War*. While Marx and Engels were avid students of Clausewitz’ *On War*, they argued it was lacking in several ways. First, because they felt that *On War* “idealized” war and seemed to lack empirical evidence in support of conclusions. Second, Marx and Engels felt that Clausewitz neglected class struggle, key components of their understanding of history, economics and politics.<sup>120</sup> While modern Chinese military thinkers appreciate Clausewitz for his use of dialectics to explain his theory, class struggle is in integral part of Marxist, Leninist, Stalinist and Maoist thought. Any work which does not acknowledge class struggle is flawed at best, or ideologically dangerous at worst.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> McReynolds, *China’s Evolving Military Strategy*, 60-63. I am deeply indebted to the analysis presented in this essay.

<sup>120</sup> Thomas, *Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of Its Use*, 36-37.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

To better illuminate Chinese strategic and operational thinking, the US Army Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) provides a useful comparison between American approaches to planning and Chinese approaches. While American planners will respond to a problem or situation by generating courses of action (COA) for a commander, the Chinese approach is to first develop “strategems.” These stratagems are means to “mislead an opponent’s perceptions, wills, thinking, or emotions.”<sup>122</sup> The goal of strategems is to achieve a favorable *shi*, a position of advantage for further use or threat of use. This concept is discussed extensively in Sun-Tzu’s *The Art of War*.<sup>123</sup>

Strategems must consider the enemy’s belief system, cognitive approach to problem solving, decision-making processes (both individually and collectively), and environmental factors to include political and organizational considerations. Furthermore, an effective stratagem will ensure the enemy knows only what China wants him to know, and any deception must be appealing and appear credible.<sup>124</sup>

China’s approach to military thought relies on both the concept of *shi* and on the framework of objective and subjective thinking. This is a blend of an ancient, Daoist concept (*shi*) and Marxist concepts (subjective-objective) venerated by modern Chinese Communists.<sup>125</sup> Chinese military leaders and planners seek to understand the objective nature of reality, and then to look for subjective means to place themselves in a position of advantage. While Chinese military thinking only loosely correlates to the levels of war laid out in US military thinking, it appears similar enough to allow for several comparisons. First, Chinese planning quantifies comprehensive national power (CNP) and looks for avenues to best leverage it for advantage.

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<sup>122</sup> Thomas, *Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of Its Use*, 41.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-43.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

This applies at both the strategic and operational levels. This concept closely parallels the US military concept of “shaping” the environment for advantage.<sup>126</sup>

The concept of *shi*, while somewhat nebulous, can only be understood through a rigorous and thorough study of CNP. It is dynamic, but continuous and accurate understanding of national power allows for creative and innovative ways to leverage it as the situation requires. Effective understanding of *shi* will allow commanders to dictate the conditions of conflict to the adversary before and during an engagement.<sup>127</sup> Note that this implies CNP is not purely an objective, empirical measure of military power such as number of armored vehicles or personnel in uniform. CNP also includes strengths and relatives relative to an adversary or potential adversary.

## Chinese Policy Documents

Every two years, the Chinese government publishes a Defense White Paper. This document provides an unclassified look at the Chinese government’s military and security perspective and priorities. While the document is extremely broad, it is a useful perspective. The document discusses the ongoing modernization and personnel strength of the Chinese military, as well as the various challenges.

The 2013 Defense White Paper does briefly mention territorial disputes in the South China Sea, but indirectly and presenting China as the aggrieved party. The document extensively highlights Chinese military participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations, anti-piracy operations, and disaster relief domestically and globally.<sup>128</sup>

In contrast, the 2015 Defense White Paper is much more robust. In contrast to the 2013 Defense White Paper, the 2015 document focuses on Chinese military modernization. It details

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<sup>126</sup> Thomas, *Military Strategy: Basic Concepts and Examples of Its Use*, 221-226.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 232-236.

<sup>128</sup> Government of China, “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces: 2013 Defense White Paper,” accessed December 13, 2018, [http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node\\_7181425.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7181425.htm).

development of joint doctrine, training and doctrine for offensive air operations, and increased deployability and strategic mobility. While the 2013 document emphasizes China's strength with a focus on domestic and regional operations, the 2015 document is a clear statement that China intends to increase capabilities and presence globally. China seeks to ensure common standards between civilian and military infrastructure, improve professional education, and prepare for conflict. The document also uses stronger language to refer to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, again presenting China as the aggrieved party defending its territorial integrity. Disaster relief is mentioned in the 2015 document, at the end of the document and with much less emphasis.<sup>129</sup> There is nothing specifically Daoist about these documents, as they do not discuss or reference Daoist concepts. However, they do provide a useful window into China's view of the world.

These Defense White Papers possess some inherent contradictions and trends. While China ostensibly focuses only on defense, China's behavior since 2010 has been a continuous, coercive and persistent expansion. To do this, China has actively worked to increase capabilities across all domains of conflict, and sought to integrate all elements of national power across military and civilian agencies and processes. China is working towards regional and global leadership, albeit slowly and through gradual modification or replacement of international institutions.<sup>130</sup> This method hearkens back to Daoist exhortations to patiently build strength and manipulate trends, and avoid direct challenge to rivals. Since direct and immediate conflicts include tremendous risk, a slow ascent can ideally present a rival with a *fait accompli*.

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<sup>129</sup> Government of China, "China's Military Strategy: 2015 Defense White Paper," accessed December 13, 2018, [http://english.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm).

<sup>130</sup> McReynolds, *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, 23-27.

## Conclusion

Turmoil and conflict have shaped China's culture over millennia. A vast population over a vast time generated a tremendous number of ideas, concepts, philosophies, and religions. Among these, Daoism formed a critical part of Chinese metaphysics, and a framework for understanding the nature of reality. The long history of Daoist thought and its appropriation by Mao Zedong lends it unmatched pervasiveness and power since 1949.

The Daoist approach to reality is starkly different from Western approaches, and the distinction is often underestimated. Western leaders would do well to understand Daoism and its enduring impact. There is a far broader gulf between Daoism and Western philosophy than what is immediately apparent. The different approaches to reality lead to dramatically different understanding of power, conflict and victory. Western leaders who fail to understand Eastern leaders will end up fighting different fights, like a professional boxer fighting an aikido master. Each may be the consummate expert in his respective art, but have difficulty understanding the moves and countermoves of the other.

Without an understanding of Daoism and Daoist influences on military thought, Western leaders could miss indicators of Chinese behaviors and goals. In the past, Chinese leaders did not appreciate Western empiricism and philosophical objectivity. While China has made a deliberate and largely successful effort to understand the West, the West has done relatively little to understand China.

While Daoism is pacifist, it provided the bedrock of Sun-Tzu's seminal work *The Art of War*. Daoism has influenced warfare ever since. Sun Tzu argued that commanders must understand the nature of reality through a Daoist lens, built through an accurate and thorough knowledge of his forces and those of the enemy, as well as the environment. This understanding allows the successful commander to understand the *Dao*, to identify potentialities and trends, and to exploit those potentialities and trends to defeat an opponent. These trends and potentialities

must be used to wisely position and command friendly forces and to predict and manipulate the enemy. When done wisely, correctly and sufficiently early, victory will appear easy.

Since 1949, the “golden thread” of Daoism is woven with the “red thread” of Maoism, creating the tapestry of modern Chinese strategic and operational thought. Daoism and Sun-Tzu both influenced Mao Zedong, who blended Daoist concepts familiar to Chinese peasants with Marxist ideas. Mao Zedong blended Daoist concepts about opposites in tension with Marxist dialectics, building a new and unique style of Communism that owed as much to Lao-Tzu as it did to Marx. While this later generated tension with his patrons in the USSR, it was easy to explain to Chinese peasants familiar with Daoist metaphysics and provided a following to replace a virtually non-existent urban proletariat Marx’ original theory required.

Daoism tempered by Sun-Tzu provides modern Chinese military thinkers with concepts of potentialities, of understanding reality while ensuring an opponent does not, and of operational and strategic misdirection. Daoism and Sun-Tzu tempered by Mao Zedong provides the foundation of Chinese political and military thought. Given China’s increasingly aggressive behavior under Xi Jinping, any nation who ignores the influence of Daoism, Sun-Tzu and Mao Zedong on modern China does so at their peril.

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