

Between Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, and Stalin: A Synthetic Character of Mao Zedong's Military Thought

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Introduction

For many years, researchers analysing Mao Zedong's works have argued about the significance of the respective influences of Western and Eastern cultures on his political thought. According to Nick Knight, a narrative of a specific synthesis of Chinese and Marxist thoughts has been adopted in the current literature on the subject.¹ One might presume that, arguably, research on his military thought has led to similar conclusions. Yet, this research seems somewhat archaic, scattered and even unilateral, as a large number of works discuss mainly the influence of ancient Chinese strategic thought. The majority of researchers like Samuel B. Griffith, John L. Washington jr, Edward O'Dowd Arthur Waldron, Michael Howard and many others claimed that his most important military inspiration is, first of all, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu,² which Mao made

¹Nick Knight, *Rethinking Mao: Explorations in Mao Zedong's Thought*, (Lanham, Rowman&Littlefield, 2007), pp. 24-27.

²See for example, Samuel B. Griffith, "The Glorious Military Thought of Comrade Mao Tse-tung," *Foreign Affairs* 42 (1963), pp. 669-674., John L. Washington Jr, *A Study of a Classical Leader: Sun Tzu and His Influence on Mao Tse-Tung*. No. ACSC-86-2650. AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLL MAXWELL AFB AL, 1986, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a168430.pdf>., Edward O'Dowd and Arthur Waldron, "Sun Tzu for Strategists", *Comparative Strategy* 10, no 1 (1991), pp. 25-36., Carnes Lord, "A Note on Sun Tzu," *Comparative Strategy* 19, no 4 (2000), pp. 301-30., Douglas M. McCready, 'Learning from Sun Tzu', *Military Review* 83, no 3 (2003), p.85., Michael Howard, "The Transformation of Strategy," *The RUSI Journal* 156, no 4 (2011), pp. 12-16. 7. However some other authors claim that Sun Tzu had little to do with Mao's strategic vision. See Edward L. Katzenbach, Gene Z. Hanrahan, "The Revolutionary Strategy of Mao Tse-Tung." *Political Science Quarterly* 70, no 3 (1955), pp. 321-340., Tang Tsou, Morton H. Halperin, "Mao Tse-

numerous direct references in his writings. However, we know that Mao Zedong spoke readily and concretely on the principles of the art of war and its application in the unique context of China. It is difficult to believe that his work in the field of military strategy is merely a confirmation of the theses of the ancient Chinese classics or the result of passive compliance with party directives. Therefore, in my opinion, it is worth revising the previous research and describing more broadly the intellectual influences that were synthesized in the form of Mao Zedong's military theory during the time of struggle against the Kuomintang and Japan.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to determine the significance of the influence of both European and Chinese thought on the most crucial statements of the Chinese leader about war's nature, military strategy and tactics. In order to achieve this goal I will analyze the main thesis of Mao's writings mostly from the years 1936-1940, when according to available sources his military thought reached mature form. The subject of my analysis will be primarily his two most famous texts. The most significant is *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, written in December 1936 on the basis of lectures for students of the school for officers of the Chinese Red Army and comprising conclusions from the previous course of the civil war between communists and the Kuomintang. The second one is *On the Protracted War*, the series of lectures from June 1938, where Mao revealed his strategy about how to fight with Japanese invaders. This study is based on also on reading of other minor texts from his *Selected Military Writings* and it is intended to discuss or expand the thesis from numerous secondary sources about Mao's military thought. The undisputed influence of ancient Chinese culture definitely shaped Mao's thoughts and actions during his first actions and battles against Kuomintang. However, till the end of the thirties, Mao Zedong's military thought as a whole became the original doctrine in the history of military and political thought, an eclectic synthesis of the following currents: Marxist-Leninist doctrine, Carl von Clausewitz's theory of war, Soviet operative art and ancient Chinese philosophy and art

tung's Revolutionary Strategy and Peking's International Behavior," , *American Political Science Review* 59, no 1 (1965), pp. 80-99., Giri Deshingkar, 'Mao Zedong's Military Thought: A Perspective', *China Report* 31, no 1 (1995), pp. 101-107.

of war associated mainly with the famous Sun Tzu strategist. I think the many crucial theses of mature Mao Zedong's military thought were shaped on the basis of the vulgar Stalinist reception of classical Marxist thought. Through it, Mao became acquainted also with Western European strategic thought, including Carl von Clausewitz's philosophy of war. Despite many references to Sun Tzu, after all, European thought significantly influenced the thinking of the Chinese leader about war and helped him to acquire political power. Mao, however, did not fully understand it and was unable to exploit its potential in relation to political theory, making use of it mainly in the military field.

Philosophy of war – from Confucian Roots to Stalinist Marxism

Before Mao became a Marxist materialist, throughout his youth, he would read literature deeply rooted in traditional Chinese Confucianism. As the Chinese Trotskyist leader Wang Fangxi, who was critical of Mao, noted, Mao became convinced of Marxism in the early 1920s, influenced by the victory of the Russian Revolution and having read just three books.³ Like other Chinese Marxists, he focused on carrying out a revolution, leaving theory in the background. Declaring himself a Marxist in the 1920s, he was influenced primarily by the Confucianists of the time, who were familiar with Western thought, such as Hong Xiuquan, Kang Youwei, and Sun Yat-sen.⁴ Since only a few works from the Marxist canon had been translated into Chinese by the 1930s, it is likely that his knowledge of the theory did not expand much until 1936, when, as a result of the Red Army gaining a stable foothold, Mao was given more time to further his education in the field.⁵ At that time, however, he was mainly confronted with works presenting the Stalinist interpretation of Marxist thought, and his own theoretical reflection was mainly shaped according to the needs of the intra-party political struggle.⁶

Established in the late 1930s, Mao's views on the nature of war reflected the level of his familiarity with Chinese and European sources on the subject at the time. The Marxist strategist read Kang Youwei's *The Book of Great Unity* in 1917 when he was only

³Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong's Thought*, trans. G. Benton (Leiden, Brill, 2020), pp. 71-72.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 86.

twenty-four years old⁷. The Chinese leader's approach to Kang Youwei's ideas was selective. While the Confucian philosopher presented a peaceful and gradual vision of historical development in which class conflict was only one of many antagonisms,⁸ Mao adopted the classical Marxist non-linear vision of history torn by wars and class struggle. As Teresa Łozińska observed, in later Mao's works from the thirties dedicated to military strategy as well as in his philosophical work *On Practice*, one can find a three-stage periodization of history borrowed by Kang from the old Confucian manuscripts - *Commentary of Gongyang to the Spring and Autumn Annals*.⁹ Mao divided history into three epochs: peace, war and eternal peace. He considered the war fought by Chinese communists to be the moment of transition from the second to the third epoch. Since the author was aware of the uneven character of historical development, this transition was not to be gentle at all. In accordance with the Chinese tradition, he considered war to be evil, and the epoch of war which affected humanity—to be a run of atrocities that had to be ended. He asserted optimistically that victory and a transition to the epoch of eternal peace were inevitable.¹⁰ Some scholars like Zhang Junbo and David C. Yu can also see in this context the influence of the Taoist philosophy on Mao, because it comprised the theory of chaos in which, similarly to the Marxist narration, history was unstable and had a dynamic and non-linear character.¹¹ More than three decades later, at the twenty-eighth anniversary of the establishment of the Communist Party of China, and three months before the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, he stated that the idea of *Great Harmony* was the ultimate objective of the communist society.¹² On the other hand, in later editions of Mao's texts, some references to Confucian historiosophy were censored and

⁷Shiping Hua, "The Chinese One World View and Foreign Policy", *Dancing With the Dragon: China's Emergence in Developing World*, ed. by Dennis Hickey and Baogang Guo, (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2010), p. 17.

⁸Teresa Łozińska, "Konfucjańska idea Wielkiej Jedności w myśli politycznej Ciang Kaj-szeka i Mao Zedonga", [The Confucian Idea of Great Unity in Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong's Political Thought] *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe* 3 (2015), pp. 43-54.

⁹ This is a commentary on the ancient yearbook (considered to be the earliest known Chinese text) describing the times of the Lu state, whose authorship is attributed to Confucius himself.

¹⁰Teresa Łozińska, "Konfucjańska idea Wielkiej Jedności..."

¹¹ Zhang Junbo, Yao Yunzhu.

'Differences Between Traditional Chinese and Western Military Thinking and Their Philosophical Roots,' *Journal of Contemporary China* 5, no 12 (1996), pp. 209-221., David C. Yu, 'The Mythos of Chaos in Ancient Taoism and Contemporary Chinese Thought', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 8, no 12 (1981), pp. 325-348.

¹²Jesús Sole-Farras, *New Confucianism in Twenty-First Century China*, (New York&London, Routledge, 2014), p. 45.

removed.¹³ There is also no doubt that despite these influences, the core of Mao's thought was the notion of class struggle, which allowed him to pragmatically use both Confucian and Marxist periodisation of history, as their final stages – both communism and eternal peace – presupposed the cessation of class struggle,¹⁴ which allows one to assume that the Marxist element in Mao's historiosophical thinking became dominant when he wanted to legitimise his leadership of the Communist Party.

Despite some above evidence of Confucian influences, I think in *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War* Mao Zedong presented the ground for his views on the nature of war in a mostly Stalinist-Marxist manner. He claimed that the genetic reason for wars was the establishment of private property and the division of society into classes; since that moment, wars were to be: "the highest form of struggle for resolving contradictions, when they have developed to a certain stage, between classes, nations, states, or political groups and it has existed ever since the emergence of private property and classes."¹⁵ This seems to be in line with the general Marxist idea of the genesis of wars, but it should be remembered that the statements of the representatives of this philosophy were much more nuanced. Although Marx could see the role of war in the development of class societies, he still observed that war had existed also earlier, and therefore it had to some extent an autonomous character with respect to the relations of production.¹⁶

Mao's views on war were shaped during his struggle for leadership with Wang Ming, who had been educated in Soviet Russia and enjoyed the confidence of the Comintern in the 1930s. Writing his works, Mao wanted to prove that not only in practice but also in theory, he was superior to Wang and his Soviet-nominated henchmen, due to his better understanding of, and attempts to develop, Marxism¹⁷. But his reflections were considerably closest to the simplified version dominant in Soviet academic thought in the times of Stalinism and resembled the interpretation from the 'History of the Communist

¹³Knight, *Rethinking Mao: Explorations in Mao Zedong's Thought*, p. 130.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁵Mao Tse-Tung, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War," *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, (Peking, **Foreign** Language Press, 1963), p.76.

¹⁶Walter B. Gallie, *Philosophers of Peace and War: Kant, Clausewitz, Marx, Engels and Tolstoy*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 79.

¹⁷Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong's Thought*, p. 172.

Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course, according to which a just war's objective was: waged to defend the people from foreign attack and from an attempt to enslave them, or to liberate the people from capitalist slavery, or, lastly, to liberate colonies and dependent countries from the yoke of imperialism, unjust war was simply: conquest, waged to conquer and enslave foreign countries and foreign nations.'¹⁸ The Mao's understanding of wars was, in fact, identical. He divided revolutionary wars into class wars consisting of fighting against *capitalist oppression*, and national wars consisting of fighting against *foreign imperialist oppression*.

Mao believed in the division of wars as just and unjust and he was sure that armed struggle would pave the way to communism and put an end to wars in the history of mankind: "But there is only one way to eliminate it and that is to oppose war with war, to oppose counter-revolutionary war with revolutionary war, to oppose national counter-revolutionary war with national revolutionary war, and to oppose counter-revolutionary class war with revolutionary class war. History knows only two kinds of war, just and unjust. We support just wars and oppose unjust wars. All counter-revolutionary wars are unjust, all revolutionary wars are just."¹⁹

Ping-cheung Lo claimed that the very fact that Mao used the Chinese term *yi zhan*, which can refer to either *a righteous war* or *a just war*, means that the origins of his views on the ethics of war can be found in the ancient Chinese philosophy because this term was already present in Mencius's works.²⁰ However, in the light of the above analysis, it can be observed significant influence of the Stalinist-flavoured theory of war here. It could be added that deliberations about just war are not only typical for Chinese philosophy, but it is also significant in the Marxist approach, in which the causes of war influence its evaluation, regardless of its course. Perhaps Mao saw a convergence between Chinese and Marxist thought here.

Nevertheless, his reflection was simplified in comparison to leading Marxist thinkers, like for example Lenin. According to Bolshevik leader, wars could be divided

¹⁸*History of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) Short Course* (New York, International Publishers, 1939), pp. 167-168.

¹⁹Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, pp. 78-79.

²⁰ Ping-cheung Lo, "The Art Of War Corpus and Chinese Just War Ethics Past and Present," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no 3 (2012), pp. 404-446

into just and unjust wars and their evaluation depended on the question of the class character of the war: 'What caused that war, what classes are waging it, and what historical and historico-economic conditions gave rise to it.'²¹ In that kind of perception, only revolutionary wars could be just; they were a means to achieve the objective, i.e. making the process of long-lasting socialist transformation possible.²² However, apart from a moral evaluation of wars, Lenin also focused on whether particular wars were progressive or not. From this perspective, the Bolsheviks' leader admitted that the existence of unjust yet progressive wars was possible. A particular war could be relatively positively evaluated even if it was not fought in the name of proper revolutionary ideals, but it did lead to progress in the social and economic spheres. That is how Lenin evaluated, for instance, the Franco-Prussian War of 1871, which was fought for conquest and plundering, but its consequence was the unification of Germany and the country's liberation from the remnants of feudal stagnation²³. Furthermore, he also divided wars in the capitalist world into imperialist, defensive, and national independence wars. He evaluated the latter two positively, even if the dominant class was the national bourgeois. His support for these wars resulted from the universal principle of nations' self-determination,²⁴ although if the wars had been a part of a larger imperialist conflict, such as the Serbs' defensive war against Austria-Hungary in World War I, then he no longer would have perceived such a war as just; thus, a defensive war did not have a pre-determined ethical status.

The utmost controversy of Mao's philosophy of war from a Marxist standpoint is aroused by the idea of war being the highest form of struggle. The authors of the Soviet *History of Marxist Dialectics* rightly criticized him, because: "there was no law of class struggle but the laws of wars decided about the course of history."²⁵ This claim can be refuted by presenting an argument that, for Mao, war was the highest form of class

²¹Vladimir Lenin, *War and Revolution*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/may/14.htm> .

²² Anna Glińska, "Lenin o rewolucyjnej przemocy" [Lenin on Revolutionary Violence], *Etyka* 16, (1978), pp. 7 – 36.

²³ Vladimir Lenin, *Socialism and War*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/s+w/index.htm> .

²⁴ Vladimir Lenin, *The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm>.

²⁵ *Historia dialektyki marksistowskiej. Etap leninowski*, [History of Marxist Dialectics, The Leninist Phase] ed. by S. Radziszewski, (Warszawa, PWN, 1979), p. 71.

struggle. On the other hand, it would mean that the fate of great historical events might be decided not by the masses initiating a social revolution by means of relevant forms of struggle such as a common insurrection of the dominated class against the dominating class, but by outstanding strategists able to command and manoeuvre an army efficiently. It is clear that Mao's view on the role of war in history diverges from classical Marxist ideas. For Marx and his followers, war was not a passive product of class society, but it had to exist earlier and influence its development.

Mao's theory of the genealogy of wars was also most similar to the Stalinist interpretation of Marxism. It was believed that since there was no class or state in primary communism, there was also no politics, and therefore no war. According to the Soviet authors, a war in the strict sense could only be born when the state and the dominant class already existed, defining the political goal of military action - it seems that Soviet science recognized Clausewitz's thesis of the primacy of politics over war as one of Marx's main tenets.²⁶

In the series of lectures during the Chinese-Japanese War from 1938 entitled *On Protracted War* which were later written down, Mao also emphasized clearly that the starting point in his deliberations on the nature of war was the famous words of Clausewitz: "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means."²⁷ Similarly to the Prussian general, Mao noticed that although war was an instrument of politics, it was not equivalent to politics as such. According to the Chinese leader, war starts when the achievement of a political objective by means of peaceful measures is no longer possible. He claimed that, in China, national independence wars were necessary because the imperialist oppression made a bourgeois-democratic revolution in the country impossible. The objective of war was to remove the obstacle and to bring China to the path of social progress. War must be fought until the political objective is achieved. The masses play the key role in the accomplishment thereof – even if the authorities make peace, if the masses are oppressed, their bottom-up insistence would lead to a renewal of fighting.

26 Georgij Fiodorow, "Pochodzenia i istota wojen" [Genealogy and Nature of War], *Marksizm-leninizm o wojnie, wojsku i nauce wojennej* [Marxism-Leninism on War,], ed. by. Adam Mazurek, (Warszawa, Książka i Wiedza, 1956), pp. 11-12.

27 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated by col. J.J. Graham, (Floated Press - ebook, 2010), p. 70.

In conclusion, the author stated: "It can therefore be said that politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed."²⁸ On the one hand, Mao, similarly to Clausewitz, perceived war as an instrument subordinated to politics, negated the possibility of *according war with the status of the absolute* and, like the Prussian general, frequently argued for limiting warfare because an escalation of military action did not serve any political purpose and might constitute the risk of self-destruction. He acknowledged the autonomy of war as an instrument because the war had its own organization and many specific methods serving it.²⁹ Simultaneously, for Mao, just like for the Soviet authors, war as military action was always a continuation of the political struggle taking place in the relations of production, and, to be precise, the class war between the oppressed and the oppressing class. However, his impressive formula treating politics as a kind of war has little in common with Clausewitz's theory. For the Prussian general, politics could not be war because the essence of war as such is that it is fully controlled by politics, that is, warfare in an ontological sense is always the result of a political decision. Irrational elements such as emotion and chance can play a significant role in war, but military operations as such are the result of conscious and planned actions.³⁰

In this aspect, his political understanding of war as bloody conflict which is the highest form of class struggle was also a deep revision of the classical Marxist position which, according to Etienne Balibar, consists in acknowledging the primacy of class struggle as the main driving force of history. This entails the perception of the history of mankind as a permanent civil war between the classes. It also implies the rejection of the *bourgeois* concept of the autonomy of politics in which struggle takes place between the parties standing for election to parliament. In the Marxist perception, traditionally understood politics is an area where the most important war in the history of mankind—the war between classes—is manifested bloodlessly.³¹ In that sense, Mao had a romantic approach to military action. He also declared that war was the best test for the human spirit and the utmost manifestation of human activity, as it is manifested in war in the

²⁸Mao Tse-Tung, "On Protracted War", *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, p. 227.

²⁹Mao Tse-Tung, *On Protracted War*, p. 227.

³⁰Youri Cormier, *War as Paradox. Clausewitz and Hegel on Fighting Doctrines and Ethics*, (Montreal&Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), p. 143.

³¹Etienne Balibar, "Marxism and War", *Radical Philosophy* 160 (2010), pp. 9-17.

most powerful way. This belief was most probably not the result of his deep theoretical reflection but rather his pragmatism and personal experience, i.e. many years spent fighting for survival.³² His views in this regard were an individual's loose interpretation of Marxist war theory. At the very least, it did not coincide with Kang's vision proclaiming the peaceful evolution of society.³³ It diverged from the views of the classics of Marxism and even Lenin, for all of them admitted the possibility of a peaceful revolution. Therefore Mao's idea that only violence can bring peace seems to be some kind of Machiavellianism alien both to Confucianism and classical Marxism.³⁴

Mao and Sun Tzu influence

There are various assessments of the Chinese leader's level of knowledge of the ancient Chinese classics of the art of war. One of the main proponents of the prevalence of the Chinese tradition's influence on Mao's thought, Stuart Schram stated that " he had taken a look at Sun Tzu before writing his own work on military tactics in 1936-1938"³⁵ Yet, there are also statements that put his direct knowledge of *The Art of War* into question. Jakub Polit claims that Mao openly admitted that he had not read any book on strategy. He was familiar with many recommendations made by Sun Tzu, though, since a considerable part thereof had a permanent place in the canon of Chinese literature and culture, which every Chinese had to know. Mao knew only single aphorisms and sayings, which he used in his writings.³⁶ It appears from Wang Fangxi's account that during the years of the first war with the Kuomintang, Mao indeed did not have the opportunity to study Western military history more extensively. He did, however, read Chinese classics and works such as the *Zizhi tongjian*, *the Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *the Water Margin*, from which he learned the details of campaigns and battles fought centuries earlier in China. In Wang's view, the strategy of avoiding and harassing the enemy, applied by him in the 1930s, undeniably demonstrates the crucial importance of Sun

³²Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989),p. 55.

³³ Teresa Łozińska, „Konfucjańska idea Wielkiej Jedności...”, p. 54.

³⁴ Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong's Thought*, pp. 112-113.

³⁵ Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-tung*, p. 54.

³⁶ Jakub Polit, "Pozornie asymetryczna wojna symetryczna. Chińska wojna domowa 1946-1949"[Seemingly Assymetrical Symmetrical War', *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Historyczne* 143, no 4 (2016), pp. 789-804.

Tzu's thought, although he admitted that his thought had been enriched in subsequent years. However, it cannot be conclusively established on the basis of this knowledge that Mao had actually read Sun Tzu's work; he may indeed have become familiar with his advice through other works.

Certainly unlike European classics of military strategy Mao raised the status of the tactical level claiming that all decisions concerning *the direction and point of assault* in a war should be selected on the basis of the actual situation of the enemy, the terrain, and the strength of one's own forces at the moment.³⁷ He indeed emphasised the importance of some of Sun Tzu's observations, in particular, the importance of the intelligence service and information acquisition: "In order to know the enemy's situation, we should collect information on his political, military and financial position and the state of public opinion in his territory,"³⁸ which is close to ancient leader's statement that: 'what enables the wise sovereign and the good general to strike and conquer, and achieve things beyond the reach of ordinary men, is FOREKNOWLEDGE'³⁹.

Mao was fully aware of the significance of the intelligence service, while for example, Clausewitz underestimated it⁴⁰. For the Chinese leader, the gathering and precise studying of information constituted the foundation of good command: "A commander's correct dispositions stem from his correct decisions, his correct decisions stem from his correct judgements, and his correct judgements stem from a thorough and necessary reconnaissance and from pondering on and piecing together the data of various kinds gathered through reconnaissance."⁴¹ Another characteristic example of making use

37 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 81

38 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 105.

39 Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, translated by Lionel Giles (The Project Gutenberg eBook, 1994), p. 80.

40 Clausewitz did not speak much about the role of military intelligence, and if he did, he spoke negatively, saying that the intelligence often provides contradictory information, which is emphasized in most studies about the Prussian philosopher of war. Suspicion of the interview came from Clausewitz's strong belief that the case is ruled by a case and also because of the belief that it is not so much information as the class and experience of people who provide it and who use it (commander). See for example George Anastaplo, "Clausewitz and Intelligence: Some Preliminary Observations.", *Teaching Political Science: Politics in Perspective* 16, no 2 (1989), pp. 77-84., David Kahn, 'Clausewitz and Intelligence', *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 9, no 2-3 (1986), pp. 117-126.

41 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 84.

of Sun Tzu's methods was Mao's proposal concerning the use of sham manoeuvres to goad the enemy into making mistakes: 'In addition, we can induce the enemy to make mistakes by our own actions, for instance, by *counterfeiting an appearance*, as Sun Wu Tzu called it, that is, by making a feint to the east but attacking in the west. If we are to do this, the terminal point for the retreat cannot be rigidly limited to a definite area'⁴². This was a reference to the ancient general's advice concerning forcing the enemy to disperse or the inappropriate placing of one's forces. However, unlike other Chinese generals, Mao did not treat Sun Tzu's advice as dogma, but rather as a useful element of his original thought adapted to the specific historical conditions of the era of twentieth-century mass warfare⁴³.

Mao also emphasised saving one's army resources and avoiding putting the army at risk of losses unless it becomes absolutely necessary. He was very cautious and focused strongly on optimizing the conditions in which the first battle was to be fought. Obviously, this was dictated also by the context of the Chinese Civil War; being significantly weaker than the Kuomintang army, the communist army had much more to lose in every battle, and therefore it is justified that Mao advocated meticulous preparations for battles. In this respect, his approach is close to the advice of Sun Tzu, who recommended starting a battle only when the commander was certain of the conditions fostering his victory: "In warfare, first lay plans which will ensure victory, and then lead your army to battle; if you will not begin with stratagem but rely on brute strength alone, victory will no longer be assured."⁴⁴

It should be stressed, however, that this is not identical to Sun Tzu's ideas, as he advocated the most economical use of resources and avoiding unnecessary fighting. Mao thought that regardless of the principle, the ultimate victory would involve many victims and require the participants' willingness to make personal sacrifices: "Every war exacts a price, sometimes an extremely high one. Is this not in contradiction with "preserving oneself"? In fact, there is no contradiction at all; to put it more exactly, sacrifice and self-preservation are both opposite and complementary to each other. For such sacrifice is essential not only for destroying the enemy but also for preserving oneself — partial and

42 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 114.

43 Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong's Thought*, p. 120.

44 Sun Tzu, *Art of War*, p. 31.

temporary "non-preservation" (sacrifice, or paying the price) is necessary for the sake of general and permanent preservation."⁴⁵

The application of some sort of Marxist dialectics to the art of war can be mentioned here. It is, however, a very simplified dialectic, and paraphrasing the Soviet critics of Maoism, it may be said that it is based on a simple pattern: "balance - violation of balance - new balance."⁴⁶ This pattern is compatible with the above-mentioned "dialectic" principle of saving one's resources. Destroying enemy forces and simultaneously saving one's resources is the first element of balance; the act of sacrificing one's resources is a violation of balance, after which a new balance is achieved where enemy forces are destroyed and one's resources are saved, and thus everything comes back *to normality*. In the author's other military writings, *dialectics* was used in a clearly Stalinist style.

It must be stressed that sources of some of Mao's key concepts can be compared to both Western and Eastern Thought. For example, his concept of active defence as a part of strategic defence used by him is the principal element of his military thought considered to be his original idea⁴⁷. He defined it as *offensive defence* or defence by means of *resolute fighting*. It can also be defined as the opposition to passive defence, or defence conducted *exclusively by means of defensive means or only and exclusively by means of defence*, which is in fact *pseudo-defence* because only active defence aimed at a transition to counter-attack and attack was proper defence. The core of this thought was the view stating that each stage of defence, including strategic retreat along the front line, was merely a step in the preparation for counter-attack allowing one to repulse the enemy, the most important element of which was the decisive battle.⁴⁸ The communist strategist stressed

45 Mao Tse-Tung, "Problems of Strategy in Guerilla War Against Japan," *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, pp.153-154.

46 *Historia Dialektyki Marksistowskiej [History of Marxist Dialectics]*, p. 70.

47 Strategic defense was understood by the Chinese leader very broadly and consisted of almost all actions taken by the Chinese Red Army in the war with the Kuomintang including the Long March. Although the cost of the march was enormous - army reduction from about 100,000 soldiers marching to less than 7,000 and party members from 300,000 to 40,000 members, Mao considered this march to be part of the strategic defense and did not refuse to recognize him as a defeat because, however, neither the army nor the party have been completely destroyed. Benjamin Yang, *From Revolution to Politics: Chinese Communists on the Long March* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1990), p. 233.

48 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 155.

also that even in a general retreat along the front line, particular units could proceed to the tactical offensive in their area.

The strong emphasis on the relationship between effective defence and proceeding to a fast and violent counter-attack is certainly an element connecting Mao's views with the views of strategy classics—Clausewitz put emphasis on the necessity to proceed to a counter-attack, but according to Thia von Ghyczy, Bolko von Oetinger, and Christopher Bassford, a similar view can be found in Sun Tzu *The Art of War*, as well as in Napoleon's statements.⁴⁹ Other researchers like James Holmes, Toshi Yoshikara, and Li-sheng A. Kuo also believed that Mao's concept of active defence is the best reflection of Sun Tzu's idea, because, in accordance with his recommendations, it involves a combination of direct and indirect attacks (*cheng* and *Ch'i*), puts emphasis on saving resources and proper manoeuvring in order to achieve a tactical advantage in particular parts of the front.⁵⁰ The flexibility of Sun Tzu's ideas is considered by Matthijs Pars and Fumio Ota to reflect well the flexibility of guerrilla fighting advocated by Mao⁵¹. The linking of the above concepts to Sun Tzu's thought is based on some circumstantial evidence but is not conclusive. Adopting a more critical approach, Wang Fanxi points out that, although he was preoccupied with military issues in the 1920s Mao was indeed focused on the works of the ancient classics, the tactics applied to him were necessitated by the circumstances in which he found himself.⁵² He had not consciously reflected on the theory of strategy until the late 1930s when he became more familiar with Marxist thought.⁵³ Whether they were conscious or not, one can indeed find numerous parallels to Clausewitz's understanding of strategy in his mature works, which will be discussed further hereunder.

49 Thia von Ghyczy, Bolko von Oetinger, Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz on Strategy* (Boston, John Wiley&Sons, 2001), pp. 116-117.

50 James Holmes Toshi Yoshihara, 'Mao Zedong, Meet Alfred Thayer Mahan: Strategic Theory and Chinese Sea Power', *Australian Defence Force Journal* 171 (2006), pp. 33-50., Li-sheng A. Kuo, *Sun Tzu's War Theory in the Twenty First Century*. ARMY WAR COLL CARLISLE Barracks, PA, 2007.

51 See Matthijs Pars, "Six Strategy Lessons from Clausewitz and Sun Tzu," *Journal of Public Affairs* 13, no 3 (2013), pp. 329-334., Fumio Ota, "Sun Tzu in Contemporary Chinese Strategy," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 73, no 2 (2014), pp. 76-80.

52 Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong's Thought*, p. 157.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Mao and European strategic thought

It is known from the analysis of Mao's diaries that he was familiar with the Chinese translation of the first book of Carl von Clausewitz's main work, *On War*, which according to Brian Zimmer Mao read in 1928 and he was impressed (just like Lenin before him.⁵⁴) by his political notion of war, and also later he: "held similar ideas regarding the superiority of numbers, troop concentrations, moral forces in war and the strategic retreat".⁵⁵ He also probably participated in a seminar on the author in the spring of 1938. It is also possible that Mao became familiar with many theses by Clausewitz via the Soviet art of war, and he reached some of the conclusions as a result of his experience gained while commanding the army. As Zimmer suggests he probably even learn about military tactics mostly from Soviet-type commanders like Zhu De and Lin Biao.⁵⁶ However, we can distinguish the numerous similarities between the theses presented by both Mao and Clausewitz although we can observe also significant differences.

Mao's definitions of strategy, operational art, and tactics are quite simple and intuitive: "The task of the science of strategy is to study those laws for directing a war that governs a war situation as a whole. The task of the science of campaigns and the science of tactics is to study those laws for directing a war that governs a partial situation."⁵⁷ Mao clearly stressed the planned and long-term character of strategy, claiming that the result of a war depends mainly and above all on the correct assessment of all the conditions and stages of war, because every mistake in the general assessment of the war situation will result in defeat on the battlefield, and eventually also in the war as such.

In this respect, strategy has a superior character and thus one can find here an analogy to Clausewitz's definition stating that: " Tactics are the theory of the use of military forces in combat, strategy is the theory of the use of combats for the object of war."⁵⁸ For Clausewitz, the inferiority of tactics and their subordination to strategy was

54 See Vladimir Lenin, "Notebook on Clausewitz," *Soviet Armed Forces Review Annual* 1 (1977): pp. 188-229.

55 Brian Zimmer, *The Military Strategy and Tactics of Mao Zedong* (Graduate Thesis), University of Regina 1996, p. 12.

56 Ibid., p. 13.

57 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 79.

58 von Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 154.

of a linear and static character because tactical successes were for him merely a means of achieving a strategic goal defined by staff officers and politicians. Formally acknowledging the primacy of strategy, Mao attempted to dynamize the relation between strategy and tactics and operational art by referring to the dialectics of a part and the whole: "But because the situation as a whole is made up of parts, people with experience of the parts, the experience of campaigns and tactics, can understand matters of a higher order provided they are willing to think hard."⁵⁹ For comparison, Sun Tzu's understanding of *strategy* does not refer to a comprehensive image of war or a manner of using tactical successes, but to a certain set of methods allowing one to gain advantage one way or another—over the opponent, for instance, by taking advantage of the terrain, avoiding a stronger opponent, using spies, etc. In other words, according to Sun Tzu, a strategy was a set of methods used in order to achieve what might nowadays be called a strategic advantage.⁶⁰ Mao's conception of the strategy thus appears to be broader than Sun Tzu's, but it seems to lack reference to a political sphere outside of war, as in Clausewitz's theory, which was also relied upon by many Marxist theorists onwards from Engels, who defined strategy as the art of using various forms of warfare, including those based on violence, to achieve a broader political goal.⁶¹

Despite that Mao's emphasis on the necessity to fight the decisive battle during a counter-attack can be considered as something that the most strongly distinguishes him from Sun Tzu and brings him closer to European thinkers. Sun Tzu was in favour of avoiding unnecessary risk in war and therefore, he made a realistic assumption that particular campaigns were usually long-lasting and bloody.⁶² Due to Clausewitz, a decisive battle has become a paradigm among European strategists as the best method to subordinate the enemy to the victor's will and achieve political objectives in a war.⁶³ It is also worth noticing that both Clausewitz and Mao considered the decisive battle to be the best instrument of counter-attack because they both thought that its objective was finding

59 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 81.

60 Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War. Classical Strategic Thought*, Taylor & Francis – ebook, 2005), p. 14.

61 Paul Blackledge, "Engels's Politics: Strategy and Tactics after 1848," *Socialism and Democracy* 33.2 (2019); pp. 23-45.

62 Handel, *Masters of War*, p. 218.

63 Bernard Fook, Weng Loo, "Decisive Battle, Victory and the Revolution in Military Affairs," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32,2 (2009), pp. 189-211.

a fast solution, and thus avoiding plunging into long-lasting protracted military combat without any measurable results.⁶⁴

Due to the above facts, in this context, Mao's focus on active defence and decisive battles should be included in the group of followers of classical European strategic thought. He differed considerably from the Modern Soviet theoreticians, such as Frunze, Tukhachevsky, Shaposhnikov and Svechin, who underlined in their works that there were no chances for fast solutions in modern war; instead, it would be long-lasting struggles between mass regular armies in which the economic potential of the opposing parties would be largely responsible for their respective victory⁶⁵. It should be admitted, though, that, unlike the Soviet generals, Mao did not deliberate on the character of future global conflicts in which the survival of socialism would be at stake, but he drew practical conclusions from military campaigns in the Chinese conditions in which he himself had participated and gained experience. It should be also stressed that Mao could not see any chance of ending the entire Chinese Civil War in one battle; on the contrary, he proclaimed its protracted character. Decisive battles were important for him mainly at a specific strategic stage, i.e. the previously discussed issue of counter-attack.

Although Mao is often perceived as a promoter of irregular guerrilla warfare, he followed the basic principle of classical strategy according to which the key to victory was outnumbering the opponent. Therefore, he strongly advised against fighting with an enemy whose well-deployed army outnumbered one's own army.⁶⁶ These principles defined the tactical and operational objectives which implied the destruction of smaller enemy units separated from any assistance of other concentrated enemy forces. Destruction of enemy forces was just another means to achieve the main strategic objective, i.e. outnumbering the enemy along the entire front line, which was to influence the result of the war as such: "A war or campaign may also end in a situation of relative superiority or of parity, in which case there is compromise in the war or stalemate in the campaign. But in general, it is absolute superiority and inferiority that decide victory and defeat. All this holds for the end of a war or a campaign, and not for the

64 Handel, *Masters of War*, 119.

65 Lech Wyszczelski, *Teorie wojenne i ich twórcy na przestrzeni dziejów* [War Theories and Their Creators in History] (Warszawa, Neriton, 2009), pp. 397-401.

66 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 137.

beginning.”⁶⁷ Summing up, his approach to battle fighting is analogical to that of Clausewitz, with whom he agrees that outnumbering the enemy (with few exceptions) is the basic condition of victory, in the areas of both tactics and strategy,⁶⁸ Furthermore, just like in *On War*, the main objective of military combat is the destruction of enemy forces, and the best way to achieve it is by fighting decisive battles.

Samuel Griffith’s discussion of Mao’s book *On Guerrilla Warfare* primarily emphasised the influence of Sun Tzu,⁶⁹ a point echoed by contemporary authors such as Tjandra Aribowo and Helda Risman.⁷⁰ There is, however, considerable circumstantial evidence of convergence between Mao’s theory of guerilla warfare and Clausewitz’s concept of people’s war, which is contained in one of the chapters of *On War*. In that concept, the Prussian general indeed presented a vision of guerrilla warfare, where irregular actions were a preliminary phase paving the way for actions by regular troops or a nationwide uprising.⁷¹ According to Beatrice Heuser, similar statements can be found in Mao’s claim that the mobilised masses of the people were auxiliary to the regular troops, who, after an active defensive phase, were to proceed, in accordance with Clausewitz’s concept of strategy, to a violent counter-attack initiating a decisive campaign⁷². In doing so, unlike the Chinese strategist, Clausewitz did not see the need for establishing guerrilla bases.⁷³ This should be considered the Chinese commander’s original innovation in guerrilla warfare methods.

According to Michael Handel, Mao’s strategic thought significantly contradicts Clausewitz’s in one aspect. They both shared the view that there was a great difference between theory and its application in practice.⁷⁴ However, Mao differed in his approach from Clausewitz, who believed that the knowledge necessary for military operations in a

67 Mao Tse-Tung, *Protracted War*, p. 236.

68 von Ghyczy, von Oetinger, Bassford, *Clausewitz on Strategy*, pp.123-128.

69 Samuel B. Griffith, “Translator Note” in Mao Tse-tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. S.B. Griffith (Courier Corporation, 2005), p.37.

70 Tjandra Aribowo, Helda Risman, “The Comparison of Guerrilla Warfare Framework of Mao Tse-Tung, Vo Nguyen Giap, and Che Guevara,” *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* Vol.3, No.4 (2020): pp. 1082-1091.

71 Jack S. Levy, “Clausewitz and People’s War,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* vol. 40, no. 3 (2017), pp. 450-456.

72 Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, p. 139.

73 Ibid., p. 140.

74 Handel, *Masters of War*, p. 31.

high position can only be obtained through observation and reflection supported by special talent⁷⁵. Clausewitz thought that strategic planning does have to be the domain of geniuses or properly educated staff officers. However, according to Handel, the Prussian general considered subjective empirical knowledge to be the most important in conducting war campaigns, while Mao believed that theory could be adjusted to practice by objective, 'scientific' methods. Success in war depended on rational analysis underpinned by hard work rather than on genius.⁷⁶ Therefore, Mao believed that strategic knowledge could be obtained by eager and able soldiers who learn from experience gained on the lower levels, get to the higher level of thinking and reach a higher abstract and comprehensive level of strategic thinking. Handel accepts that Mao's position coincides with Sun Tzu's views, although he acknowledges that it may equally well coincide with the influence of Marxist philosophy, yet he does not analyse this at length.⁷⁷ Therefore, in my view, it is important to focus on this thread and consider the relevance of the relationship between Marxist theory and Mao's understanding of strategic issues, which I intend to do in the following part.

Mao's military theory from the Marxist viewpoint

There were some opinions that Mao perceived strategy in a typically European manner because he attempted to connect all levels of warfare knowledge by means of Marxist dialectics. The reason for this belief is that Mao functioned in an environment of officers educated in Soviet military academies. According to Western military historians like William Whitson, of all the Soviet thinkers, Mao was influenced the most by the war doctrine of Mikhail Frunze.⁷⁸ According to Martin Andrew, its main principles referring to the Chinese specificity can be summarized as follows: firstly, there existed a specific *proletarian* method of warfare; secondly, it had to reflect the social structure and relations of production in a particular country, which in the case of China meant the use of the

75 von Clausewitz, *On War*, pp.193-194.

76 Handel, *Masters of War*, pp. 33-35.

77 Ibid., pp. 36-38.

78 According to Whitson, Soviet-educated officers reconstructed the entire military doctrine of the communist army. They graduated from Soviet military academies and adapted the art of operation on the basis of Chinese conditions. See William Whitson, Chen-Hsia Huang, *The Chinese High Command: A History of Communist Military Politics 1927-71*, (London, Palgrave Macmilian, 1973).

peasant class as the main revolutionary power and the militarization of the rural areas as a military and political back-up facility for the Chinese Red Army; thirdly, military actions were to be active and dynamic and involve many offensives and flanking manoeuvres; and fourthly, the communist war machine was to be a force to spread the revolution in the world, which was proved by communist China's offensive operations already after World War II, including the annexation of Tibet.⁷⁹

According to Wang Fanxi, Mao was not, however, a brilliant strategist in the Marxist sense of treating strategy as the art of using tactical moves to achieve far-reaching political objectives. Although he indeed had high military ability, Mao did not display any broader strategic vision and he revised it in the face of accomplished facts. According to Wang, it can be proved by the fact that Mao was attached to the classical Marxist interpretation according to which revolution was primarily the work of the proletariat, with the peasantry and other classes playing a subsidiary role. The fact that in the 1930s the Chinese revolution was based on rural forces was more a coincidence, and actually, it was a contradiction of Mao's strategic line; he criticised the concept in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁸⁰ He only changed his mind after the outbreak of the war with Japan⁸¹. At the same time, however, the Chinese leader's limited reading of Marxist literature was to protect him from dogmatism.⁸² Therefore, familiarity with Soviet military concepts does not suffice to make him a Marxist strategist.

On the other hand, Mao's works are the interpretation of a political moment in strategy, and to be more precise, the connection of right or wrong strategic decisions with a 'proper' or *improper* political attitude, and subsequently also the connection of a proper strategic assessment and a *proper* understanding of certain principles of the Marxist philosophy. The connection between strategic, operational, or tactical mistakes with political or even philosophical 'deviations' seems to ensue from Mao's specific instrumental understanding of Marxism, which was different but still close to the dogmatic Stalinist understanding of reality as a world determined by objective laws.

79 Michael K. Andrew, *Tuo Mao: The Operational History of the People's Liberation Army*, Bond University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences 2008 (doctoral dissertation), p. 56.

<http://epublications.bond.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1072&context=theses> .

80 Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong's Thought*, pp. 101-103.

81 *Ibid.*, pp.109-110.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Neither Marx, Engels, nor Lenin developed a complete philosophical system, and a considerable part of their works was written under the pressure of current needs, such as the polemics with ideological competitors, etc. However, in the 1930s, in the Soviet Union, thanks to Stalin and Soviet academics subordinated to him, the content of classical works was generalized and codified to the form of Marxism-Leninism comprising historical materialism (so-called *hismat*) and dialectic materialism (*diamat*). It was dialectic materialism that aroused the most controversies because it generalized many statements of the Marxist classics, giving them the form of general laws governing the entire material reality. These developed “laws of dialectics” became the foundation for all other exact sciences (with a special emphasis put on history).⁸³ As a matter of fact, Mao rejected dialectic materialism and the “laws of dialectics.” comprised in it, replacing it with materialist dialectics and the science of contradictions in which a contradiction assumed the proportions of the chief ‘law..” Without analyzing the details of the philosophical deliberations of the main architect of the People's Republic of China, it can be stated that despite differing from the Stalinist version, he still considered a collection of statements referred to as materialist dialectics to be a set of general principles governing the social and natural reality⁸⁴. Therefore, Mao’s philosophy comprised a set of universal, objective principles governing the world, a departure from which resulted in mistakes that could influence both politics and the art of war. These objective principles, whose presence in Mao’s argument Handel attributed to Sun Tzu’s influence, were largely merged with Marxist-Stalinist ornamentation.

Mao saw the roots of the mistakes made by the Chinese Red Army generals and officers exactly in their poor knowledge of materialist dialectics, and specifically in their inability to solve contradictions between the subjective and the objective: “Why are subjective mistakes made? Because the way the forces in a war or a battle are disposed or directed does not fit the conditions of the given time and place, because subjective direction does not correspond to, or is at variance with, the objective conditions, in other words, because the contradiction between the subjective and the objective has not been

83 See Etienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London&New York, Verso Books, 2017).

84 See Mao Tse-Tung, *On Practice and Contradiction* (London&New York, Verso Books, 2017).

solved.”⁸⁵ Success on the battlefield had to be preceded by a concordance between the subjective element, i.e. the commander, his talent, cognitive abilities, etc. and the objective conditions in the battlefield, i.e.: “If the point chosen for the attack is on one of the enemy's flanks and it is located precisely where his weak spot happens to be, and in consequence, the assault succeeds, then the subjective corresponds with the objective, that is, the commander's reconnaissance, judgement and decision have corresponded with the enemy's actual situation and dispositions. If the point chosen for the attack is on another flank or in the centre and the attack hits a snag and makes no headway, then such correspondence is lacking.”⁸⁶ Analogically, if a battle was a success, it meant that the subjective and objective elements were concordant. This concept can be considered to be simple and intuitive. It seems close to the classical Marxist concept of revolution in which subjective and objective conditions influence its success, and the terms have a meaning similar to that of the Maoist vision of the art of war: the subjective referring to issues that can be influenced by the subject, and objective—to conditions which the subject has no direct influence on. As Wang Fanxi asserts, the errors discussed by Mao are unlikely to be related to a broader strategy aimed at achieving a meaningful political objective, but are manifestations of Stalinist terminology and dogmatism translated into a language pertaining to rather common-sense observations concerning the effective conduct of warfare, in this sense being part of tactical-operational planning.

The main problems for Mao were ‘leftist errors’ in the strategy. They were characterized by over-optimism, overestimation of one’s forces and underestimation of the enemy’s forces and possibilities. Moreover, it was also excessive attachment to offensive actions, absence of patience, and thus an ‘unnatural’ wish to accelerate revolution. The representatives of the leftist-opportunist deviation wanted revolution *now and here*, neglecting the objective elements and paying too much attention to the subjective element. It seems also that Mao related this error to a specific class deviation, and specifically to the petit bourgeois characteristics of the ultra-leftists: “They were nothing but subjectivism. Under favourable circumstances, this subjectivism manifested itself in petty-bourgeois revolutionary fanaticism and impetuosity, but in times of adversity, as the situation worsened, it changed successively into desperate recklessness, conservatism and flight-ism. They were the theories and practices of hotheads and

85 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 83.

86 Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, pp. 83-84.

ignoramus; they did not have the slightest flavour of Marxism about them; indeed they were anti-Marxist.”⁸⁷

The other type of *military error* was the rightist deviation resulting in defeats in the campaign: ‘The mistake here arose from a Rightist viewpoint. The leaders feared the enemy as if he were a tiger, set up defences everywhere, fought defensive actions at every step and did not dare to advance to the enemy’s rear and attack him there, which would have been to our advantage, or boldly to lure the enemy troops in deep so as to herd them together and annihilate them.’⁸⁸ The rightist deviation in military operations can be defined as an attitude deprived of courage and resoluteness in action, an absence of an inclination to take risks, an excessive attachment to defensive actions, a desire to save one’s resources and to expose one’s forces to losses to the least possible degree; probably also an overstatement and overestimation of the enemy forces which is connected with an excessive fear of the enemy. It was also attached to passive defence, as opposed to active defence promoted by the Chinese leader. Despite this ornamentation, from a Marxist point of view, it is difficult to attribute any deeper understanding of strategy to the Chinese commander. He was, however, a capable, pragmatic and innovative tactician able to use the knowledge from the Chinese and European military thought to achieve battle success, illustrating this with ideological terminology intended to secure approval for him within the party. However, in his writings, it is difficult to find any indication of a wider, political use of this knowledge. From this perspective, it would be difficult to agree unequivocally with the claim that his military achievements were the decisive or the only source of his political success.

Conclusion

It must be stressed that the leader of Chinese communists dealt first of all with the practical side of conducting warfare; therefore, his statements on the very essence of war are few and far between and additionally appear to be greatly simplified in comparison to those by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, as well as Vladimir Lenin, whose analyses of war are the most extensive. Nonetheless, Mao’s views are in line with the general Marxist

⁸⁷ Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 111.

⁸⁸ Mao Tse-Tung, *Problems of Strategy*, p. 102.

deliberations on war, according to which war is a derivative of the development of social formations and it is affirmed as a form of political struggle effective in the reality of capitalism, and simultaneously acceptable for revolutionists. However contrary to general Marxist thought, Mao probably under the influence of his subjective experience adopted the Stalinist flavoured principle of overcoming violence only by another form of violence. Although he invoked objective and “scientific” laws, in the military-political sphere he was nevertheless a rather subjective empiricist using inductive reasoning, who applied all available tactics and resources to achieve a strategic advantage over his opponent. In this sense, one can agree with Wang Fanxi that he was close to Stalin, who also favoured common sense thinking over exaggerated theorising in the type of Marxist classics.⁸⁹

Certainly, in the writings of Mao under analysis, one can see a far-reaching convergence with Sun Tzu in his recommendations concerning workable tactical and operational moves to achieve local advantage at the front. He learnt most of these from the classics of Chinese literature and from Communist commanders, confirming it with his own experience and perhaps with a brief glance at the relevant work of the ancient Chinese master, before commencing to describe his own theory. As Wang Fanxi shows, almost all of Mao’s principles of warfare overlap with those of Sun Tzu⁹⁰. But Mao’s theory would not have been complete or effective had it not been for a number of principles concerning the broader operational dimension of warfare with which he must have become familiar through the work of Clausewitz and its political reception by Lenin, the importance of which, in Marxist terms, the Chinese leader did not fully appreciate without correctly recognising the relationship between military action and long-term political strategy. At the same time, Mao believed that he understood Clausewitz better than the classics of Marxism did because he saw how important the role of war was for the accomplishment of political objectives and how important political control over the course of warfare was⁹¹. However, this was nothing that these classics had not known before, and Mao’s writings even seem poorer in terms of the context of the political dimension of war.

89 Wang Fanxi, *Mao Zedong’s Thought*, p. 138.

90 *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

91 Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, p.141.

It is worth emphasising here that without understanding the role of the interaction between guerrilla and regular troops, the role of campaign planning and decisive battles, Mao's theory would not have been what it was. Compared to Clausewitz, Mao was perceived as an excessive optimist who did not take into account the role of luck and variability in war.⁹² However, it is possible to conclude that it was Mao's familiarity with the classics of the European art of war in a Marxist interpretation that was instrumental in the successful use of ancient tactical advice to achieve Mao's military objectives, although he himself did not fully understand the theoretical and political significance of the tools he used.

92 Handel, *Masters of War*, p. 188.