

Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band: 28 (1974)
Heft: 1

Artikel: The ideal of the officer in ancient China
Autor: Weigand, Jörg
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-146391>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 18.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE IDEAL OF THE OFFICER IN ANCIENT CHINA

*Illustrated by the military treatise Wei liao tzu [1]**

JÖRG WEIGAND

The author of the text *Wei liao tzu*¹ considers war as a necessary evil that should only be used if a peaceful policy has proved unsuccessful. 'Weapons are tools of mischief; fighting [means] violating virtue.'² Accordingly, WL values a victory higher if it has been achieved in the throne room by the sovereign's skilful negotiation than if achieved on the battlefield by a general³.

However, if fighting is inevitable the sovereign should be able to rely on a well-trained and obedient army under a commander who is experienced in the art of war, *ping-fa* [6]. He should be assisted by skilful officers⁴. The officer should be a good example to his soldiers. This is the

* The numbers in square brackets refer to the list of characters at the end of the article.

1. The military treatise *Wei liao tzu* comprising 24 chapters is one of the 'Seven Military Classics', *Wu ching ch'i shu* [2], edited in the year 1080, following an Imperial decree, by Chu Fu [3] (a *chin-shih* of 1073). I think the basic concept of the text originates from the early Han period. The examination of the historical background of text and authorship is contained in a more detailed study in which I equally present a full translation of the text. In the following I shall use the abbreviations *WLT* for the book and WL for the author (according to the supposed author Wei Liao). Cf. J. Weigand, 'Staat und Militär im altchinesischen Militärtraktat Wei Liao Tzu', phil. Diss., Würzburg 1969.

2. *WLT*, ch. 23. Edition *Po-tzu ch'üan-shu* [4], reprint Taipei 1963, vol. 4, p. 2662, line 1. In the following, my references are to this edition.

3. Compare for instance *WLT*, ch. 2, p. 2630. Sun-tzu [5] holds a similar view in ch. 3 of his military treatise having the same name: 'For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.' (Samuel B. Griffith, *Sun Tzu. The Art of War*. Reprint, Oxford 1965, p. 77.)

4. The *WLT* does not always clearly differentiate between the commander and the sovereign, nor between the commander and the other officers. Thus, WL uses the notion commander, *chiang* [7], not only for the chief of the army but also for the leader of a unit of hundred men. Sun-tzu, too, does not clearly elaborate the difference between the sovereign and the commander. As to the importance of the commander with regard to the state compare Sun-tzu, ch. 3: 'Now the general is the protector of the state. If this protection is all-embracing, the state will surely be strong; if defective, the state will certainly be weak.' (Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 81.)

only way to make them follow him and even to die for him. Therefore, the officer should not claim any special advantages: 'In summer heat he may not put up a sheltering roof; in wintry cold he may not wear double clothes; in dangerous situations he must be the first to venture in.'⁵

Furthermore, it is important for the solidarity of the troops that the officers demonstrate to their men how much they trust in their own commander: 'If the officers respect their commander⁶, the common soldiers will respect their officers; if the common soldiers respect their officers, the enemy will respect these soldiers.'⁷

Equally, a particular concern of WL is that the officers take care of their soldiers. According to him, this may oblige them to do better service⁸. Even when they are on duty the officer must spare them as soon as this becomes possible or as soon as the military situation allows it. He should never vex them by unnecessary drudgery or formalities: 'Consequently, when the officer wore his armour in Antiquity he did not salute so as to show to his men that they would not be disturbed by him personally. From Antiquity up to our days you will probably not have heard of anyone who disturbed the people and demanded at the same time that they should go to be killed and exhaust their strength.'⁹

WL wants officers who are ready to take responsibility and initiative. They must have a sober character and should be able to take their decisions independently from prompting and other influences. This he illustrates by the example of the commander: 'The commander should not let himself be influenced from above by Heaven; from below he should not let himself be influenced by Earth; in the middle he should not let

5. *WLT*, ch. 4, p. 2636, l. 11–12.

6. They can however only respect their commander, if he has proved his skill in the art of war. WL explains this in the preceding sentences.

7. *WLT*, ch. 5, p. 2637, l. 10–11.

8. In this connection, Sun-tzu says in ch. 10: 'Because such a general regards his men as infants they will march with him into the deepest valleys. He treats them as his own beloved sons and they will die with him.' (Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 128.)

9. *WLT*, ch. 8, p. 2644, l. 8–10.

himself be influenced by Man¹⁰. He must be sufficiently generous so that he cannot be instigated to violent anger; he must be sufficiently honest so that he cannot be influenced by money. For if the heart is wild the ears are deaf and the eyes are blind, and if you want to guide men with these three faults, this might become difficult indeed.' ¹¹

If the commander can avoid the bad effects in this manner he can deploy his abilities to the full, and if he 'nurses his courage' ¹², then 'commander and officers, group leaders and common ranks will form one body in combat and in rest'. ¹³ WL describes this body as follows: 'The commander is [the same as] the heart, the subordinates [the same as] the limbs [of the body]. If the heart moves in a convincing manner the limbs will surely lend it vigorous support. If the heart moves with hesitation the limbs will certainly oppose.' ¹⁴

If officers and subordinates harmonize in action, the officer must not disturb this harmony by acting irresponsibly, thus endangering the confidence which his subordinates have put in him. In dubious situations he should not advance blindly but act corresponding to the behaviour of the enemy ¹⁵. Only if he has knowledge of the enemy's plans can he take the right dispositions. In every situation he must take his decision calmly; for if he shows that he is uneasy or doubtful or if he even reacts violently, he will lose the confidence of his subordinates, and the vital order and discipline of his troops will collapse ¹⁶. 'If, therefore, the superior does not give dubious orders, the troops do not have to listen twice

10. In chapter 8 WL explains that the commander should be independent from his own sovereign as well as from the enemy. Consequently, the whole paragraph means that the commander must be independent from the *san-ts'ai* [8], the 'Three Powers' (i.e. Heaven, Earth, Man). Sun-tzu too points out that it is important for a commander to be independent. In ch. 3 he says: 'He (the ruler) whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will be victorious.' (Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 83.)

11. WLT, ch. 2, p. 2630, l. 11 to p. 2631, l. 1.

12. Compare WLT, ch. 3, p. 2631-2634.

13. WLT, ch. 5, p. 2637, l. 5.

14. WLT, ch. 5, p. 2637, l. 7-8.

15. Compare WLT, ch. 18, p. 2655-2656.

16. WLT, ch. 23, p. 2663, l. 2-3.

(in order to understand what has been said); if he moves without uncertainty the troops do not have to waver [between] two decisions.’¹⁷

The officer firmly guides the unit put under his command. He guarantees order and discipline. He is responsible for his men and at the same time for the behaviour of the other officers: ‘The officers, starting from the chief of a group of ten up to the generals of the Left and Right Armies, are all responsible for each other. If one of them offends against orders or ignores prohibitions and the others reveal it, then they will be set free from punishment. [If, however] they know it and do not reveal it, they will be punished as accomplices, *yü-t’ung* [9].’¹⁸

This mutual responsibility will equally be transmitted to the group leaders and to the common ranks. One has to control the other. If they have knowledge of anybody violating the regulations and do not report it to their superiors they all risk to suffer the same punishment.

If such an irregularity comes to the officer’s ears he has the right to punish this soldier immediately. The amount of punishment, however, should be adequate and correctly applied¹⁹. On the whole, for WL discipline is one of the most important conditions for keeping an army together. Only discipline allows coordinate action. Consequently, everybody who infringes it must expect to be sentenced to death: ‘All [the soldiers] deserting their officers in combat and all the officers leaving their troops and fleeing will altogether be eradicated.’²⁰

17. *WLT*, ch. 4, p. 2635, l. 4–5. This part has been translated by Lionel Giles, *Sun Tzu on the Art of War*, Reprint Taipei 1964, p. 107.

18. *WLT*, ch. 14, p. 2653, l. 2–4.

19. Compare *WLT*, ch. 4, p. 2636, l. 6. As to the correct application of punishment Sun-tzu equally gives the following instructions: ‘If troops are punished before their loyalty is secured they will be disobedient. If not obedient, it is difficult to employ them. If troops are loyal, but punishments are not enforced, you cannot employ them.’ (*Sun-tzu*, ch. 9; Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 122–123.)

20. *WLT*, ch. 24, p. 2664, l. 6–7. Equally compare ch. 13 where details are given; e.g. what would happen to an officer in charge of a thousand men and infringing discipline by flight or even desertion. He would be proclaimed ‘enemy of the state’. ‘He himself will be killed and his family destroyed; his requisitioned fortune will be confiscated; the burying place [of his ancestors] will be opened and their bones will be exposed to the sun on the

Last but not least it is evident that the officer must be skilled in the art of war and know the principles of *ping-fa*. This is the only way for perfectly planning the engagement of his troops²¹. 'Consequently, he who skilfully engages his soldiers can deprive the Other²² [of courage] and it will not be the enemy who deprives him [of courage].'²³ Wisdom of action means that the officer does not blindly rush forward in order to force victory but that he can see how important it is even to retreat in order to use all chances of success. Uncontrolled advance merely serves the enemy and helps him to win²⁴.

To sum up we can say that WL demands the following qualities of a good officer, who will lead his troops to everybody's satisfaction: (1) integrity, (2) a sense of responsibility, (3) exemplary conduct in every situation, (4) care for his subordinates, (5) fair strictness, (6) precise planning, (7) wisdom in action, and (8) profound knowledge of the art of war²⁵.

1. 尉繚子
2. 武經七書
3. 朱服
4. 百子全書
5. 孫子

6. 兵法
7. 將
8. 三才
9. 輿同

market place. His sons and daughters will be entered as public slaves into the administration' (p. 2652, l. 4-5).

21. Naturally, this applies first of all, to the general; but within a smaller scope it is equally of importance to the subordinate officer.

22. i. e. the enemy.

23. *WLT*, ch. 4, p. 2635, l. 2.

24. Compare *WLT*, ch. 12, p. 2651, l. 7-9.

25. Compare Sun-tzu's postulate for a commanding officer: 'By command I mean the general's qualities of wisdom, sincerity, humanity, courage, and strictness.' (*Sun-tzu*, ch. 1; Griffith, *op. cit.*, p. 65.)