

“Wangdao” or “Badao”: Comparative Study of Ethics in the Art of War and On War

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Abstract: *Is there some middle ground between “Wangdao” and “Badao”, which represents the ethics of benevolence or hegemony respectively? Are discussions not rigorous enough about the thought of “Wangdao” in China and the thought of “Badao” in the West? What are the warfare ethics in Sun Tzu’s The Art of War and Clausewitz’s On War? Based on the comparison of warfare ethics, it is necessary to put forward a new idea about the “Wangdao” and “Badao”, which runs through the whole process of war, from the objectives to the operations. The masterpieces of the two great philosophers and strategists came out under the influence of different cultures, which reflect the typical characteristics of Chinese and Western ethical thoughts to some extent. By comparing the warfare ethics in The Art of War and On War, and referring to dialectics, this paper tries to analyze the spiritual traits of ethics of “Wangdao” and “Badao”, and find out the cultural backgrounds of their formation. Finally, there will be discussions about the contemporary values of the ethics and suggestions about their applications in the modern society.*

Keywords: Wangdao; benevolence, Badao, hegemony, The Art of War; On War, ethics, cultural backgrounds, contemporary values

1. Introduction

To a certain extent, “Wangdao” and “Badao” are the key points when we try to figure out the cultural differences between China and the West. The Chinese culture is widely accepted as “Wangdao” which represents virtue and peace; in contrast, the western culture is “Badao” which represents wars and violence. The great politician Sun Zhongshan had made the following evaluation: “The culture of the East is “Wangdao”, while the culture of the West is “Badao”; “Wangdao” stresses virtue and morality, while “Badao” advocates material gain and power. Virtue and morality influence people by the justice, while material gain and power oppress people with guns (Sun, 1984).” From the perspectives of most people, the eastern culture is based on benevolence and righteousness as “Wangdao”, while the western culture is based on force and interests, which is termed “Badao”.

However, according to the materialist dialectics, the contradiction has a tendency to transform into its opposite, namely, the mutual transformation between “Wangdao” and “Badao”. Hence, I try to compare the ethics of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* and Clausewitz’s *On War*, which represent the peaks of military works in the history of China and the West, and look for the common points of their ideas about “Wangdao” and “Badao”, even if they only take up a small part, compared to their mainstream moral and ethical thoughts. In addition to the comparison, I will also focus on the cultural and historical factors of the formation of the ethics, the contemporary values, and the modern application.

2. Methods

The two main methods which are used in elaborating on this topic are Literature Analysis and Dialectical Analysis. In order to know the distinction between ethics in *The Art of War* and *On War*, I firstly classified the military thoughts of the two masterpieces and made a comparative study to find their characteristics. The comparison was carried out in three aspects: moral ethics evaluation - strategic purpose; moral and ethical foundation - commanding concept; moral and ethical norms - warfare operations. These thoughts run through the two books, from the overall concept to the detailed operations in war. Secondly, I used dialectics to explain the tendency that two ethical thoughts are transforming into their counterparts. Finally, by referring to a large number of journals and books from the relevant areas and try to find much description about “Wangdao” and “Badao”, I summarized the

different ideas of the formation of the different ethics and analyzed the historical factors to compare the cultural backgrounds and give my own understanding about the thoughts to contribute to the development of the society.

3. Comparison

3.1 Comparison of the Characteristics of Ethics

3.1.1 Moral and Ethical Evaluation - Strategic Purpose

In the eyes of Sun Tzu, “protecting the homeland and people” is the highest purpose of the war. “Those whose only concern is to protect his people and serve his sovereign is an invaluable asset to the state.” (“The Terrain”) The standard of war is in line with the interests of the country and the people. “Winning battles and seizing land and cities, and yet failing to consolidate these achievements, is dangerous, as it means a drain on your resources. Therefore it is said that a wise sovereign makes careful deliberations before launching a war and a good commander handles it with care. Do not go into battle if it is not in the interest of the state. Do not deploy the troops if you are not sure of victory. Do not send them into battle if you are not in danger. The sovereign should not start a war simply out of anger; the commander or general should not fight a battle simply because he is resentful. Take action only if it is to your advantage. Otherwise, do not. For an enraged man may regain his composure and a resentful person his happiness, but a state which has perished cannot resort, nor can the dead be brought back to life. Therefore, the enlightened sovereign approaches the question of war with the utmost caution and the good commander warns himself against rash action. This is the way to keep the state security and the army intact.” (“Attacking by Fire”) Sun Tzu sees the deep suffering brought by the war to the people. If it could not achieve the strategic goal of “protecting the homeland and people”, it will still be a waste of effort to seize the land, even if winning a victory.

However, in Clausewitz’s view, “war is a tool of politics.” The essence of war is a means to achieve political goals so that the objectives should be fully consistent with political intentions. According to *On War*, Clausewitz not only made the classic expression that “war is nothing but the continuation of politics through another means”, but also clarified profoundly that “the only criterion for evaluating the issue, whether a war is reasonable, is to figure out if the war has contributed to the achievement of political goals”. By using metaphors, Clausewitz claims in *On War* that: “politics is the body, while the war is a part of it. It is politics that has produced wars”; “politics is ‘the mother of war’, and the outline of war has been faintly formed in politics, just as the nature of creatures has formed in the embryo”; “a war is only a part of interactions of politics, and it is by no means independent from politics”. That is to say, firstly, a war is a political act, which is always produced under certain political situations and can only be caused by certain political motives. Secondly, Clausewitz believes that a war is a means, while politics is the purpose; politics determines wars, and political views determine the military viewpoints. Clausewitz also points out that “while the political intention is the purpose, war is the means, and a means without purpose is always hard to imagine”. Meanwhile, the author also used the relationship between the mind and the tool as a metaphor: “politics is the mind, while war is just a tool so that military views are always subordinate to political views”. At the end of the book, Clausewitz makes a conclusion that politics runs through the whole process of the war. He says: “political interactions are not interrupted by war, nor are they turned into something that is completely different because of war. Regardless of the means, political interactions exist in essence; moreover, the main route that is followed and restricted by war events could only convert into the outline of political interactions, which goes throughout the war until the end.”

In conclusion, the ethical thought of “protecting the homeland and people” in *The Art of War* is in line with the thought of “Wangdao” from Mengzi, which is also the mainstream moral ethics in *The Art of War*. However, the thoughts of Clausewitz that “military affairs are subordinate to politics”, “political interests determine military interests”, and “political purposes determine the military purpose” represent the ethics of “Badao”, which target at seeking hegemony.

3.1.2 Moral and Ethical Foundation - Commanding Concept

“*The Art of War*” begins with the statement: “War is a question of vital importance to the state, to the matter of life and death, and to the road to survival or ruin. Hence, it is a subject which calls for careful study” which means that the way the general manages and commands the army decides the life and death of the country, so it must be seriously treated and considered, so “it is necessary to examine

the belligerent parties and compare them in terms of the five factors, in order to assess the outcome of a war". Based on the "five factors" and "seven questions", people could have a general prediction about whether they could win the battle. The so-called "five factors" are the "Tao", the "Heaven", the "Earth", the "Command", and the "Regulations"; the so-called "seven questions" are: "Which general is more capable? Which side has the advantages of heaven and earth? Which army is better disciplined? Whose troops are better armed and trained? Which command is more impartial in meeting out rewards and punishments?" What is worth mentioning is that Sun Tzu puts the "Tao" in the first place of the "five factors": "by the Tao, I mean moral influence, or that which causes the people to think in line with their sovereign", that is, the "Tao" means the ways that can unify the will of people and the sovereign. According to the chapter of "Making Assessments", "when people think in line with their sovereign, they will follow him through every vicissitude, whether to live or to die, without fear of mortal peril". The statement shows that Sun Tzu has already recognized the ethics of humanism, which is well accepted as "Wangdao".

However, according to dialectics, the contradictions of everything have a tendency to transform to each other, which means you can also see the clue of "Badao" in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. For example, Sun Tzu said: "you must win the soldiers over by treating them humanely and keep them in line with strict military discipline". ("Deploying the Troops") At the same time with "ruling with virtue", we still need to pay much attention to "ruling with laws". There are also strict regulations about "discipline" and "punishment" to implement necessary penalties to soldiers who slack off orders and violate discipline, so as to work as a warning to consolidate the management. It is the philosophy of Legalists and generals to rule the army by enforcing laws, which is a part of "Badao".

Just like Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* which contains the thoughts of "Badao" in the mainstream ethics of "Wangdao", Clausewitz's warfare ethics also show some characteristics of using "Wangdao" to manage the troops. Except for the statement like "military genius is a harmonious combination of various spiritual forces", which indicates that the rule of military depends on the spiritual power of commanders, Clausewitz also advocates the implementing of civil war. He believes that countries which fight a battle with the power of people would have a comparative advantage over those countries which doesn't win their support. "The way the people's armed force fight against the enemy resembles the way of burning flames in the dark." That is to say, the ethics of "Wangdao" can also be seen in *On War* by the concept of uniting people as a whole.

3.1.3 Moral and Ethical Norms - Warfare Operations

Sun Tzu recognizes the ethics of the "benevolence" and "humanitarian spirit" in *The Art of War* as the core of his philosophy. First of all, he puts forward the thoughts of "complete victory" and "breaking the enemy's resistance without going to battle" which represent the concept of moral ethics. According to "Attacking by Stratagem", "Generally in war, the best policy is to take the state of enemy whole and intact; to destroy it is not. To have the enemy's army surrender in its entirety is better than to crush it; likewise, to take a battalion, a company or a five-man squad intact is better than to destroy it. Therefore, to fight a hundred battles and win each and every one of them is not the wisest thing to do. To break the enemy's resistance without fighting is the wisest thing". Keeping things intact is the best policy while fighting battles are the worst. From the perspective of ethics in *The Art of War*, it is not only a denial of the brutal and inhuman war, but also a reflection of Sun Tzu's expectation of reducing the loss of the war to a minimum. Secondly, because of "benevolence", Sun Tzu also puts forward a series of ethical norms such as "caring soldiers" and "treating soldiers friendly". He asks the generals to treat the soldiers just like fathers treating their sons. According to "The Terrain", "when generals care their soldiers as if they were infants, they will follow them through the greatest dangers; when generals love their soldiers as if they were their own sons, they will stand by him even unto death". Finally, Sun Tzu holds the idea that his army must treat the people of the enemy friendly, and should not abuse its soldiers. Showing them the virtues of humanity, just as what is recorded in "Waging War": "prisoners of war should be treated kindly and taken into your ranks. This is what is meant by boosting one's strength in the process of overpowering the enemy". This is also a typical embodiment of the ethics of "Wangdao" in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*.

On the other hand, *On War* defines war as "a violent act that makes the enemy to obey." Clausewitz believes: "violence is the way to impose one's own will on the enemy. In order to achieve this purpose with certainty, the enemy must be made powerless. That means resistance is the real goal of war." Clausewitz argues that in order to make the enemy unable to resist, violence must be used as much as possible. "Some people suppose that there must be a clever way that could beat the enemy without heavy casualties, and consider it as the direction of the development of the war. This view, no matter

how wonderful it is, is a wrong idea that must be eliminated, because this kind of misconception from kindness is the most harmful thought for dangerous things like war. Therefore, the one who is desperate and does not hesitate to use violence will certainly gain an advantage when the counterpart does not do the same. In this way, the counterpart is forced to change their behavior, so that the two sides will go to extremes. In Clausewitz's view, it seems unreasonable not to kill prisoners and show benevolence to the enemy in the war. "If we find that civilized people do not kill captives and do not destroy cities and villages, the reason is that they learned ways to use violence more effectively during the war." From this point, we can firmly make the conclusion that "Badao" has a great influence on the ethics of *On War*.

To summarize, *The Art of War* puts much attention on discussing the ethical thoughts of "Protecting the homeland and people" and the humanism, and shows the characteristics of "Wangdao"; at the same time, there is also the philosophy of ruling by laws which represents the ethics of "Badao". In contrast, according to *On War*, "war is nothing but the continuation of politics through another means" and "a violent act that makes the enemy to obey", emphasizing the ethics of "military violence" which represent the thoughts of "Badao". However, it also has some descriptions of the power of the people, embodying the narrow-minded people-oriented thinking, namely, the narrow-minded "Wangdao".

The pinnacles of the two military masterpieces in the history of China and the western countries have broken through the constraint of "Wangdao" and "Badao" which lied in the tradition of China and the West. There is a tendency between the two ethics to transform from one side to another, indicating the view of dialectics. However, the mainstream of moral ethics in *The Art of War* could be concluded as "Wangdao", while the thoughts of "Badao" is well-represented in *On War*.

3.2 Comparison of the Cultural Background of Ethics

3.2.1 The Art of War

Academic scholars have different opinions on the formation of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. The mainstream views the moral ethics in *The Art of War* the same as the thought of "benevolence" from Confucian and believes that the formation is influenced by Confucianism and regards it as the main part of Sun Tzu's ethical thought (Li, 2010; Cao, 2012).

The scholars of "Qi" (the area where Sun Tzu lived in) think that the humanistic ethics in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* are formed under the influence of "Qi" culture. In their view, there is a difference in status between the ethics of "Wangdao" from Sun Tzu and the thought of "benevolence" from Confucian. In "Making Assessments", Sun Tzu says: "by command, the wisdom, trustworthiness, benevolence, courage, and firmness of the commander", which puts wisdom in the first place, compared to "benevolence" in the second place (Sun, 1991). This is the typical characteristics of Qi culture.

There are still a small number of scholars who believe that the formation of Sun Tzu's ethical thoughts of "Wangdao" is greatly influenced by the Legalists in the period of "Chunqiu". He believes that the principle of interest is the basic starting point for Sun Tzu's, and the utilitarianism has become the core of Sun Tzu's ethics (Bi, 2001).

In my opinion, although the previous research has its own value, there are also deficiencies. I would like to generalize the core of ethics in *The Art of War* as "the combination of Legalist theory and Confucianism", and the formation of this thought is the result of integration from the "Wangdao" of Confucius and "Badao" from Legalists.

According to "Deploying the Troops": "if you punish soldiers for not being devoted to you, they will remain disobedient; and if they are disobedient, they will be difficult to use. But even when you have their devotion, if discipline is not enforced, you still cannot use them. Hence, you must win them over by treating them humanely and keep them in line with strict military discipline. This will ensure their allegiance." Among the text, treating the soldiers with benevolence and enforcing rules to regulate their behaviors are of great importance. The combination of humanism and disciplines is the only thing that can make the army go forward and fight for the generals. That is to say, it is crucial to combine the ethics of "Wangdao" with "Badao".

The ethical thoughts in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* can be traced back to the "pre-Qin" period. According to Shangshu, "ethics should be used to manage the country, and the aim of policies should target at improving the living standard of people". The moral and ethical thoughts and the theory of

“Wangdao” had already shown their characteristics thousands of years ago. During the period of “West-Zhou” Dynasty, the rulers built a theoretical system of political philosophy on the basis of the ethics of morality. The “benevolence” is not only the individual moral quality and ethical cultivation, but also the foundation for examining the political legitimacy and use of the political power. With the disintegration of the patriarchal hierarchy of slavery, and the prevalence of hegemony, Confucius set up a theory system on the basis of “Wangdao”, and regarded the ethics of humanitarian “benevolence” as its main feature, which imposed a great influence on the formation of moral ethics and military philosophy in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*.

The Legalists, as the philosophers in the period of “pre-Qin”, regarded the war as the crucial point, which can influence the destiny of a country. “Breaking the enemy’s resistance without going to battle” is the concrete embodiment of the Chinese pacifism in moral ethics and “an army with benevolence and righteousness” is the final goal to constitute troops, which represent the ethical thoughts of “Wangdao”. That is to say, the moral ethics in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* are combinations of Confucianism and thoughts of Legalists.

3.2.2 On War

While the ethics in *The Art of War* can be traced back to the “Xia”, “Shang”, “Zhou” Dynasty and the “pre-Qin” period, the moral and ethical thoughts in *On War* can be traced back to ancient Greek, Roman, and the Christian culture. “The roots of western culture grow in the soil of the East, which comes from the Greek culture and Hebrew culture. (Greene, 2005)” “People have original sin.” “The human nature is evil.” “People cannot redeem themselves, so they must rely on God to be saved”. These are the theoretical basis for the European Christian theology that ruled the West for centuries. “This is a state of war where everyone fights against each other (Hobbes, 2017).” “In the theory of individualism, there is a fundamental ethical principle. That is: a single person has supreme intrinsic value or dignity (Lux, 1993).” If we apply this concept to the whole world, the pursuit of national interests becomes a universally logical value. In order to achieve this, any means, including war, can be used. This is an important ideological and theoretical basis for the moral ethics of “Badao” from the West.

In the modern society, colonialism and hegemonism show the supremacy of national interests and lead to the worldwide expansion, colonial plunder, and war, which can be found in the theoretical basis of nationalism. These thoughts were formed in the development of the modern industrial revolution and the bourgeois revolution. “Western Europe is the land of hegemony in the modern world. From the competition between Spain and Netherlands to the alternation of power between Britain and Spain; from the war between Britain and France to the challenge of Britain due to the growth of Germany, as well as the competition between the United States and Britain, these are all classic modern hegemony in international politics. The history of the development of western civilization is not only the history of aggression, exploitation, plunder, and conquest of the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, but also a warfare history of blood between the western countries (Tang, 2008).”

To draw a conclusion, the moral ethics in *On War* are influenced by western individualism, which has developed into “Badao” with capitalism in the war of resources in modern society.

4. “Wangdao” or “Badao”: The Contemporary Value of the Ethics

As mentioned above, the ethics in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* mainly represent the characteristics of “benevolence”, which can be concluded as “Wangdao” with people-oriented thoughts and humanism, although the ethical democracy arises from “the way of politics” (Tseng, 2020); the ethical thoughts in *On War* are mainly based on personal egoism, aiming to conquer the world by violence, which reflects the characteristics of “hegemony” and can be concluded as “Badao”. The final goal of “Wangdao” is to build a harmonious world, but the development of “Badao” will definitely destroy the peace of the world.

The thought of “Wangdao” has made a great contribution to the formation of the Chinese national spirit. The core of it is patriotism with the moralities of tolerance, harmonization, peace-loving spirit, solidarity and friendship, and self-reliance, which is still full of vitality. However, we must admit that the ethics of ancient China are, after all, products of the agricultural civilization, and have a limitation, which does not fit the modern society. If we simply rely on the moral and ethical thought of “Wangdao” to establish a benevolent government and replace the laws with benevolence, it will certainly hinder the

construction of law in China. Although the legal system requires certain moral ethics as supports, the construction of which cannot be only measured by ethical standards. With the development of capitalism, the thought of “Badao” will aggravate the competition of human beings. The solipsism and materialism may impede the improvement of science and technology as well as material civilization. After all, the trend of the modern world places the emphasis on peace and development, and people are forced to cooperate with each other to achieve a greater success under the context of globalization.

Therefore, the reality determines that we have to find some middle ground between “Wangdao” and “Badao”. The dialectics also reveals the rules of transformation from the two sides of contradictory and provides us with theoretical guidance. We could draw a conclusion from *The Art of War* and *On War* that the combination of “Wang Dao” and “Badao” is not only wisdom from predecessors, but also an effective way to regulate the society: construct the social system on the basis of benevolence and consolidate the rule by laws and regulations. While thinking highly of the morality and ethics of “benevolence”, we should also improve the legal system and the construction of armaments. Ruling simply by the ethics of “Wangdao” without the support of military and regulations from “Badao” cannot be termed a true rule of “Wangdao”. Only when we combine “Wangdao” with “Badao”, can we “cultivate morality, regulate the family, maintain the state rightly and make all the world harmonious and peaceful”. The great philosophers have already set an example for us.

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