

Sūn Wǔ 孫武

E Bruce Brooks 白牧之

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

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Abstract. This can be a short abstract. There never was any Sūn Wǔ.

Background. The Military section of the Hàn Palace Library catalogue (HS 30 4/1756f), which was compiled at the end of the 01st century, begins with these entries:

- Sūndǔ of Wú 吳, Laws of War 兵法 in 82 chapters; diagrams 9 chapters
- Sūndǔ of Chí 齊, Laws of War 兵法 in 89 chapters; diagrams 4 chapters

These are much longer than our text. The ambiguous Sūndǔ “Master Sūn” is listed twice in HS 30: Sūn Wǔ 武, said in SJ 65 to have served King Hǔlǔ 闔閭 of Wú 吳 from c0512 and trained an army of Wú royal concubines, and Sūn Bìn 孫臏, who led Chí forces to victory over Ngwèi 魏 at Mǎ-líng in 0343. Doubts about Sūn Wǔ or his date were raised in Sùng; based on 04c indicators such as crossbows in the Sūndǔ text, and on the silence of the Dzwǒ Jwàn, which does not mention Sūn Wǔ 孫武.¹

New Factors. Fragments of the long Sūndǔ, and of the Sūn Bìn, were found in a tomb of 0134 near YínchYWèshān; these showed that the long Sūndǔ was the source of the SJ 65 “concubine army” story.² It has been claimed that since the Sūn Bìn does exist, *our* Sūndǔ must be by Sūn Wǔ.³ This follows if the HS 30 attributions are true. It can easily be shown that they are false.

The Attribution of the Sūndǔ

Warring States. Some texts, eg Sywǎndǔ 15 (c0250), mention “Sūndǔ” 孫子 or “Sūn and Wú [Chǐ] 吳起,” in that order, as established classics. Wèi Lyáudǔ 3 (c0238) lists exemplary generals: Hwán-gūng of Chí (who led 10 myriad troops), Wú Chǐ (7 myriad), and last “Wǔdǔ” 武子 (3 myriad), implying increasing skill in the handling of troops. The admiring epithet Wǔdǔ “military master” must be our Sūndǔ. This is seemingly the first use of “Wǔ” 武 in connection with Sūndǔ, but note that the chronological placement of this “Wǔdǔ” is still after Wú Chǐ.

Chín. The ambiguous “Sūndǔ” is disambiguated in this early Chín text:

- Lǚ-shè Chūn/Chyōu 17G1 lists the key concepts of ten thinkers; Sūn Bìn 孫臏 is said to have prized shǐ 勢 or “dynamic potential,” an idea distinctive to Sūndǔ 7.

Then “Sūndǔ,” the text, still meant “Sūn Bìn” to the learned men of early Chín.

¹Apparently first noted by Yè Shè 葉適 (1150-1223).

²The story of the concubines of Wú as told in SJ 65 is literarily indebted to that story as found in the YínchYWèshān extended Sūndǔ; see Ames **Sun-tzu** 190-196.

³See for example Gawlikowski in Loewe ECT 449, Ames **Sun-tzu** 16f.

Hàn. The Jàn-gwó Tsṽ (JGT) is a species of romantic literature, flourishing at the time of the Mǎwángdwēi tomb (pre-0168), and continuing to expand thereafter. The Shǐ Jì authors (working after c0140) drew on a later developed state of that literature for much of their material. “Sūndž” in JGT stories usually means the 04c Sūn Bìn:

- JGT #121 (HK #105). Following the battle of Mǎ-líng, “Sūndž” asks Tyén Jì if he is capable of revolting against Chí; he is not. Sūndž here is an 04c figure.

- JGT #304 (HK #300). Mǎ-líng from the Ngwèi side: the King’s son is sure to lose against the Chí general Tyén Pàn and “Sūndž.” Sūndž here is an 04c figure.

Finally, we have this story, which brackets the specific “Sūn Bìn” with Wú Chǐ:

- JGT #161 (HK #210). A Chí general in the 03rd century, writing to a besieged Yēn general, says “Yours are troops fit for Sūn Bìn or Wú Chǐ.”

Now comes an important step, in a long JGT harangue by the mythical Sū Chín:

- JGT #158 (HK #142). “Generals like Hǎlǎw and Wú Chǐ can be captured while one is sitting in a room.”

This pairs Wú Chǐ with the supposed 06c *patron* of Sūn Wǔ.⁴ For the first time, Sūndž (if implicitly) is being moved back to an earlier period. The ground is now prepared for “Sūndž” to take the epithet Wǔ as his name, and to occupy a time slot earlier than Wú Chǐ, taking with him the received Sūndž text. This frees the historical Sūn Bìn to be associated with another text. In turbulently military Hàn, new military writings were in demand,⁵ and one began to be written under the newly available name of Sūn Bìn. In the YínchYWèshān texts of 0134, the extension of the Sūndž and the beginning of the “Sūn Bìn” are still in embryo stage, but have definitely been launched, in time to come to the attention of the authors of the Shǐ Jì, who would have begun work soon after the accession of Wǔ-dì in 0140. The chronological sequence is without flaw.

Attribution Dynamics. One of the important Sinological discoveries, made in the 18th century by Tswēi Shù 崔述 and again in the 20th by Gù Jyé-gāng 顧頡剛, is that Chinese antiquity myth was “built up in reverse,” the latest invented characters being put at the head of the sequence, to claim for them a higher antiquity than the earliest previously recognized figure had possessed.⁶ The Micicians, who freely cited pre-Jōu figures, could therefore laugh at their Confucian rivals (who were committed to Jōu as the fountainhead of virtue) in these terms: 且子法周而未法夏也，子之古非古也 “But you take as your model Jōu, and not Syà – *your* antiquity is not really antique.”⁷ The relocation of Sūn Bìn ahead of his rival Wú Chǐ serves a comparable purpose.

⁴Other literary associations of Wú Chǐ with King Hǎlǎw, which show the image of Wú Chǐ drifting upward chronologically, perhaps in response to the backdating of “Sūndž,” are to be found in the Chín layers of LSCC (19C1, 19D2).

⁵Hàn liked its new military writings to have classic status. Thus was the Sūndž extended from 13 to 82 chapters, and the Wú Chǐ from 6 to 48 chapters. The story of Jāng Lyáng being given a book on strategy by an old man at a bridge (SJ 55) spawned two treatises (the Lyòu Tàu and the Sān Lywè) purporting to *be* that book. Even Sūn Bìn’s opponent, the losing general Páng Jywēn of Ngwèi, is credited in HS 30 with a military treatise in 3 chapters.

⁶Compare the classic statement in Waley **Way** 133-135.

⁷This was written c0262; for its context at that time, see Brooks **Analects** 261.

The attribution of the successive military texts fits this pattern: each in turn claims a higher niche on the timeline than its immediate predecessor. Thus:

- Sūndǔ: associated with a general of the mid 04c (victory in 0343)
- Wú Chǐ is said to have served Ngwèi Wǔ-hóu (r 0398-0371)
- ... or, in later layers of that text, Ngwèi Wǔn-hóu (r 0425-0399)
- “Sūn Wǔ” is associated with Hǔlǔ of Wú’s invasion of Chǔ (0511)

The chronological escalation is obvious.

Sex. Besides antiquity, the other thing that sells books is sex and violence. Perhaps to help the Wúdǔ text compete more successfully in the marketplace of ideas with the Sūndǔ, the tale was told that early in his career, Wú Chǐ had killed his Chǐ wife to prove his loyalty to Lǔ.⁸ The invention of that legend made the Wúdǔ authorial figure both older and more violent than the Sūndǔ persona. But this was merely a narratively offstage killing, of only one woman. About the time that Sūndǔ was re-imagined as Sūn Wǔ, there arose the legend of the concubine army of King Hǔlǔ, with its *onstage* killing of *two* women. This myth the Shǐ Jì popularized. It secured for the Sūndǔ text, whether in its original or its augmented form, a decisive advantage over its antagonist. The story is still quoted, in full and enthusiastically, in modern studies of the Sūndǔ. The Wúdǔ never afterward regained its old position as the equal of the Sūndǔ.

Conclusion

No Warring States or early Hàn text mentions “Sūn Wǔ,” though the *epithet* Wǔ was applied to Sūndǔ in c0238. By c0145, the Sūndǔ text had been reattributed to an invented “Sūn Wǔ,” said to have been the general of King Hǔlǔ of Wú. To Sūn Bìn, previously associated with the Sūndǔ, there were then ascribed new military writings.

Methodological Moral. It is fashionable these days to dismiss “arguments from silence” and to decry attempts to “prove a negative.” There are indeed reasons, cultural or personal, why something which in fact exists may not be mentioned in a given text. But the “Sūn Wǔ” episode, with its centuries of textual silence about Sūn Wǔ, his concubine army, and his battles in Chǔ, may serve to remind us that if something did not in fact exist, the only evidence which that fact is capable of leaving in the record is precisely an *absence of evidence* in the record.

Works Cited

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⁸The story seems not to be attested earlier than the Hàn period; for its typology, see Goodrich **Biography** 215.