

The Pseudo-Biography of Sun Wu

Below is a complete translation of the “biography” of Sun Zi from the Shi ji (The Grand Scribe’s Records), s. 65. Written by Sima Qian (145–ca. 86 B.C.) around the year 97 B.C., it is an essentially fictional account of a figure for whom there is no other more secure information.

Master Sun, whose courtesy name was Wu (“Martial”), was a man of Qi.¹ Because of his *bingfa*,² he gained audience with Helu,³ the king of Wu.⁴ Helu said to him, “I have read the whole of your thirteen chapters.⁵ Can you give me a small demonstration of how you train soldiers?” Master Sun replied, “Yes, I can.” Helu asked, “Can you do the demonstration with women?” Master Sun replied, “Yes, I can.”

Thereupon it was permitted for one hundred and eighty beauties to be brought out of the palace. Master Sun divided the women into two companies, with two of the king’s favored concubines as company commanders, and he ordered all of them to carry halberds.

Master Sun gave them orders, “Do you know where your heart and back, your left hand and right hand are?” The women

replied, "We know." Master Sun said, "If I want you to go forward, face in the direction of your heart. If I want you to go to the left, face in the direction of your left hand. If I want you to go to the right, face in the direction of your right hand. If I want you to go to the rear, face in the direction of your back." "Yes, sir!" replied the women.

The marching commands having been proclaimed, Master Sun had a large battle-ax brought out, then he repeated the orders over and over.⁶

Thereupon Master Sun drummed⁷ them to the right, and the women broke out in laughter. Master Sun said, "If the marching commands are not clear, and if the orders have not been repeated enough to make them familiar, that is the fault of the general."

Again, Master Sun repeated the orders over and over, then he drummed them to the left, and again the women broke out in laughter. Master Sun said, "If the marching commands are not clear, and if the orders have not been repeated enough to make them familiar, that is the fault of the general. Since the commands have already been made clear, yet you do not execute them according to the regulations, that is the fault of your officers."

Whereupon, he wished to execute the left and right company commanders. When the king of Wu, who was observing the proceedings from a terrace, saw that his concubines were about to be executed, he was greatly terrified. Hastily, he sent a messenger to deliver the following order: "We already realize that you know how to conduct military operations, general. If we, however, are bereft of these two concubines, our food will be tasteless. We hope that you will not execute them."

Master Sun said, "Since your servant has already received your command to be the general of your army, and I am now with the army, 'there are ruler's orders that he does not accept.'"⁸

Whereupon he had the two company commanders executed⁹ as a warning to the others.

After he appointed the next two in line to be the company commanders, he again drummed the soldiers. The women turned to the left and right, went forward and backward, knelt and rose as precisely as if their movements had been measured with a compass and L-square. None of them dared make a sound.

Thereupon, Master Sun sent a messenger to report to the king: "The soldiers are now in perfect order. Your Honor may come down and observe them. They will do whatever Your Honor wishes, even if you want them to go through fire and water." The king of Wu said, "Enough, general! You may return to your quarters. I do not wish to come down and observe."

Master Sun said, "Your Honor only cherishes the words of the *bingfa*, but cannot apply their reality."

Thereupon, Helu came to realize that Master Sun was capable of conducting military operations, and eventually made him a general.¹⁰ Subsequently, the kingdom of Wu destroyed the powerful state of Chu¹¹ to the west, entering its capital at Ying,¹² awed the states of Qi and Jin¹³ to the north, and achieved illustrious fame among the feudal lords. Master Sun played an important role in all of these developments.¹⁴

On the whole, this is not a very helpful introduction to the putative author of the *Sun Zi* and his career. Indeed, the only useful information in it appears in the first and last paragraphs, both of which are short. From these two paragraphs, we learn that Master Sun was supposedly a native of Qi, which was in the northeast of what is now China (the modern province of Shandong), that he was granted an audience with the king of Wu (a coastal state that lay to the south of the Yangtze), and that he later served as a commander in the Wu army. The rest of the quasi biography, more

than four-fifths of the whole, is taken up with a highly improbable, blood-curdling account of Master Sun drilling 180 palace beauties and ruthlessly beheading the king's two most favored ladies. Sima Qian, though, certainly did not fabricate this story, since it is told at still greater length in one of the Yinque Shan bamboo strip manuscripts that was found with the *Sun Zi*, namely, the fragmentary text that has been given the provisional title of "Jian Wu wang" (An audience with the king of Wu) (Yinque Shan 1976:106–8). In this earlier rendition of the tale, it is Master Sun who offers to use "noble persons . . . , ignoble persons . . . , [or] women" to demonstrate his rigorous military discipline.

From the more expansive but less polished manner of the story as it is related in the archeologically recovered manuscript version, it would appear that Sima Qian, author of the *Shi ji*, has abbreviated a preexisting legend. Inasmuch as the Yinque Shan manuscripts date to between 134 and 118 B.C., this means that the story of Master Sun's interview with King Helu was probably already in circulation by at least the first half of the second c. B.C. It also pushes back the antecedents of the thirteen-chapter edition of the *Sun Zi* to a similar time, since the extended version of the story in the bamboo strip manuscripts twice mentions that number of chapters.

For an English translation of the Yinque Shan manuscript version of this fanciful tale, see Ames (1993:191–96). The Chinese text is available in Yinque Shan Hanmu Zhujian Zhengli Xiaozu (1976:106–8, nn. 109–11).

Although Sun Wu's "biography" in *Shi ji* 65 is sorely disappointing, there is more that can be said about the scroll as a whole, for he shares it with Sun Bin (and thereby hangs a tale), not to mention Wu Qi (and thereby hangs another tale). See the introduction for a complete translation of the biography of Sun Bin and for additional information concerning Wu Qi, with whom Sun Zi is often paired.