

# STRATEGY: COOKBOOK OR PHILOSOPHY?

## STRATÉGIA: KUCHÁRKA ALEBO FILOZOFIA?

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### Abstract

Even though “strategy” is one of the most frequent and influential words today, its essence remains hidden. This article goes back to the original Sun Tzu’s concept of strategy and shows that the amazingly complex ancient wisdom transcends our common understanding to a great extent. Sun Tzu’s core concepts, such as grand-strategy, the five principles for victory, and the strategic configuration of power, might help us to comprehend the essence of strategy, improve the processes of strategic planning, and contribute to the more balanced development of municipalities, their competitiveness, and sustainability. The article introduces some of Sun Tzu’s core messages and illustrates their usefulness briefly on a case study.

### Abstrakt

Aj keď je „stratégia“ jedným z najfrekvencovanejších a najvplyvnejších slov súčasnosti, jej význam zostáva nejasný. Tento článok sa obracia k originálnemu konceptu stratégie tak, ako ho podal čínsky stratég Sun Tzu. Ukazuje sa, že staré poznanie bolo veľmi komplexné a výrazne presahovalo náš súčasný pohľad. Kľúčové koncepty, ako tzv. veľká stratégia, päť princípov víťazstva či strategická konfigurácia moci, by nám mohli aj dnes pomôcť uchopiť esenciu stratégie, zlepšiť procesy strategického plánovania a prispieť k rozvoju miest smerom k harmónii, konkurencie schopnosti a udržateľnosti. Článok predstaví vybrané kľúčové odkazy стратега Sun Tzu a v krátkosti ilustruje ich užitočnosť na prípadovej štúdii.

### **Introduction**

Despite of the fact that *strategy* is a military word, the idea of *strategy* was also applied to commercial, non-profit, and public sectors. Terminology that evolved from old military words and practices (e.g. vision, tactics, leadership, strategic partnership, competitive advantage, and similar) are widely accepted and used today. *Strategy* became one of the most frequent and influential words today. Nevertheless, its nature remains hidden.

Hambrick and Fredrickson (2001) pointed out that strategy has become such a broad term that it is used to mean almost anything. Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin (2012, 162) stated: “*although strategy is one of the most taught and studied concepts, it is paradoxically also one of the least understood.*” Since the word *strategy* misses clear meaning today, the natural step is to go back to its source.

The commonly accepted origin of *strategy* is Sun Tzu’s manuscript the *Art of War*, which was referred by many authors. Nevertheless, as Milevski (2019) stated, Sun Tzu is often interpreted as (as well as criticized for) being “a cookbook” of how to “do strategy”. In contrast to most contemporary authors, however, Sun Tzu himself required “*penetrating understanding*” to be able to capture the essence of his ideas and, in Milevski’s words, “a genius” to be able to use it. According to Lau (1965, 319), “*there are many difficulties in the Sun tzu that cannot possibly be solved except by philological methods*”. What if the ancient message is rather a philosophy than a cookbook?

This article presents Sun Tzu’s *essence of strategy* according to his original manuscript (Sawyer’s translation of the *Art of War* is used here) and its interpretations offered by Yuen (2008), Lord (2000), Milevski (2019), and others and illustrates such essence on a case study. When searching literature, the key factor to select references was the approach in which authors worked with the manuscript *Art of War*. Attention was paid to articles explaining Sun Tzu’s crucial concepts (explained below), the context of Taoism in ancient China, and the hidden forces “behind the obvious”. On the contrary, articles which tended to make a guideline, adjust Sun Tzu’s words and methods to contemporary world, and explain details were not used for this purpose. Unfortunately, only the very limited amount of suitable texts was found, and there are no articles presenting this viewpoint in the field of municipal/regional development. As for the case study, the article does not claim any deep analysis. It only sketches how understanding the ancient wisdom might be useful today, and more rigorous studies should follow.

## **What is strategy?**

There is no doubt that *strategy* is a military term. It comes from Greek *strategos* (army commander) by joining *stratos* (army) and *ago* (leading, managing). Therefore, strategy means the *way of leading the army*, and, by definition, it contains the great deal of leading abilities. The oldest military document comes from ancient China. Sun Tzu’s manuscript the *Art of War* was written around 400 BC; yet, the date varies from 750 to 200 BC (Trellis, 2004). According to Ames (1993), legend says that the King Ho-lu of Wu read the *Art of War* and asked Sun Tzu to demonstrate his military abilities. After the successful demonstration, the king employed Sun Tzu as his advisor, which started Sun Tzu’s career as a great strategist. The historical fact is that the King of Wu gained victory over the hostile state of Ch’u that was about three times size of Wu by using unorthodox methods.

According to Lau (1965), the first translations of the *Art of War* appeared during 18<sup>th</sup> century in France and during 20<sup>th</sup> century in England. Afterwards, Sun Tzu’s wisdom

became known in Western countries and influenced western terminology across military, commercial, and public sectors.

Commercial companies discovered Sun Tzu during the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. They adopted the idea of strategic approach and replaced the old intuitive planning methods by new rational managing systems. The very first definitions of *strategy* were offered by Drucker (1954, 1994), Chandler (1962), Ansoff (1965), and Learned et al. (1969). Even though they anchored the core vocabulary, the definitions of *strategy* started to vary during the following decades. Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin (2012) made the quantitative analysis of 91 definitions of strategy which occurred since 1962 to 2008. According to their analysis, those definitions obtained 472 different terms, which were divided into 20 categories of nouns, 20 categories of verbs, and 10 categories of adjectives. Out of all terms, 60.52percent appeared only in one definition. This showed the large dispersion, ambiguity, and lack of consensus about the modern concept of *strategy*. Nevertheless, the analysis also proved that the concept gained internal coherence over decades. Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin offered the “*consensual definition about the essence of the strategy concept*” like this: “*the dynamics of the firm’s relation with its environment for which the necessary actions are taken to achieve its goals and/or to increase performance by means of the rational use of resources*” (182).

Ronda-Pupo’s and Guerras-Martin’s analysis was made only in the context of pro-profit companies; yet, the first definitions of *strategy* anchored our understanding so deeply that the uncovered consensual definition could be easily used in non-profit and public sectors too. In all sectors, we highlight subjects’ interaction with their environment, actions to achieve goals, good performance, and the reasonable use of resources. The fundamental problem of this modern consensual essence is that it ignores soft attributes and the role of leaders, which were in the heart of Greek *strategos* as well as essential for Sun Tzu (see chapters below). How would such discrepancy happen?

Black (2004, 89) pointed out that “*Taoism, the philosophical basis of The Art of War, is difficult for Westerners to understand because of the use of paradox, which Westerners interpret differently than how the paradoxes were originally intended to be read*”. Yuen (2008) recovered the original meaning of concepts used in the *Art of War* in the context of Taoism philosophy (which had fundamental influence on ancient Chinese authors) and explained them in the context of other works on strategy that originated in China and in the West (e.g. Clausewitz, Liddell-Hart, Boyd, Wylie). He concluded that the West’s overemphasis on decisive battles makes it blind to the non-military spheres of war. Yuen suggested that Sun Tzu deals with complexity of war by issues regarding grand strategy and statecraft enabling him to be certain of victory without bloody combats. Unlike other military manuscripts, Sun Tzu rooted victory in “*growing stronger*” and preferred the non-military aspects of war to direct battles. The back-bone of the *Art of War* is made of victory without fighting and non-prolonging the war. The first chapters deal with reasons why not to fight, and all the core ideas across the manuscript underline those reasons. Moreover, “*human dimension*”, which is understood as forces internal to human mind, personalities, emotions, and reasons, is dominant in Sun Tzu’s manuscript. This soft approach to warfare made Sun Tzu’s ideas, at the same time, interesting for strategic

approach across sectors as well as hard to be captured without the required “*penetrating understanding*”.

This article does not explore definitions of strategy as they are used in public sector and in municipal strategic planning. The reason is that, as Ronda-Pupo’s and Guerras-Martin’s analysis proved, our contemporary understanding is largely ambiguous and, as the following text discusses, far from the original complexity of strategic thinking. Therefore, the next chapter searches for the original Sun Tzu’s essence of strategy, as they were written in the *Art of War* and interpreted by Sawyer (1996), Yuen (2008), Lord (2000), and others.

### **Ancient concept of strategy was a philosophy rather than a cookbook**

Sun Tzu stated: “*Warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Way (Tao) to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed.*” There are few concepts running across the manuscript, which need to be explained.

### ***Sun Tzu’s grand strategy***

The back-bone of the *Art of War* is made of “*subjugating the enemy’s army without fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence*” (Sun Tzu). Yuen (2008) concluded that “*Sun Tzu deals with complexity of war by issues regarding grand strategy and statecraft enabling him to be certain of victory without bloody combats*”. Yuen suggested two possible translations of this highest realization of warfare as “to attack enemy’s plans” or as “attacking by stratagem”. The war can be won by influencing the mind of hostile ruler; in such case, only the marginal use of military actions would be needed. Influencing the small number of minds (one ruler) is possible and predictable, whereas dealing with the irrational behaviour of masses, especially in the critical situation of combat, is much more difficult and less decipherable.

According to O’dowd and Waldron (1991), the ancient China acknowledged the high value to harmony (*ho*). Sun Tzu believed that harmony helped to create strong state and the quality of life, whereas enemy could be defeated by implementing the state of chaos in terms of “*the destruction of the psychological, social, and political order*” (O’dowd, Waldron, 1991, 27). “Creating chaos” is one of the recurring topics in the *Art of War*. “*Those who do not thoroughly comprehend the dangers inherent in employing the army are incapable of truly knowing the potential advantages of military actions*” (Sun Tzu). Therefore, Sun Tzu had the strong tendency to ponder all aspects of war to avoid non-controllable chaos generated in direct battles. Instead of bloody battles, he suggested to break the harmony between a ruler and his people, to use enemy’s own weaknesses to exhaust him, and/or to convince an enemy to abandon his intentions.

Moreover, Sun Tzu’s definition of victory is “*conquering the enemy and growing stronger*”. He did not speak about extermination or demolishing, but about preservation, good treatment, and re-employment. “*Now if someone is victorious in battle and succeeds in attack but doesn’t exploit the achievement, it is disastrous [...] the wise general*

*ponders it, the good general cultivates it.*” Sun Tzu distinguished victory, non-victory, non-defeat, and defeat. He stressed that ensuring *non-defeat* as an obligatory basis for seeking victory, and accepting *non-victory* is a good option if it is for the general good of a state.

Today, grand strategy as non-fighting and victory meaning *growing stronger*, pondering, and cultivating achievements are well applicable in the peaceful democratic self-development. Moreover, countries and municipalities can also *grow weaker* (be self-defeated) in terms of falling into regression, destruction, demoralisation, the decline of system, and, in extreme cases, the loss of the future. Hence, Sun Tzu’s understanding of peaceful way to victory or defeat is worthy to be reconsidered.

### ***Invincibility as the precondition for victory***

*“Those that excelled in warfare first made themselves unconquerable in order to await (the moment when) the enemy could be conquered. Being unconquerable lies with yourself; being conquerable lies with your enemy.”* (Sun Tzu) The significant part of Sun Tzu’s manuscript focused on ensuring unconquerability (non-defeat) and highlighted that *invincibility* is connected to the state of mind and the preservation of *ch’i* (morale, spirit, energy) of troops.

According to Sun Tzu, war can be won with only the marginal use of military actions if one preserves his/her own *ch’i* and influences the mind of hostile ruler to compel *“one’s opponent to abandon his purpose”* (Liddell-Hart, 1991, 43). This statement is rooted in belief that influencing the small number of minds is possible and predictable, whereas dealing with the irrational behaviour of masses is much more difficult and less decipherable. The loss of morale, spirit, and energy of people brings conflicts, apathy, fear, and abandoning duties. All of these together cause defeat. Yuen (2008) pointed out that the ancient China had the highly developed understanding of how quickly does order change into non-controllable chaos and the loss of *ch’i* in case of wrong leadership. Based on this understanding, avoiding negative processes of municipal decline (ensuring non-defeat) can be seen as the subject to the state of mind of people in charge and to the preservation of *ch’i* of others (inhabitants, actors). Hence, the positions of leaders (people in charge) and of other actors differ (see also below).

However, ensuring invincibility (avoiding defeat, avoiding growing weaker) does not mean that one will be victorious (grow stronger). In other words, invincibility (non-defeat) is good enough to “survive” and to keep status quo, but it is just a precondition for the future development and growing stronger (seeking victory). Moreover, being certain of victory is the key aspect for Sun Tzu to make the decision of whether to fight or not, because, as he said, *“vanquished state cannot be revived, the dead cannot be brought back to life”*. Sun Tzu suggests that there are two interconnected ways to ensure the victory – making ourselves unconquerable and knowing that enemy is conquerable. *“One who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements”* is maybe the best-known text of the *Art of War*. In West, this sentence is mostly interpreted through getting data and making comparative analyses. However, Sun

Tzu's concept was based primarily on knowing minds and *ch'i* (morale, spirit, energy), which might be compared to what West calls "soft-information". "*Instead of mere 'knowing', it addresses the necessity to correctly grasp and evaluate the intentions, traits and thought patterns of enemy's decision maker as well as the mental condition of his troops*" (Yuen, 2008, 190). Even when we speak about peaceful self-development, the aspect of knowing oneself from the perspective of soft-information (e.g. admitting the true potentials of a municipality as well as understanding minds, abilities, and intentions of leading people) creates the core of non-defeat (ensuring stability to avoid growing weaker).

To establish the unconquerable position and form of troops and, later on, to gain victory, Sun Tzu provided various detailed guidelines and military techniques. The offered rules and methods are dominant in most interpretations of the *Art of War* today. However, in author's opinion, a piece of Sun Tzu's important wisdom remained misunderstood (or ignored). He listed the *five principles for victory* – Tao, Heaven, Earth, Generals, and Laws – and warned that the mutual interactions of those principles provide the large scale of results varying between excellent victories to fatal defeat. "*The notes do not exceed the five, but the changes of the five can never be fully heard.*"

### ***Five principles for victory***

To use Sun Tzu's manuscript in municipalities today, we need to transform the original five principles for victory – Tao, Heaven, Earth, Generals and Laws – into contemporary vocabulary. To do so, this article uses the idea presented in Dobrucká (2016, 146; italic in original): "While [...] questions [asked during planning processes, e.g. during building a zone] cover many diverse issues, they can be grouped into a few core categories: *what* (questions relating to principles, aims and tasks), *who* (questions concerning individuals, groups and societies involved), *when* and *where* (questions about context, time-spatial characteristics and the current situation), *how* (questions relating to processes, methods and tools) and *why* (questions of values, motives and reasons)." Below, the Sun Tzu's five principles for victory are described in their original context as well as sketched in our modern perspective. Even though some words are offered to understand the principles, those words are only tools to capture meanings; they are not meant to offer translations of any kind.

***"The Tao (Way) causes the people to be fully in accord with the ruler. (Thus) they will die with him; they will live with him and not fear danger."*** For Sun Tzu, *Tao* meant including people to have the same aim as ruler. It did not mean knowing the secret goals and details of ruler's decisions, but to be sure of the exactness, consistency, and predictability of his behaviour. *Tao* pointed on the preservation of *ch'i* (mind, energy, and spirit), which maintained purpose, rather than on having information, which turned to knowledge only. From the perspective of Dobrucká's categories of questions, *Tao* refers to *why*. Why do things happen; why efforts do or do not work out; why should we follow or resist? In companies, categories such as vision, mission, and organisational culture have crucial importance for the broader acceptance of how company behaves. Non-profit organisations need to set up the purpose of their existence through values, motives, and

society's needs to be successful. In municipalities, however, we face an issue beyond the time of one human life. People can, for sure, influence municipal development; yet, the municipality also keeps evolving in its own independent continual "way".

Today, words like reason, purpose, evolution, and similar would describe the first principle. In some cases, the principle can be sensed in the general development vision, such as sustainable city, smart city, just city, etc. However, using visions is misleading because the first principle cannot be set up. It needs to be sensed, discovered, and understood. Official representatives might formulate concepts, modify strategic plans, and implement their own tactics, programs, and projects. Yet, the future itself should be felt and shared in the everyday life of municipality and be independent from election periods or planning documents. For instance, the vision of being "just city" becomes useful only if inhabitants' mindset turns to justice, fairness, and tolerance. If inhabitants prefer to cheat, deceive, and do wrong, the vision of "just city" turns useless. To explain *Tao*, we might also use the word *Continuity* and see its most "tangible" expressions in the form of identity, local genius loci, and inhabitants' self-identification.

***"Heaven encompasses yin and yang, cold and heat and the constraints of the seasons."***

In the *Art of War*, *Heaven* represented balance and harmony as well as understanding and ability to use cyclic changes and the mutual interactions of conditions. Nowadays, much of these can be found in the concept of sustainability. Even though words sustainability and sustainable development don't have any official definitions, the essence of all their interpretations deals with adaptation on changes (e.g. climate change, new technologies, changes in social structures and human behaviour, globalisation vs. localisation, etc.) and balancing diversity (see the original concept in WCED, 1987; Agenda 21, 1992). Unfortunately, sustainability also often evokes the strong preference of environment.

From the perspective of Dobrucká's categories of questions, *Heaven* might refer to *what*. What is the natural way of things; what is the desired future in the context of natural changes and trends; what would we like to achieve? Terms such as sustainability, the quality of life, harmony, creativity, and similar could be parts of the answer. In author's opinion, *Balance* would be the common contemporary expression close to the original Sun Tzu's meaning: balance between desired and natural, between actual and changing, and between diverse aspects.

***"Earth encompasses far or near, difficult or easy, expansive or confined, fatal or tenable terrain."***

The principle of *Earth* helped the armies to face non-controllable circumstances, such as climate, weather, and landscape. Armies could not change those conditions; they had to know them, adapt on them, and use them for own advantage. From the perspective of Dobrucká's categories of questions, *Earth* refers to *when and where*. When and where are we; what does it look like here and now; when and where are or will events happen? Place and time can be influenced to some extent. Nevertheless, speaking about municipalities, these factors are given and irrevocable. Therefore, the only way to create the successful future of municipalities is to know the locality, to accept its limits, and to discover and use the biggest potentials while preventing the risks

of devastation. The context of time, place, and causality shows the true potentials and limits of the municipality at hand. Hence, this article might suggest the term *Context*.

Unfortunately, city planners often do not recognise and employ the full potential of evolving trends and comparative analyses. For instance, the well-known SWOT analysis should have four steps – a) brainstorming to make the list of factors in four categories, b) decision on three to five most important factors in each category, c) developing correlation matrix to compare and measure mutual interactions, d) calculating actual position and the best approach to future development. Municipalities generally use only the first step (the list of facts), which is insufficient. To truly know the circumstances and be able to use them, context should be measured and calculated to find out objective and unprejudiced possibilities. While the previous two principles were extremely soft and had to be sensed, this third principle can be rationally evaluated. The interactions between “sensed” (*Continuity*, natural evolution and people’s self-identification) and “known” (*Context*, true local potentials and limits) might reveal the most natural way of municipal development.

***“The general encompasses wisdom, benevolence, credibility, courage and strictness.”***

Tremayne (2008) suggested that Sun Tzu named and ordered the required qualities according to their importance. It might be so, and we might discuss particular character features (anyway, the translations of the *Art of War* differ in particular words). In author’s opinion, however, the key point is hidden elsewhere. Sun Tzu warned that each trait could be potentially dangerous because of its reverse side. He stressed that *Generals* are able to lead only if they have all their features balanced and appropriate to their functions. Otherwise, they would lead others into danger and defeat. *“The general is the supporting pillar of state. If his talents are all-encompassing, the state will invariably be strong. If the supporting pillar is marked by fissures, the state will invariably grow weak.”* (Sun Tzu) As Milevski (2019, 142) stated: *“Sun Tzu considers the appointment of the commander one of the most important decisions a sovereign can make, repeatedly emphasizing that skill is vital”*. Interpretations of the *Art of War* largely agree that skilful generals use rational considerations rather than intuition. Nevertheless, Milevski reminded that Taoism, which influenced Sun Tzu’s thinking, embodied the idea of genius and metaphysical wisdom – “heavenly genius” was gained via studying ancient esoteric texts. Hence, Sun Tzu called for rational considerations that were supported by general’s genius and teaching. Such combination allowed generals to recognise a situation as well as to create a situation, to think rationally as well as to “feel”.

At this point, Sun Tzu’s understanding was strait. He did not point on all people involved in armies but only on leaders, rulers, and generals. From the perspective of Dobrucká’s categories of questions, *Generals* refers to *who*. Who are key players and people making decisions; *who* are they, what are their intentions, characters, and abilities? Hence, the principle of *Generals* in municipalities could be called *Key people* or, to be even more straightforward, *Leaders* as those who possess the biggest power and responsibility during events at hand. In a nutshell, there are four groups of people that could be considered as leaders – politicians (“rulers”), people on the highest hierarchical positions in municipal and institutional structures (“formal generals”), experts dealing with plans



and projects (“formal and/or informal generals”), and informal leaders who possess influence on the community at hand.

This principle – *Leaders* – is probably the most controversial one. It is so highly neglected that “human dimension” did not even appear in the consensual definition of strategy (discussed above). In democratic countries, we tend to avoid the expression “leading people”. Words communication and participation are preferred. Unfortunately, they do not have the same core. Leadership points on the roles of “rulers and generals” which were (and remained) crucial for making decisions as well as for delegating power and responsibility. On the other hand, communication and participation point on the tools of involving people into co-creation *Continuity* and *Conditions for implementation* (see below). Hence, in democracy-based municipalities, two levels of human involvement exist – the level of *leaders* as those having power to influence others and make decisions (according to their election, hierarchical position in municipal structures, expertise or informal power) and the level of *common actors* as those having power to elect, control, and participate or refuse to participate. Leadership and teamwork can be understood as two sides of the same coin. Teamwork creates synergic effects helping to lower necessity of one genial leader. At the same time, leaders are needed to handle the coordination, moderation, motivation, and inspiration of teams. In ancient China, rulers and generals were important to preserve people’s mind, energy, and spirit. Today, “*the role of leader is not to decide, give orders and control, but to make the job of others easier and possible. It means to give advice, help and encourage, create conditions for development of the company as well as people*” (Senge, 2000; translated by author). Intermixing leaders with actors and leadership with participation devalue the role of leaders and enables them to avoid their responsibility by melting it among masses.

In their analysis, Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin offered one category called “managers/owners/stakeholders” which included the wide range of terms referring to diverse and multi-valued positions, such as general, senior and line management, administration, stakeholders, governors, entrepreneurs, employees, top executives, headquarters, individuals, and specialists. During 1962-2008, all of these terms pointed on to leadership style, communication, education, training, feedback, employees’ empowerment, and/or motivation. Unfortunately, these are tools rather than the “human dimension” meaning forces internal to human mind, personalities, emotions, and reasons, which are highlighted by Sun Tzu. Moreover, this category keeps only the medium influence on the modern concept of strategy, and it did not make its way into the summarizing definition. One of the reasons might be the natural resistance of each person to criticism. *Leaders* are those who set up strategy. It can be hardly expected that they would identify their own character traits and abilities as one of the crucial factors for success or failure. This point is even more complicated in democracy-based societies. Human minds, characters, and attitudes are rarely questioned; individual abilities are simplified to education and professional skills.

***“The laws encompass organization and regulations, discipline, the way of command and the management of logistics.”*** The last principle involved issues such as processes and structures, rules and hierarchy, signals, the physical condition and mood of troops,

the system of rewards and punishments, logistics, finances, etc. Together, they created *conditions* which an army had to handle and in which the military strategy could or could not be successfully implemented. At the same time, and in contrast to the non-controllable principle of *Earth*, this last principle is fully manageable.

From the perspective of Dobrucká's categories of questions, the principle of *Laws* refers to *how*. How can we achieve goals; how do we proceed, control, and enforce the desired behaviour? In contemporary municipalities, *Conditions for implementation* include institutional structures, the hierarchical flow of orders according to the delegation of power, operational processes, finances, etc. Controversial "discipline" is the part of the conditions too. The non-profit sector shows how to deal with it. Instead of reward-punishment system, it can be a feeling of usefulness, advisability, and self-satisfaction creating responsible behaviour and acceptance on duties (Drucker, 1994). Similarly, self-identification balanced with potentials can be the strong motivation factor for active participation, public control, and self-responsibility in municipalities. Inhabitants (actors) could be added into this principle too, because people and system are connected to each other in the same way as leadership is connected to teamwork. Together, they make the base on which activities can or cannot be made. Adding common actors under *Conditions for implementation* (rather than under *Leaders*) does not devalue their importance. In fact, it highlights the importance of self-identification and identity of actors if any development plans are to be feasible. Realization is the crucial part of any plan, and actors are the crucial condition for the realization.

### ***Victory or defeat?***

"If one who finds that majority of factors favour him will be victorious while one who has found few factors favour him will be defeated, what about someone who finds no factors in his favour?" (Sun Tzu). The word "find" could perhaps be replaced by the word "recognize". If people do not recognize/find some of the principles, it does not mean that those principles do not exist. According to Sun Tzu, all *five principles for victory* influence development, and not recognizing or ignoring that influence causes troubles (defeat).

Yet, if all *five principles* are always present in some form, what is the key difference between *non-defeat* and *victory*? Sun Tzu stated: "*Thus one who excels at warfare seeks (victory) through the strategic configuration of power, not from reliance on men. Thus he is able to select men and employ strategic power (shih).*" In other words, if we use the *five principles for victory* consciously, we might be able to ensure invincibility (non-defeat) or even non-victory. However, to reach victory, the concept of *Strategic configuration of power* has to be added.

To understand Sun Tzu's ***Strategic configuration of power***, it is necessary to understand his concept of *hsing* (form or position) and *shih* (advantage or leverage). Lord (2000) explained that concept. *Hsing* advises to configuration of one's forces through the proper use of terrain and the complex calculation of relative strengths. *Shih* is understood as the use of comparative advantage gained from *hsing* by ability to combine orthodox and

unorthodox actions. *Shih* involves psychological dimension on two levels. First, the *ability of general* to gain advantage from *hsing* is fully based on his/her integrated personality and balanced character traits. Second, the *ability of troops* to follow the general and leverage *hsing* is based on their preserved energy, moral, and spirit. “*The burden of military success should rest not on the quality or morale of the troops as such but on the commander’s skill in deploying them to strategic effect*” (Lord, 2000, 302).

The concept involves one more combination of words: *cheng* (the orthodox or straightforward) and *ch’i* (the unorthodox or surprise). “*Strategic advantage derives from the combination of both in a single battle so as to conserve one’s own strength and take maximum advantage of the enemy’s weaknesses*” (Lord, 2000, 303). “*It takes both ch’i and cheng to form a whole concept; they should never be considered individually*” (Yuen, 2008, 192). Analogous to the combination of *hsing* and *shih*, an ability to combine both *orthodox* and *unorthodox* is needed to gain the winning force of the *Strategic configuration of power*. Sun Tzu’s manuscript presents the set of rules and methods to ensure invincibility. At the same time, it stresses that victory is connected to the ability to use and/or break those rules and methods according to the situation. For instance, „*there are commands from the ruler that are not accepted*” (Sun Tzu).

In municipalities, local situation, potentials, and limits (possible equivalent to *hsing*) do not ensure development yet. The ability of leaders to use the advantage of the situation by balancing orthodox (*cheng*) and unorthodox (*ch’i*) decisions as well as to inspire people to support their leaders (*shih*) is needed. Again, the role and significance of leaders should not be ignored.

If we look at the Strategic configuration of power via the lens of Dobrucká’s categories of questions and Sun Tzu’s five principles of victory, we find out the fundamental link. The “*who - in what context*” mutual interaction makes an important insight on the relativity of personal features, skills, and abilities. Different situations require different leaders. Management style needs to copy specific situation to deliver good results. Specific conditions need to be known, accepted, and turned profitable by leaders having appropriate abilities complying with the situation. Moreover, the combination of *Earth* and *Generals* connects objective and subjective dimensions and influences the choice of orthodox and unorthodox actions. The relationship between *Context* and *Leaders* formed the core of Sun Tzu’s *Strategic configuration of power*, which was considered a must to reach victory (growing stronger). It is a paradox that modern companies, organisations, and municipalities often try to “develop strategy” without employing the *Strategic configuration of power*.

## Case study

A case study of a town located in a middle-European post-communist country illustrates how Sun Tzu’s understanding of strategy could help to reconsider the case. Quotations used below come from interviews collected in 2006 (during the project focusing on green areas noted below) and 2011. Interviews served for a purpose unrelated to this article

(one project in 2006 and survey about another project in 2011); nevertheless, the selected quotations are relevant for this article too.

The medieval free royal town X possesses the well-preserved historic urban structure and identity which were not changed since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, 20<sup>th</sup> century development, settlements, and other investments did respect neither the historic heritage nor the principals of sustainability and quality. The continuity and balance of municipal development became endangered. Luckily, citizens are active patriots (92 percent according to public survey), the official representatives elected after 2000 were long-term oriented. The ex-Mayor (who was elected in 2002) said (interviews 2006): *“I want to have my name on a tablet somewhere on the wall. I will do my best to be known as the one that re-developed X”*. He/she declared his/her core vision for the town X as *“to be the leader of quality in the country”*.

In 2003, the Department for Strategy and Marketing (DSM) operating under the Mayor’s direct supervision was created. This might be marked as the point when X adopted the principals of strategic and project management and started to promote towns’ priorities and coordinate development. DSM’s main goal was to develop and implement the strategy of municipal development into inhabitants’ common lives. Additional goals pointed on establishing the processes of project management and of financial support. To fulfil its aims, DSM created several strategic and mid-term documents in 2004-2005. Due to well-prepared strategic documents, X became very successful in winning state aids and grants. The significant amount of money started to flow into the municipality.

One particular visionary-oriented project took place in 2006. Its aim was to propose how the green areas of X (in both urban areas and surrounding countryside) could be used to strengthen the potential of municipal development. The proper use of greenery in the context of overall strategic development was expected to strengthen sustainability by the means of connecting greenery to social and cultural life, supporting economic growth, and using the existing municipal structures for implementing the project. Additionally, there was an order to support local genius loci, to increase X’s attractiveness internally for citizens as well as externally for tourists, investors, etc., and to improve urban design, image, and identity.

When the contracted experts asked about any specific requirements on how the project should be designed, the ex-Mayors answered (interviews 2006): *“You are the one with expertise. Suggest the best way which you can find and come back to me to discuss it. If it is applicable, you will have my full support to implement it.”* The full support was truly provided. The members of the Board of Representatives participated at each crucial meeting; they followed and supported the process. The head of DSM himself/herself cooperated as the ordinary team member. Inhabitants had possibility to participate at several events. For example, the scientific conference concerning the topic of municipal development was organised in X, and the entrance was free for inhabitants. Up to 50 non-researchers came to listen to presentations about history, archaeology, urbanism, landscape architecture, environment, and similar.

Due to the significant support and extensive cooperation, the project brought several achievements. The original aims were fulfilled; the future development of green areas was agreed in the form of long-term vision as well as of several specific proposals. The greenery vision turned into following documents and projects, e.g. new Urban plan, vine-road, golf course, the plan of using lakes, few municipal parks, etc. Moreover, it even caused the re-evaluation and re-design of few studies which were already in process. The head of DSM, who originally favoured economic activities over greenery, turned into one of the biggest supporters of the greenery vision. Influenced by the project, he/she started to promote continuity, balance, quality, and complexity in all the projects under his/her responsibility. Additionally, one of the most important outputs of the project was *memorandum*, the shortened two-paged version of vision that was published at the towns' webpage. It became the short and easy guideline for making decisions on new development activities by X, investors, inhabitants, and other relevant actors. A slogan offered during the project and promoted via the memorandum is used still in 2022.

During the project, the main risks for the process of implementing the greenery vision were identified too. The most fundamental risk was seen in "breaking the continuity", such as the change of the Mayor or inside the Board of Representatives, developing a new strategy, etc. Unfortunately, the risk became reality in 2010, when political pressures endangered both the ex-Mayor and the head of DSM. The Mayor was re-elected by the inhabitants (for one more period, he/she ended in 2014) but the head of DSM abdicated. He/she said: *"I did not want to fight. If they thought they could do it themselves, I would let them to do it"* (interviews 2011). A new head of DSM was named. Unfortunately, the new head was not the proper person for the position. He/she focuses on small tasks instead of the complex picture, and he/she did not fully understand the complexity of strategic spatial planning. He/she was afraid to involve inhabitants because he/she feared of duties coming out of such involvement. As he/she said: *"I don't want to tell people what we plan to do, because after that they could expect me to do it. And I am not sure if I am able to do it"* (interviews 2011). The running projects continued; nevertheless, new projects refocused into maintaining achievements instead of further development. In time, inhabitants started to complain and the development in X turned turbulent and uncertain. Even though the situation is always complex and cannot be simplified to one factor only, we need to admit that the change of one leading person in 2010 made a huge impact. (Further events are out of scope of this article.)

Using Sun Tzu's view on the development of X:

- In the past, X was the royal town with its own local governance, proud citizens, and strong genius loci. Today, the spirit of active participation at development processes is still alive. When inhabitants have opportunity to participate, they do so. (*Continuity, Conditions for implementation*)
- In its strategic documents, X identified its biggest potential in its connection to history. Such potential was fully balanced with the self-identification of local people. Hence, the idea to allocate the biggest investments to support history, genius loci, and quality was commonly accepted and supported. (*Continuity, Context*)
- The ex-Mayor had the clear long-term vision of the future of X (to be the leader of quality) as well as of his/her own (to become known for redeveloping X). He/she was

able to inspire people, who followed him/her. Also, he/she established the Department for Strategy and Marketing and delegated power to make decisions on the head of DSM. (*Leaders, Continuity* as being in accord with the key representative, *Conditions for implementation*)

- The first head of DSM understood the power of strategy, which enabled him to use the potentials of X, to manage large long-term oriented development projects, cooperate with experts from diverse professions, lead his subordinates, and motivate inhabitants to participate. (*Leaders, Strategic configuration of power*)
- When teams were created to deal with the individual key projects, such teams were multi-professional and involved the members of DSM as well as inhabitants. In this way, each project reflected the combination of different view-points. (*Balance*)
- Long-term strategies, which were developed via strategic plans as well as the greenery vision, were accepted and implemented via the following planning documents and projects. Moreover, some of the documents that had been developed sooner were modified to become in line with the strategies. (*Continuity, Conditions for implementation*)
- The greenery vision focused on the quality of life, sustainability, and genius loci. It connected greenery to the strategic priorities of X and strengthen interactions between the environmental, socio-cultural (including historic), and economic dimensions of development. (*Continuity, Balance*)
- When using the state aids and grants, X did not follow ad-hoc calls but followed its strategic documents and goals. (*Continuity, Conditions for implementation*)
- The second head of DSM lacked the abilities of former head, feared opened communication, and preferred small operational tasks to strategic visions. (*Leaders, loss of Strategic configuration of power*)

The case study showed how Sun Tzu's wisdom could be used in strategic planning practice in municipalities. It aimed to offer neither wholistic analysis nor look for details of everyday planning processes. Rather, it illustrated the (dis)harmony of Sun Tzu's key concepts and principles; how those can help to gain the more holistic understanding of the situation at hand and guide suggestions for the crucial improvements to be taken.

## Conclusion

Our contemporary understanding of *strategy* is vague; moreover, we overuse the word *strategy* without knowing what it means. The “*consensual definition about the essence of the strategy concept*” for all sectors (which derived their definitions of strategy from the same sources and from each other) could be represented by Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin (2012, 182) like this: “*the dynamics of the firm's [organisation's] relation with its environment for which the necessary actions are taken to achieve its goals and/or to increase performance by means of the rational use of resources*”. However, as this article argued, this modern essence is far from the original concept of *strategy*. The ancient strategic wisdom was amazingly complex. It reflected purpose and context, ideals and reality, system and people, objective and subjective dimensions. It stressed that interactions and mutual influences of all these elements form the future rather than

individual factors themselves. The ancient concept was a far-reaching philosophy, and Sun Tzu himself required “*penetrating understanding*” to gain advantage from that complexity. Our contemporary attitude, on the other side, is to reach a simple “cookbook for success” while eliminating disturbing soft elements that demand deeper understanding, such as purpose, values, and personal integrity.

The ancient concept was rooted in the *grand strategy*, which called for avoiding direct battles. Victory was not seen in conquering enemies, but primarily in growing stronger, preservation, and cultivation. The concept offered the *five principles for victory* – *Tao* (Continuity), *Heaven* (Balance), *Earth* (non-controllable Context), *Generals* (Leaders), and *Laws* (manageable Conditions for implementation) – which can be also connected to the five simple questions: *What, Who, When/Where, How* and *Why*. Ignoring any of these five causes troubles since those questions always get answers, knowingly or unknowingly. Moreover, victory was fully dependent on employing the *Strategic configuration of power*, a force that combined objective with subjective dimensions (in terms of situation and ability to use that situation) and orthodox with unorthodox actions. As the necessary precondition for victory, Sun Tzu stressed reaching *invincibility*, which was fully based on “knowing oneself” and on preservation of moral, spirit, and energy. In fact, many attributes of the ancient wisdom, especially the importance of human dimension, disappeared from our common understanding of *strategy*.

The case study showed (among other things) that personal abilities are crucial in terms of employing or not-employing the *strategic configuration of power*. Understanding this fact makes an insight on the role of strategic and spatial planners too. Planners are in the position of first-line leaders; therefore, along with hard information about planning, they should also possess managerial and strategic abilities. The education of planners should involve much more soft abilities, such as psychology and leadership, as it does today. “*The city is discussed in barren, eviscerated terms and in technical jargon by urban professionals as if it were a lifeless, detached being. In fact, it is a very sensory, emotional, lived experience. [...] How often do strategic urban plans start with words beauty, love, happiness or excitement, as opposed to bypass, spatial outcome or planning framework?*” (Landry, 2006)

“*It is significant that the frequency of the term ‘goals’ decreases whereas the term ‘performance’ has sustained growth. This shows that strategy changed its central focus from obtaining the firm’s goals to improving its performance*” (Ronda-Pupo, Guerras-Martin, 2012, 172). From the perspective of the original concept of *strategy*, this shift is a negative one. The category “goals” (*what?*) included objectives, purpose, concepts, mission, ends, principles, attainment, and pursuit. The category “performance” focuses on success, failure, profit, result, value, risk, costs, rents, organizational adaptation, viability, outcomes, effect, efficiency, and effectiveness. Even though the differences between the two categories are soft, they demonstrate the shift from an intangible essence of philosophy towards measurable hard factors. This might be one of the reasons why the so-called short-term strategies (usually in the form of numbers) tend to dominate over long-term orientation (vision, mission, philosophy). In the name of emergence and flexibility, *strategy* slowly becomes substituted by *tactics*.

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Lucia Dobrucká explores the topic of strategic spatial development and its relations to the concepts of strategy and power, social issues, and individuals' roles. She holds doctoral degrees in the fields of spatial planning (Slovak University of Technology, Slovakia) and business management (Comenius University, Slovakia), and has completed two post-doctoral studies (Luleå University of Technology, Sweden and Charles University, Czech Republic). Recently, she works as assistant professor at the Czech Technical University in Prague.