

# THE TAO OF WAR BY WANG CHEN

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The Martial *Tao Te Ching*

Translated by  
**RALPH D. SAWYER**  
Translator of Sun-tzu's *Art of War*

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## About the Author

Ralph D. Sawyer, one of America's leading scholars in Chinese warfare, has worked extensively with major intelligence and defense agencies. After studying at MIT and Harvard and a brief stint of university teaching, Sawyer has spent the past thirty years lecturing and doing international consulting work focused on China.

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# THE TAO OF WAR BY WANG CHEN PDF

Wang Chen, a ninth-century military commander, was sickened by the carnage that had plagued the glorious T'ang dynasty for decades. "All within the seas were poisoned," he wrote, "and pain and disaster was rife throughout the land." Wang Chen wondered, how can we end conflicts before they begin? How can we explain and understand the dynamics of conflict? For the answer he turned to a remarkable source—the Tao Te Ching. Here is Wang Chen's own rendering of and commentary on the ancient text, insightfully expanded and amplified by translator Ralph D. Sawyer, a leading scholar of Chinese military history. Although the Tao long influenced Chinese military doctrine, Wang Chen's interpretations produced the first reading of it as a martial text—a "tao of war." Like Sun-tzu's Art of War, certainly the most famous study of strategy ever written, the Tao provides lessons for the struggles of contemporary life. In the way that the ancient Art of War provides inspiration and advice on how to succeed in competitive situations of all kinds, even in today's world, Wang Chen's The Tao of War uncovers action plans for managing conflict and promoting peace. A book to put on the shelf next to Art of War, Wang Chen's The Tao of War is a reference of equally compelling and practical advice.

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## Most helpful customer reviews

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Buyer beware: not for everyone.

By Steve W.

I purchased this book because, as the cover states, it seemed to be the perfect companion to Sawyer's excellent translation of the Art of War. I'm afraid that claim isn't very accurate. On the surface this book does appear quite promising--Sawyer has translated ninth-century commander Wang Chen's commentary on the classic Tao Te Ching and has even retranslated the source text itself; and a Taoist-military perspective on the nature of combat and conflict is certainly enough to catch one's attention. The historical importance and timelessness of the matter treated provide further value to the work.

So why only 3 stars? Well, my first problem involves the organization of this book. Sawyer provides an introduction to Wang's commentary in which he briefly addresses historical details and the purpose of composition, and then moves on to address certain salient issues within the text. I found this introduction

basically worthless, however. Sawyer appears to be merely going through the motions here--his scholarship in this introduction is lacking compared to what he did with the Art of War--and much of the introductory text consists of quotes and summaries from the pages to come. In other words, it offers little new insight; if you're going to be looking at extensive quotations, why not just read the book itself? I realize that criticizing the introduction usually doesn't offer much information about the text as a whole, but in this case I believe it does. I say this because the book follows a format of Tao Te Ching > Wang Chen > Sawyer, with each offering an interpretation of the previous one. So the issue here is a trait characterizing the entire work: we see Lao-Tzu's original Tao Te Ching text, which is then interpreted in a military- or government-centered nature by Wang, whose commentaries are then either explained or expanded upon by Sawyer. This is no bad thing, and within the book proper the translator shows his extensive knowledge of the material. Nonetheless, I don't see why this would be of value to the average reader (toward whom the book is obviously aimed). Wang provides a unique reading of the Tao Te Ching, but what it seems we have here is primarily multiple layers of commentary that come off as, well, filler. And that's my main reason for the low rating. Not much here seems essential to understanding the text: it's nothing other than multiple commentaries on a single source and there really isn't a need for extensive explanation. Sawyer does his best to work with what's there, but honestly, what's there isn't very interesting. Much is written but not much is actually said.

I have a hard time envisioning this book being necessary for greater appreciation of either Sun-Tzu's Art of War or the nature of conflict in general. Sawyer's translation of the Art of War is ostensibly geared toward the business-politics world, and the Tao of War masquerades as a perfect complement to Sawyer's previous successful translation. I fail to agree with that assertion. With a more scholarly introduction and wider scope, this book could be quite useful to students of Chinese philosophy or military history, or to those eager to read new interpretations of the Tao Te Ching. It does not, however, strike me as successful when one considers its purpose; it comes off as an attempt to capitalize upon the commercial success of Sawyer's other books. The cover in particular emphasizes this: no mention is made of Wang Chen, only Sawyer's name appears on the front, and what is a mostly unrelated book is made to resemble the Art of War. This may work commercially (as well as follow classic military principles of deception) but I find it rather misleading for the average consumer.

So, to conclude: if you're deeply interested in Chinese military history, I would recommend this book as a supplement to your studies. If you enjoyed the applicability of Sawyer's Art of War and are looking for something along the same lines, well, you won't find it here, and I recommend you to look elsewhere. Still curious? Buy it used if you must. It shouldn't be too difficult to find unwanted copies.

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Ian Myles Slater on: The Way of War and Peace

By Ian M. Slater

As discreetly acknowledged on the back cover, this book was originally published in hardcover as "The Tao of Peace." That edition, published by Shambhala, clearly identified itself on its cover as a translation of a work by the T'ang Dynasty general Wang Chen (about 800 C.E.), a product of one of the classical periods of Chinese history. The Westview Press version is a little harder to recognize for what it is.

In both versions, it is in fact a translation, with an introduction and commentary by the translators, of "Tao-te-Ching lun-ping yao-yi-shu," one of the more unusual of the many surviving Chinese commentaries on the "Tao Te Ching" or "Lao-Tzu." ("Daodejing" and "Laozi" in the current Pinyin transliteration; the Sawyers continue to use the familiar Wade-Giles system.) The "5000-character Classic" (as it is also known, and as Wang Chen sometimes cites it) was of exceptional importance to the T'ang; the supposed author was officially an ancestor of the dynasty, the Chinese roots of which were often questioned.

The Westview edition has been repackaged, slightly revised in references to the title, and expanded by a section of "Further Reading" which is in effect a catalogue of the translators' other books on Chinese military thought for Westview, rather than for study of the "Tao-Te-Ching." (For some suggestions, see below.)

Ralph D. Sawyer explains in the Preface that they have also provided a translation of the "Tao-Te-Ching" itself, which uses Wang Chen's apparent readings and parsing of the text, and so differs from the many earlier translations, and from the Sawyers' own understanding of the book. Each of the eighty-one chapters consists of a passage of the Lao-Tzu, Wang Chen's explanation of its application, and the translators' explication of its (mainly military and political) context and significance.

The two alternative titles of the translation reflect the thrust of Wang Chen's commentary equally well, although the choice seems to reflect the markets served by the two publishers. As is the case with many Shambhala publications, the volume is rather thin on references, although Sawyer's Preface does mention some important translations of the "Tao Te Ching." Since he explains that the book is directed at ordinary readers, he might have expanded some of these brief comments in the Preface -- the ordinary reader may not be familiar with, say, the difference between the Ho Shang Kung and Wang Pi texts of Lao-Tzu, which he mentions in passing. (These are two early commentaries, whose approaches and textual readings mark the religious and philosophical approaches to the book; the received "Wang Pi" \*text\* of Lao-tzu, by the way, seems not to correspond completely to the one implied in his commentary! For relevant bibliography, see below.)

Wang Chen and his "commentary" are the main focus of the book. The Sawyers attempt to show how the general connects his views to a book usually treated from religious and philosophical perspectives. The question of whether Wang Chen is correctly interpreting his canonical text is, of course, of no great concern. The commentary is a common form for expressing original ideas in many cultures with strong text-based traditions, Hebrew and Sanskrit, for example, as well as Chinese. This commentary is an attempt to find a consistent basis for humane and effective government. It was intended to replace the T'ang tendency for random shifting between ruthless interventionism and quietist failure to govern. Whether this instability in policy was a cause of the dynasty's difficulties, or a dangerous symptom, is another matter. Having a contemporary analysis of the dynasty's problems is only part of the book's considerable interest.

The secondary literature on the Taoist classic is very large, and the number of translations continues to grow. The Sawyers' work offers an unexpected reading, and does not require a wider knowledge of the base text to be appreciated on its own terms.

Those seriously interested in the textual problems of the "Tao-Te-Ching" can now consult the recent technical edition and translation by Rudolf G. Wagner, "A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing: Wang Bi's Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation" (2003). Together with Wagner's "The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi" (2000), and "Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)" (2003) it was published in the State University of New York (SUNY) Press "Chinese Philosophy and Culture" series. They are significantly more difficult than "The Tao of War," or almost any of the readily available translations of Lao-tzu.

SUNY had also published Alan K. L. Chan's "Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu," in its older "Series in Chinese Philosophy" (1991), which, although slightly antiquated, offers a fascinating comparison of two of the earliest of the competing philosophical, political, and religious interpretations, to which Wang Chen was adding.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

A martial version of the Tao Te Ching

By Midwest Book Review

Ralph Sawyer is a leading scholar of Chinese warfare and has worked extensively with major military agencies, so he's the perfect author of choice to translate *The Tao Of War*, a martial version of the Tao Te Ching. The original author Wang Chen was a 9th-century Chinese military commander sickened by carnage and began using the ancient Tao Te Ching for peaceful purposes: his interpretations produced the first reading of it as a martial text of strategy, and Ralph Sawyer's in-depth interpretations go far in placing its military importance in modern Western hands.

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## About the Author

Ralph D. Sawyer, one of America's leading scholars in Chinese warfare, has worked extensively with major intelligence and defense agencies. After studying at MIT and Harvard and a brief stint of university teaching, Sawyer has spent the past thirty years lecturing and doing international consulting work focused on China.

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