

Chinese Ways of War From Sun Tzu to the Twenty-first Century

Harold Tanner

University of North Texas

Is there a culturally determined
Chinese way of war?



The Chinese vs. Western Ways of War Hypothesis

THE WESTERN WAY OF WAR

- Offensive
- Preference for aggressive military action
- Territorial expansion
- The “direct approach”—head-to-head clash of forces
- Based on Greece, Rome, and Carl von Clausewitz’ *On War*

THE CHINESE WAY OF WAR

- Defensive
- Military action as the last resort
- No territorial expansion
- Stratagem, deception, and “the indirect approach”
- “winning without fighting”
- Based on Confucius and on Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*

“Rarely did Chinese statesmen risk the outcome of a conflict on a single all-or-nothing clash; **elaborate maneuvers** were closer to their style. Where the Western tradition prized the decisive clash of forces emphasizing feats of heroism, the Chinese ideal stressed **subtlety, indirection, and the patient accumulation of relative advantage.**”

-- Henry Kissinger, *On China*



Weiqi (Go)

The basic objective of the game is to secure more space on the board (or more territory). The players do so by encircling more space on the board. The competition for more territory thus leads to invasion, engagement, confrontation, and war fighting.

-- David Lai, "Learning From the Stones"



Henry Kissinger's comparison of weiqi and chess

Kissinger, *On China*

Chess	Weiqi
Decisive battle	Protracted campaign
Total victory	Relative advantage
Single-mindedness	Strategic flexibility
center of gravity, decisive point	Strategic encirclement
Eliminate opponent's pieces in head-on clashes	Move into empty spaces to mitigate strategic potential of enemy's pieces
Assess strength of opponent's pieces on the board	Consider both pieces on the board and reinforcements that the opponent may deploy

“Peace, concord, and harmony are ideas the Chinese nation has pursued and carried forward for more than 5,000 years. The Chinese nation does not carry aggressive or hegemonic traits in its genes.”

-- Xi Jinping, “Speech on the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China,” July 1, 2021

“No matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansionism.”

-- Xi Jinping, “Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” Oct. 16, 2022



**General Secretary of the Chinese
Communist Party
Xi Jinping**

CHINESE VS. THE WESTERN WAYS OF WAR

THE CHINESE WAY OF WAR

- Defensive
- Military action as the last resort
- No territorial expansion
- Stratagem, deception, and “the indirect approach”
- “winning without fighting”
- Based on Confucius and Sun Tzu

THE WESTERN WAY OF WAR

- Offensive
- Preference for aggressive military action
- Territorial expansion
- The “direct approach”—head-to-head clash of forces
- Based on Greece, Rome, and Clausewitz

Over-estimating Confucius

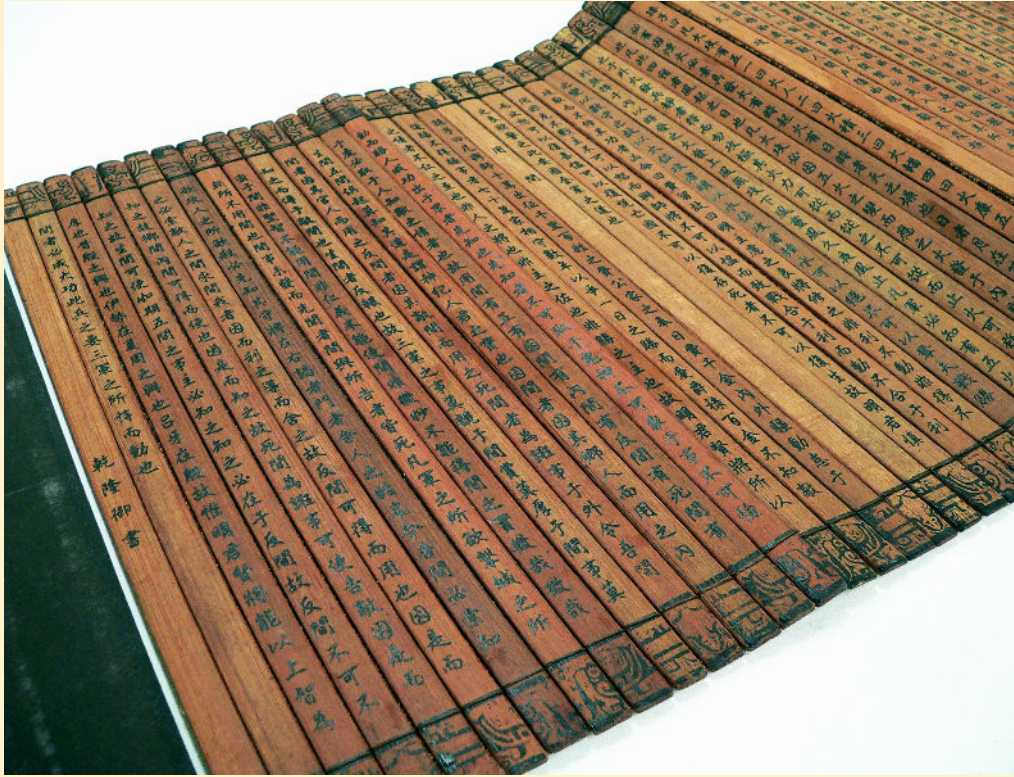
Duke Ling of Wei asked Confucius about military formations.

Confucius replied, “I know something about the arrangement of ceremonial stands and dishes for ritual offerings, but I have never learned about the arrangement of battalions and divisions.”

He left the next day.

Wen 文 civil virtue vs. *Wu* 武 martial virtue





The Art of War

Late Warring States (475-221 B.C.E.)

Attributed to "Sun Tzu" (*pinyin* Sunzi)

Mis-reading Sun Tzu

"He who knows his opponent and knows himself will not be imperiled in a hundred battles."

"Warfare is a way of deception."

"... being victorious a hundred times in a hundred battles is not the most excellent approach. Causing the enemy forces to submit without a battle is the most excellent approach."

Sun Tzu's concern: the cost of war

The method of waging war invariably requires
a thousand swift chariots
a thousand heavy carts
a hundred thousand armored troops
and the transportation of grain over a thousand tricents

Then there are
internal and external expenditures
provisions and missions set to and fro
the raw material for glue and lacquer
the supplying of equipment
Which amounts to a thousand pieces of gold per day

Therefore,
He who does not thoroughly understand the
harm of waging war
cannot thoroughly understand the advantages of
waging war.

Therefore, Sun Zi
concludes:

- ❖ Prolonged war is disadvantageous
- ❖ Care must be taken not to engage in a war which leads the state to financial disaster

Sun Tzu's Goal: Efficiency

The chapters of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*:

1. Assessments
2. Doing Battle
3. Planning for the Attack
4. Positioning
5. Configuration
6. Emptiness and Solidity
7. The Struggle of Armies
8. Nine Varieties
9. Marching the Army
10. Terrain Types
11. Nine Types of Terrain
12. Incendiary Attack
13. Using Spies



Sun Tzu
Putative author of
The Art of War
(兵法 *bingfa*, a.k.a. "Military
Methods"):



Carl von Clausewitz
Author of
On War

Going beyond Sun Tzu

- Other texts on military thought
 - Mozi
 - Han Fei
 - Liu An
 - *The Seven Military Classics*
- Debates in court rarely cited texts on military thought

“Although arguments in Tang court debates rely heavily on historical precedents, the emperors preferred to heed advice based on practical knowledge.”

-- Jonathan Skaiff, “Tang Military Culture and its Inner Asian Influences.”

Mis-reading the Great Wall & the Northern Frontier

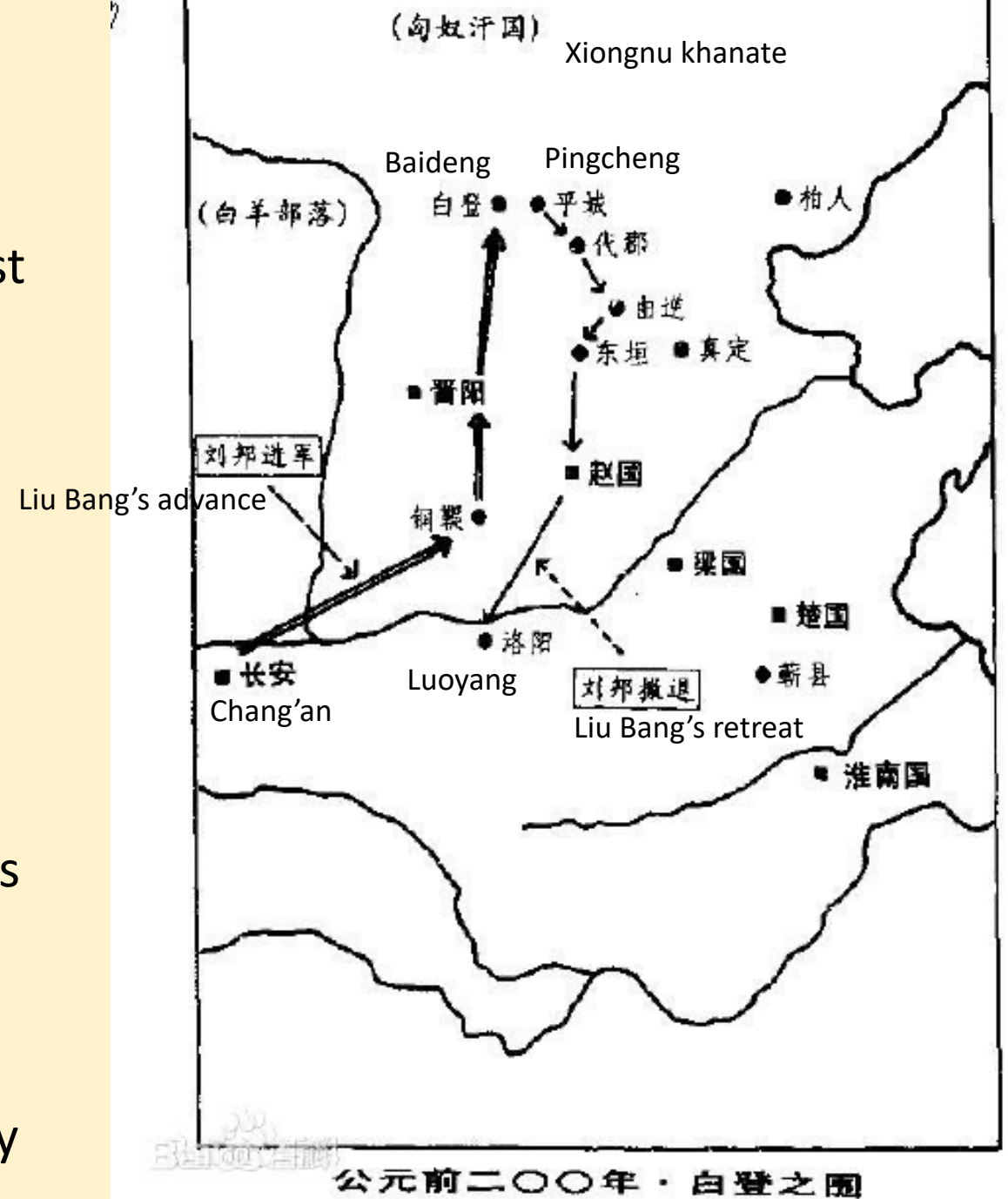


Varieties of Northern/Northwestern Frontier Strategy

- Accommodationist
- Passive defense
- Active, forward defense
- Expansionist
 - Alliances
 - Client states
 - Territorial expansion

The Siege of Baideng

- 200 BCE; northern Shanxi province (northeast of modern Datong)
- Liu Bang vs. the Xiongnu leader, Modun Chanyu (r. 209-174 BCE)
- 30% of soldiers suffer frostbite
- Modun's cavalry surrounds Liu Bang's Han force (infantry, chariots) at Baideng for 7 days
- Han bribery of Modun's consort
- Result: the *heqin* (peaceful relations) strategy





Bright green line:
greatest extent of
territory under
Xiongnu control in
the time of Modun

The Han-Xiongnu
War (133 BCE-89
BCE)

Major characters:

Han Wudi (r. 141-87
BCE)

Zhang Qian (Han
emissary to the
Western Regions, d.
114 BCE).



Protectorates of Tang Dynasty

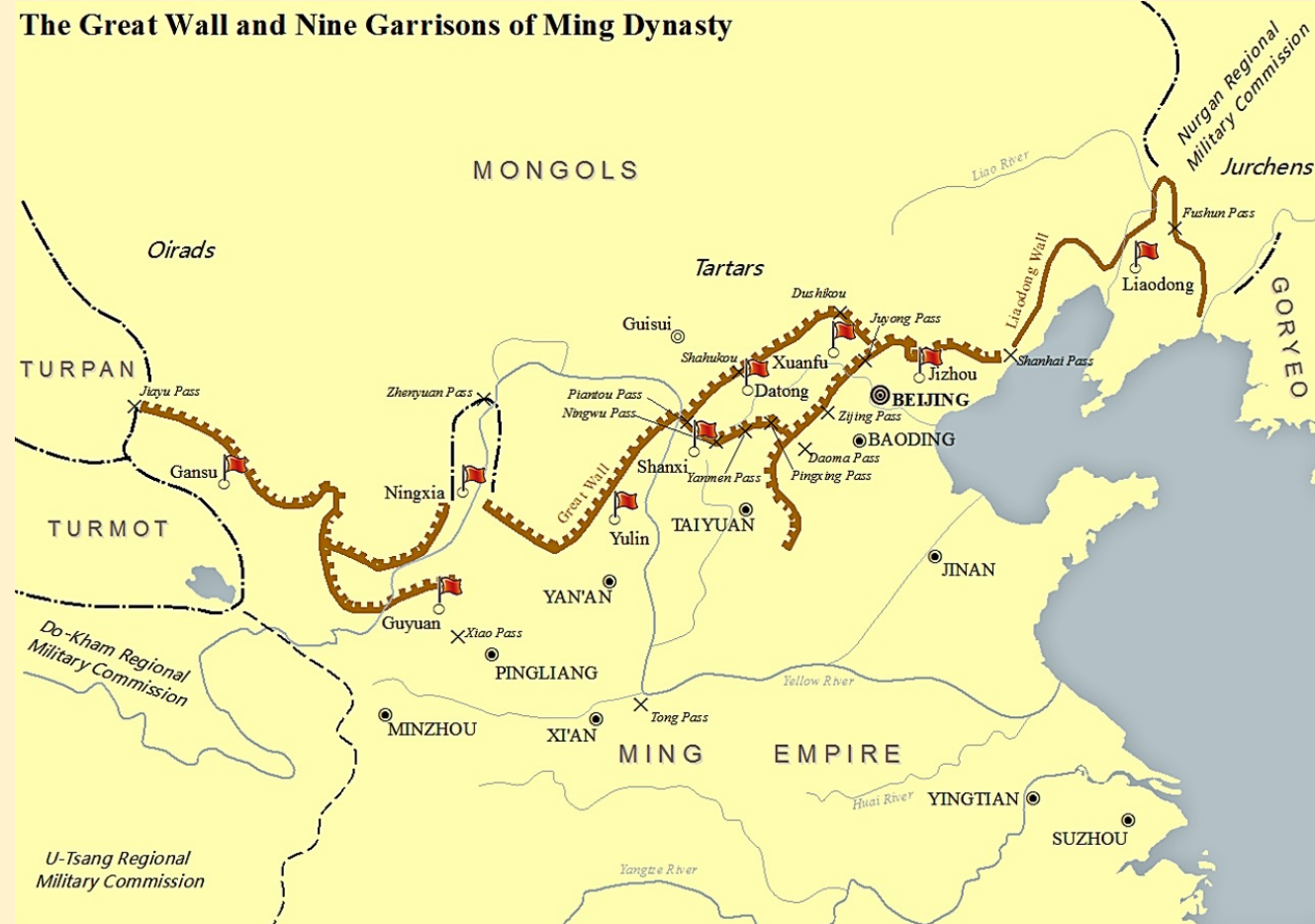


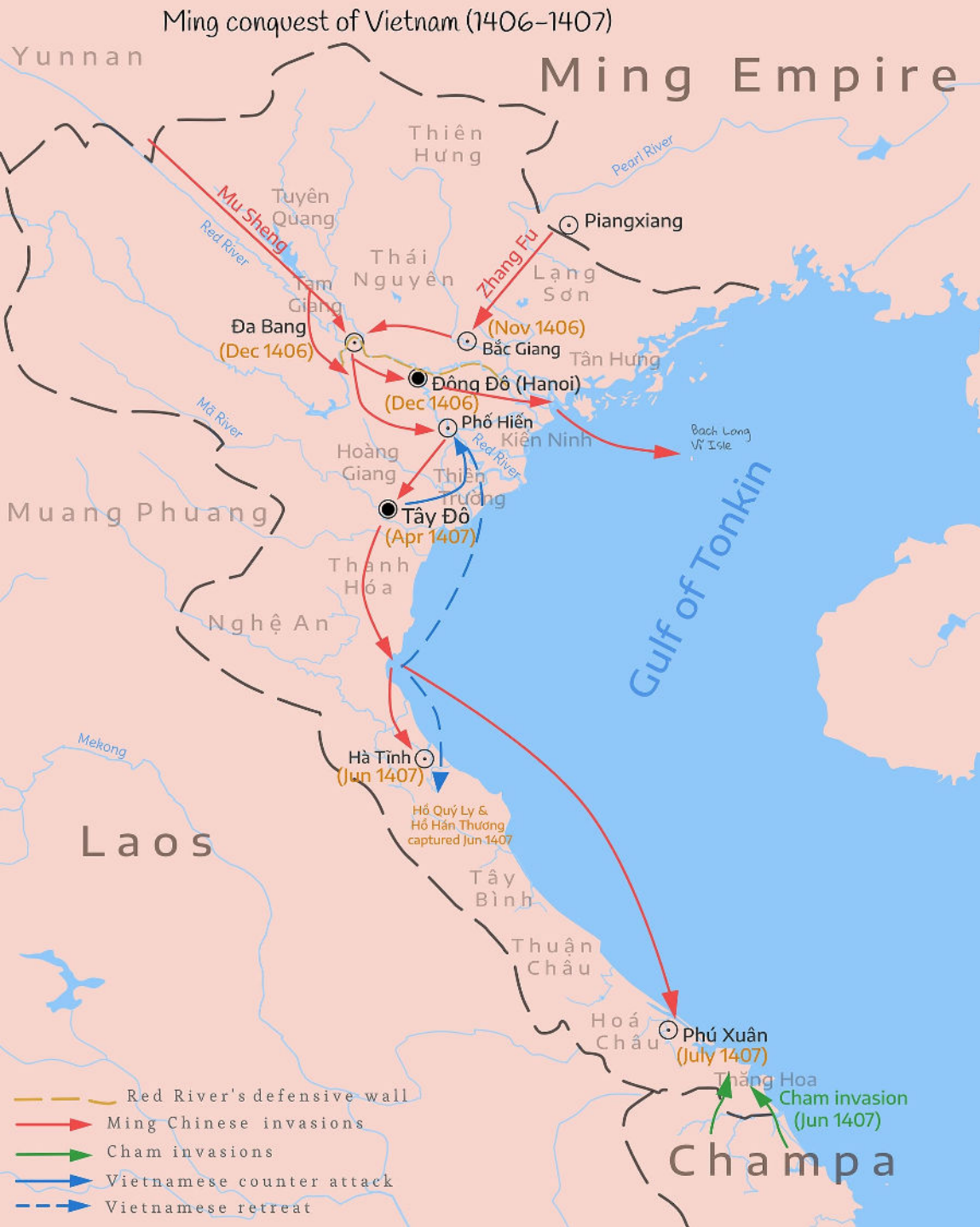
The Tang-Byzantium Comparison

- Tang expansionism and the “Eurasian Way of War”
 - Parallels between Byzantium and Tang
 - Common enemy (steppe nomads)
 - Similar responses in terms of
 - Strategy
 - Weapons
 - Training
 - Tactics
 - Argument against cultural determinism and “Western Way of War” vs. “Chinese Way of War”

Stages of Ming Strategy

- The Hongwu Emperor (r. 1368-1398)
 - Offensive “8 Outer Garrisons”
 - Defensive inner line of forts
- The Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-1424)
 - Campaigns into the steppe
 - Withdrawal from “8 Outer Garrisons”
- 16th century
 - Full-scale wall-building





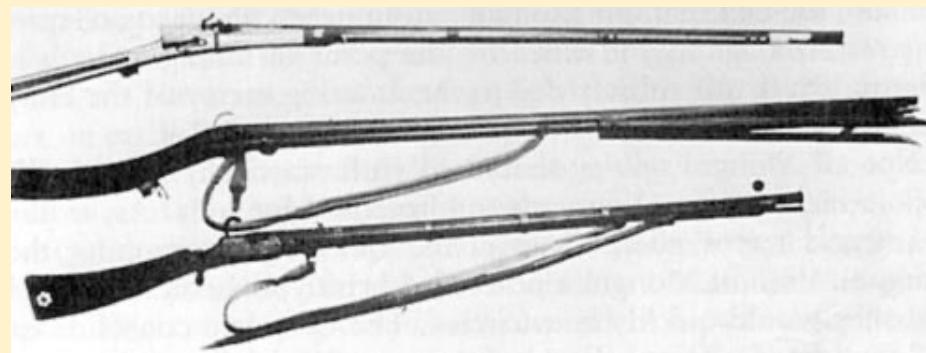
Ming Invasion of Annam (northern Vietnam) 1406-1407

- Takes place during Yongle reign
- 215,000 Ming soldiers
- Goal: restore Tran dynasty
- Champa (southern Vietnam) allied with Ming
- Goal shifts to occupation
- Ming use of firearms
- Some captured Vietnamese served Ming as firearms experts
- Vietnamese uprising, 1418



-  1592 and 1597 Japanese attacks
-  1593 Korean-Chinese counter-attack
- ☆ **Kingdoms' capitals**
- ✦ major city
- city
- ✕ battle
- Sea*
- Isle*
- River, Lake, Bay*

source: Twitchett, *Cambridge History of China*, vol.7, p569.



Mis-reading the Zheng He Voyages



- Ming dynasty (1368-1644)
- 7 expeditions, 1405-1433
- Led by Muslim Chinese eunuch Zheng He at behest of the Yongle Emperor (r. 1402-1424)
- Huge fleets
- Establishment of diplomatic and trade relations
- No territorial expansion
- Ended for various political & economic reasons
- Anti-piracy and regime replacement operations



"We cannot lose even one inch of the territory left behind by our ancestors. What is other people's we do not want at all."

-- Xi Jinping



Wars in Chinese history were "a result of the breakdown of the internal Chinese system"

-- Henry Kissinger

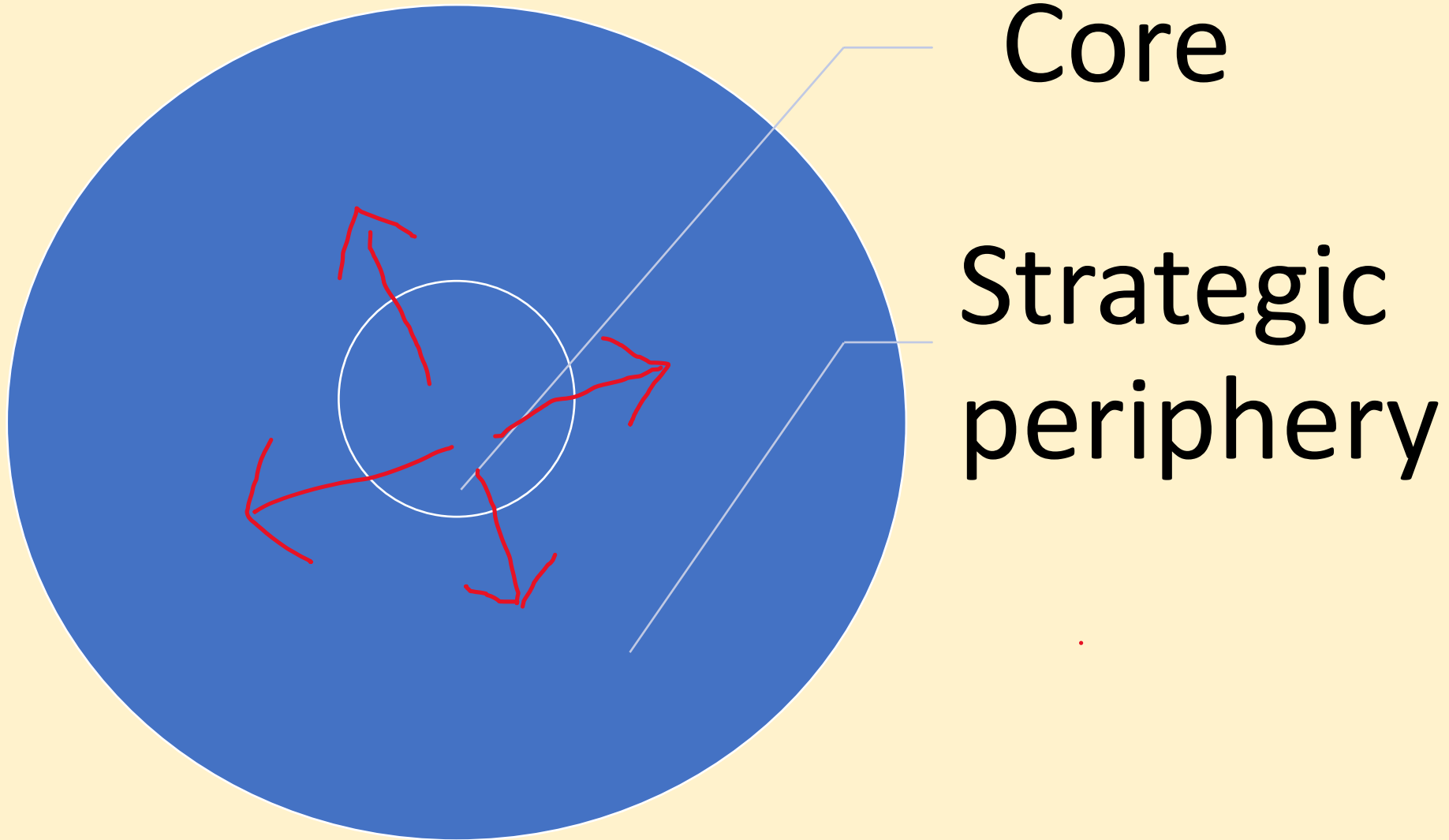
War in Chinese history:

- Number of wars fought by Chinese states, 770 BCE to 1912 CE: 3,756
- Average number of wars per year: 1.4

-- Estimated numbers from the Chinese Academy of Military Science



THE LOGIC OF STRATEGY IN CHINA

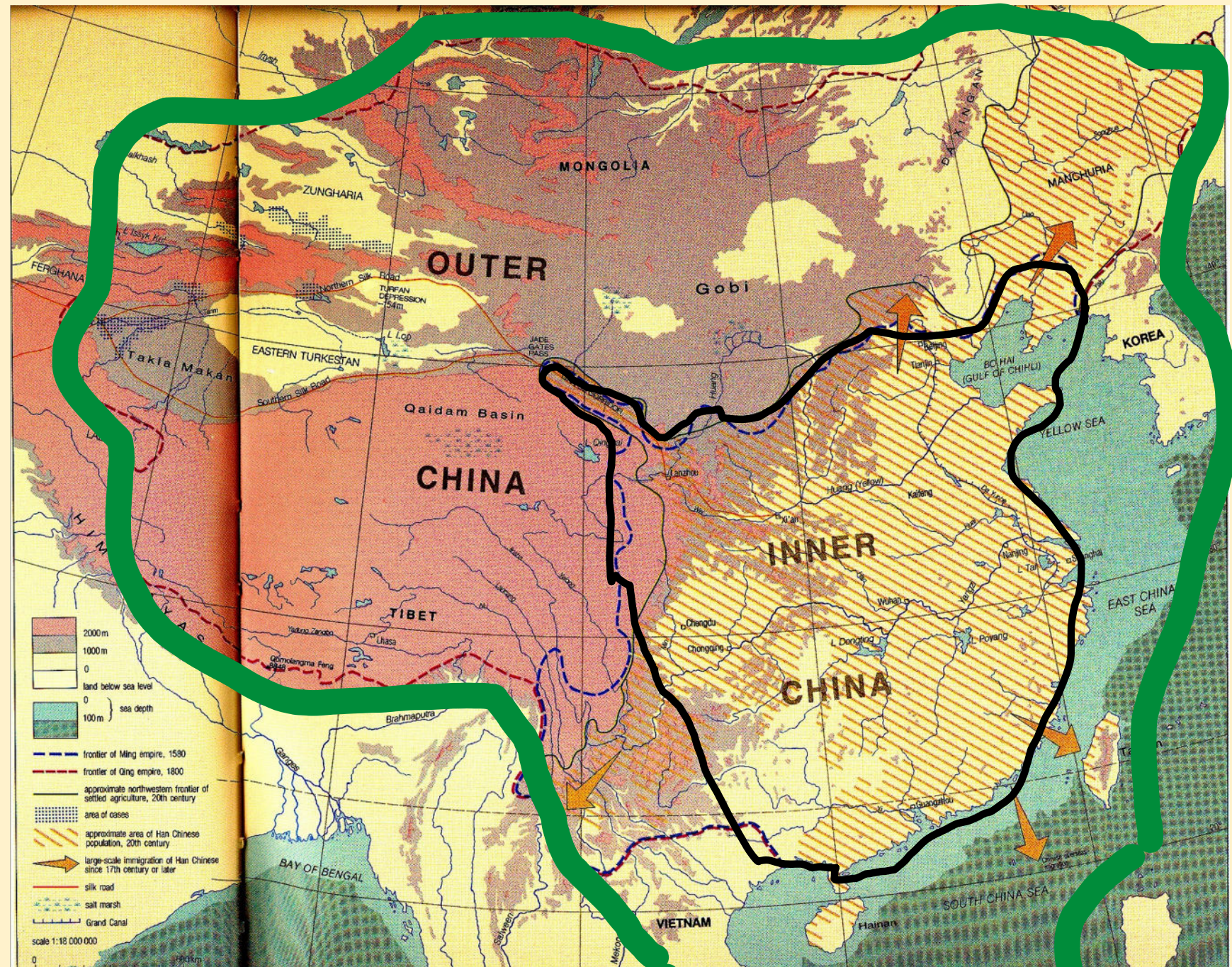


Chinese strategy and the use of military force in Chinese history

The core and strategic periphery.

Goals:

- Control the core
- Defend against external threats from the periphery
- Defend regime from internal threats





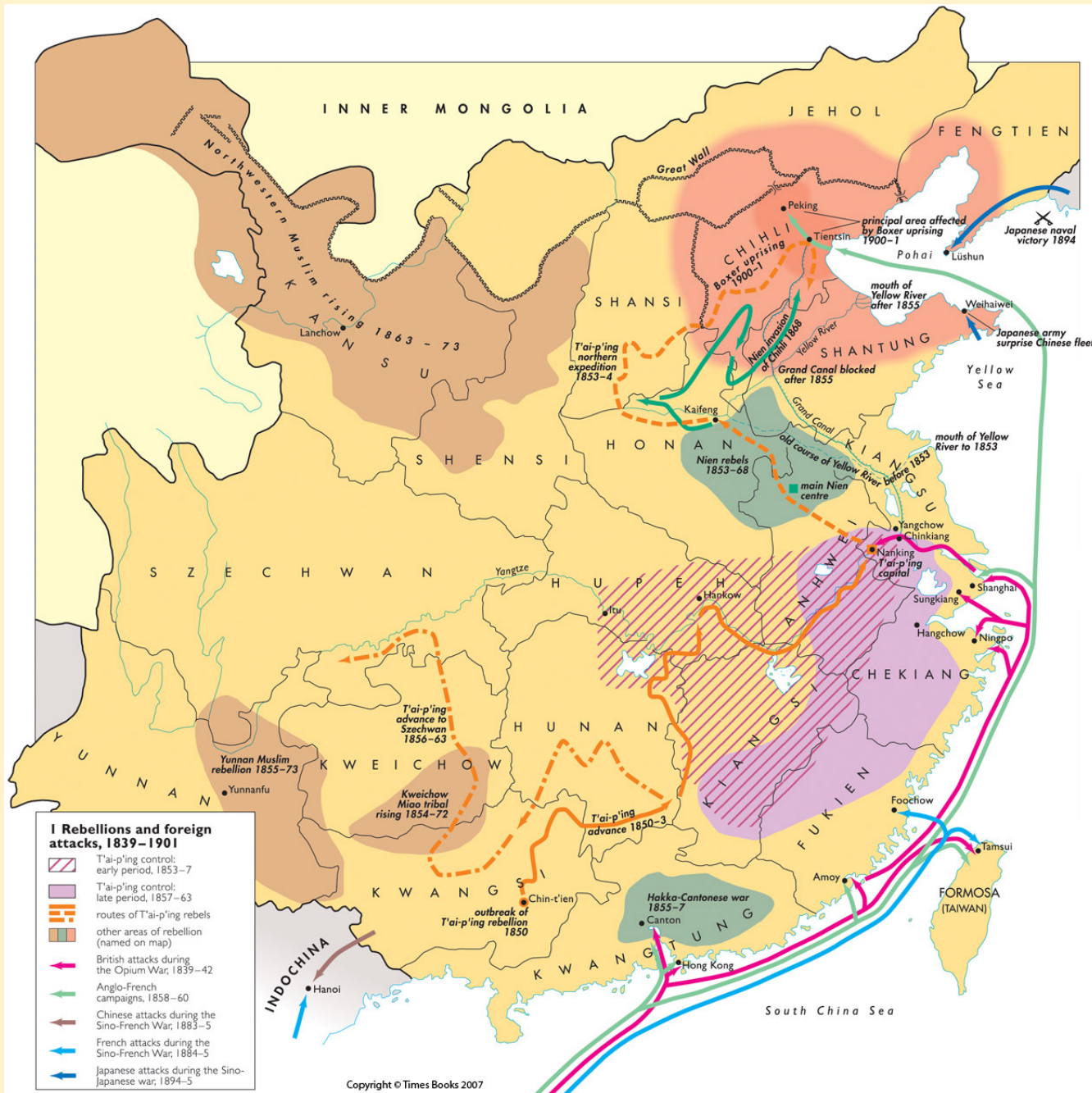
Map 7. The Qianlong emperor's western campaigns, 1755–1760.

Chinese *Ways* of War vs. Chinese *Way* of War

- Diverse approaches
- Change over time
- Importance of context
- Expansion over land

Other illustrations of diverse & changing ways of war

- Changes in technology
- The gunpowder story
- Naval warfare
- Comparison of the northern and southwestern frontiers



A Royal Navy steamship destroying a Chinese junk with a Congreve rocket

Internal and External Security Threats, 1839-1901

China's Security Threats, 1901-1949

- Internal
 - 1911 Revolution
 - Warlords
 - Banditry
 - Communist insurgency (1927-1937)
 - Civil War (1945-1949)
- External
 - Continued threat of Western & Japanese imperialism
 - War with the Soviet Union in Manchuria (1929)
 - War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945)

Military Innovation & Modernization

- Military modernization programs in the Qing (1840-1912)
 - Weapons acquisition
 - Building a modern navy
 - Organization of New Army units
 - Japanese and German models
- Military modernization programs in the Republic (1912-1949)
 - Warlord armies
 - Military education in China and abroad
 - Soviet advisors and armies created by political parties
 - American training and equipment



Zeng Guofan (1811-1872)

Played a key role in the defeat of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1865)



Zuo Zongtang (1812-1885)

Led the recovery of Xinjiang from the Central Asian military leader Yakub Beg (1878)



Jiang Baili (1882-1938)

Japanese-educated military theorist, advisor, educator and general

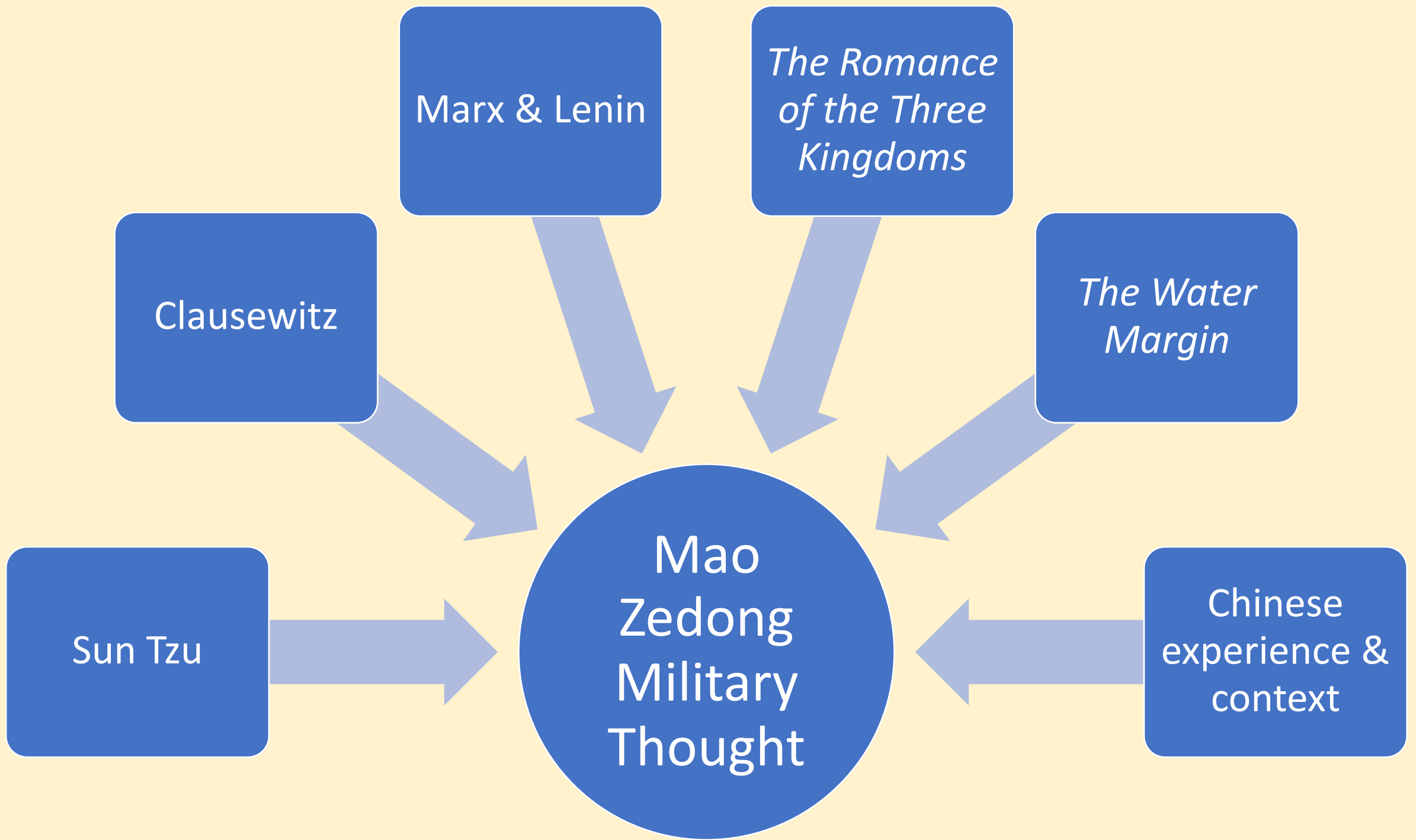


Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975)

Commandant of Whampoa Military Academy, Kuomintang general, and president of the Republic of China



Mao Zedong (1893-1976)



Mao's Military Theory: The Weak Can Defeat the Strong

- Guerrilla and mobile warfare
- Grasping the initiative
- Active defense
- Political struggle and military struggle
- Transition from guerrilla to conventional warfare
- Destruction of enemy through major battles of annihilation

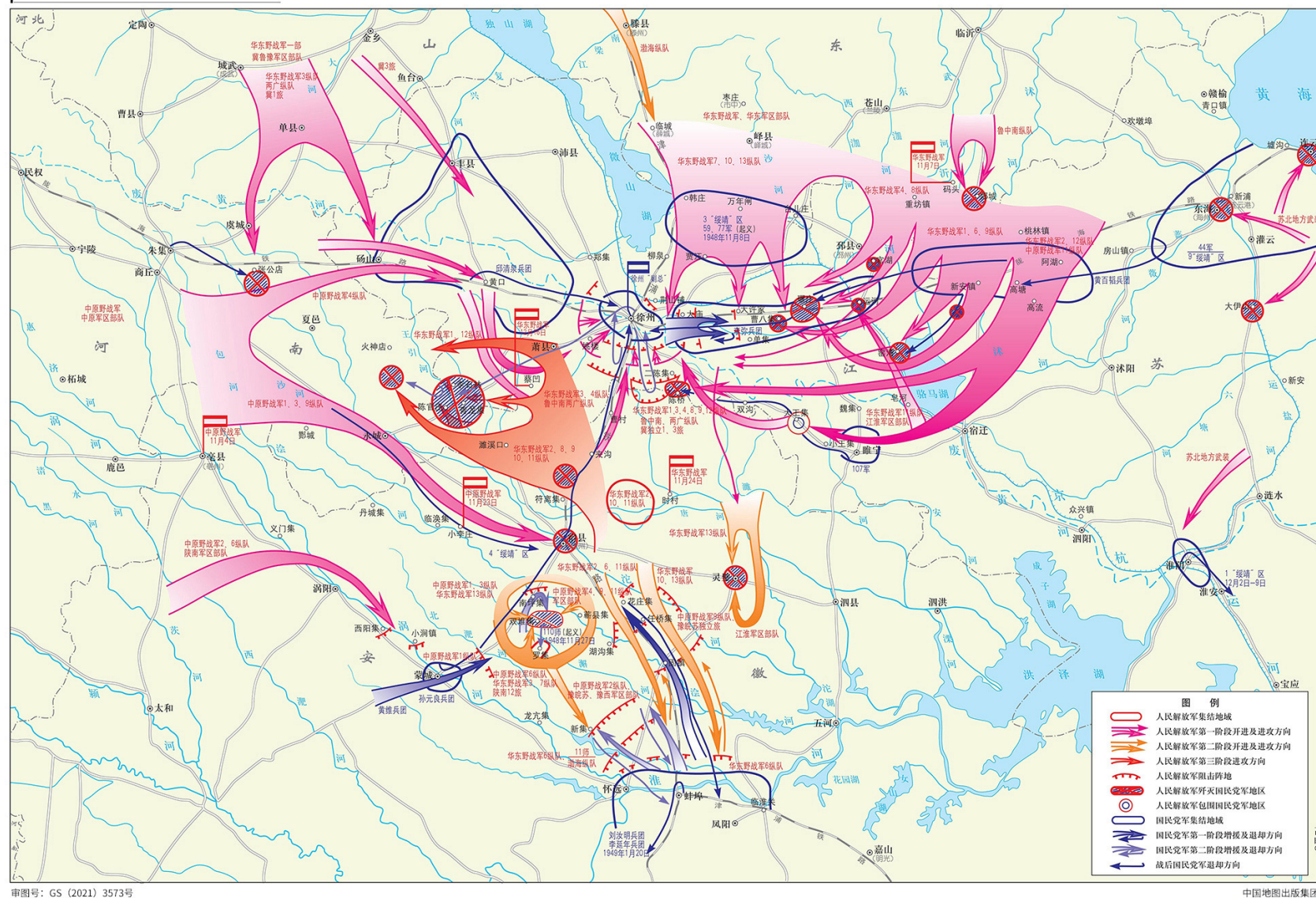
“Our strategy is to pit one against ten and our tactics are to pit ten against one: this is one of our fundamental principles for gaining mastery over the enemy.”

-- Mao Zedong

PLA Operational Style, 1930s-1950s

- Mobile warfare
- Use of stratagem & deception
- Penetration
- Division of enemy forces
- Outflanking
- Achieve overwhelming superiority at the tactical level
- Rapid battles of annihilation
- Effective in Chinese Civil War
- Not effective in Korean War

淮海战役要图 (1948年11月—1949年1月)



Example of PLA Operational Style: The Huai-Hai Campaign
(6 November 1948-10 January 1949)

Soviet military education



Lin Biao

Education:
Whampoa Military
Academy;
USSR



Liu Yalou

Education:
Frunze Military
Academy; Red
Army



Zhu Rui

Education:
Zhongshan University;
Soviet artillery
barracks



Liu Bocheng:

Education:
Frunze Military
Academy



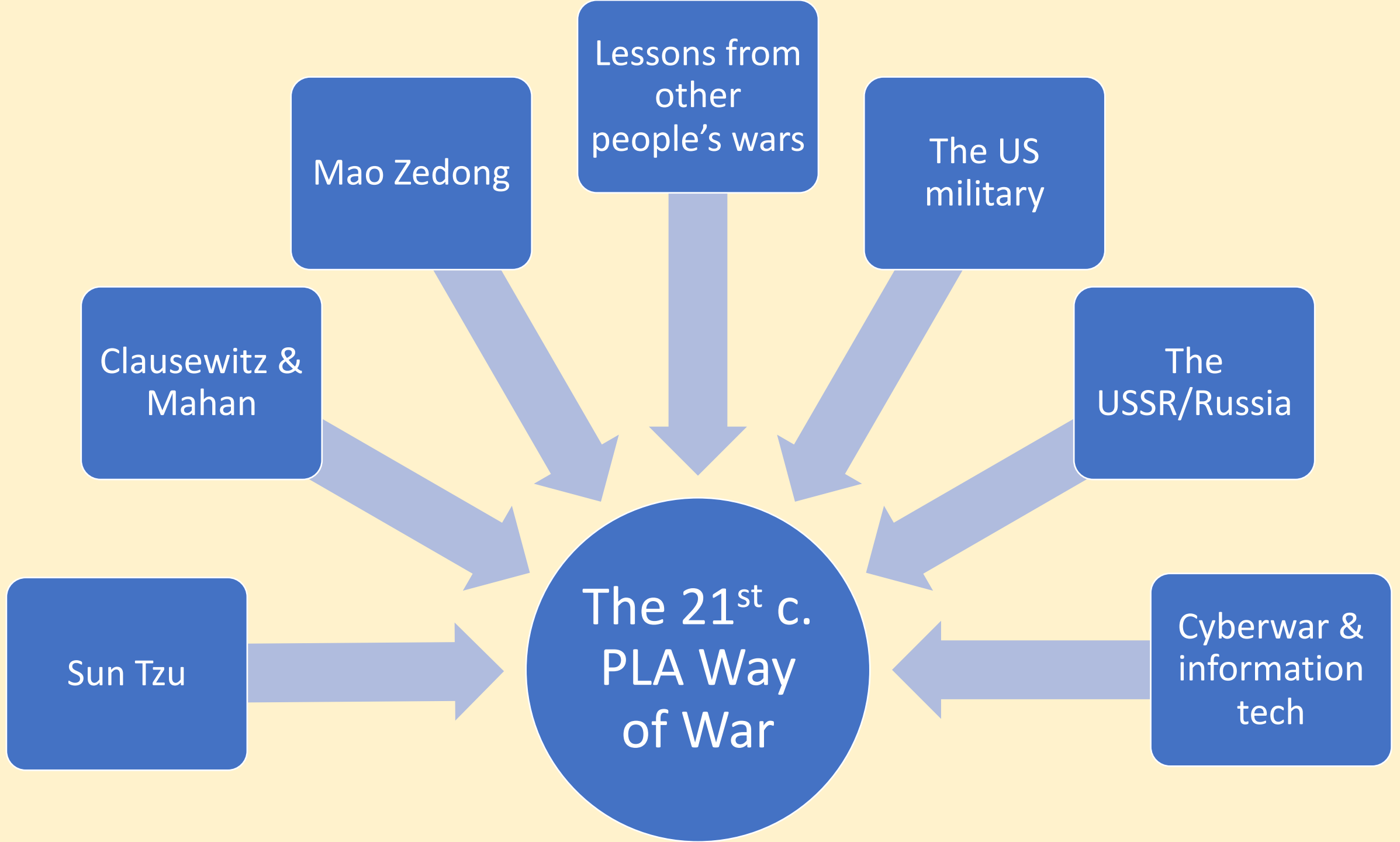
Nie Rongzhen

Education:

Soviet Red Army
College;
Whampoa Military
Academy

Ways of War in Post-Mao China

- Changing strategic perceptions, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping
- Continued relevance of Mao's Military Thought
 - The weak can defeat the strong
 - Active defense
 - Achieve overwhelming superiority at the tactical level
 - People's War under modern conditions
 - The Party leads the army



Chinese Ways of War?

- Innovation and adaptation
- Multiple sources (domestic & foreign)
- The role of technology
- Flexibility
- Attention to shaping the battlefield
- Culturally-informed, but not culturally determined
- Diverse and changing



Pilots Tao Jiali, He Xiaoli, Yu Xu and Sheng Yifei (from L to R) pose for a photo on March 3, 2015. The four female members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force acrobatic team left for Malaysia Wednesday to perform at the Langkawi International Maritime & Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA) in the J-10 fighter jets. [Xinhua photo]