Zuo Zongtang was a renowned military leader of nineteenth-century China; he led the Chinese military in the suppression of the Muslim and Nian rebellions (1868–1880), negotiated with the Russians, and led the war against the French in 1884–1885.

Zuo Zongtang (1812–1885) was born to a scholarly family in Hunan Province; in his early years he studied works in the fields of history, classics, geography, and agriculture. In 1852 he joined the military in the campaign against the Taiping Rebellion and soon displayed his military ability and wisdom. He was promoted to governor-general of Fujian and Zhejiang provinces in 1863 and remained in this position until 1866. Zuo founded China’s first modern dockyard and naval school in Fuzhou during this period. In 1866 Zuo was appointed governor-general of Shaanxi and Gansu provinces to suppress the Muslim rebels there. Between 1868 and 1880, Zuo suppressed Nian rebels in Shandong Province and the Muslim rebels in the northwestern China and consolidated China’s northwestern frontier. He militarily sustained China’s negotiation with Russia in recovering Yili, a Chinese territory occupied by Russia during the Muslim rebellion. He also carried out several important economic reforms, including the encouragement of the cotton industry in Xinjiang and the mobilization of soldiers to farm unused land. In 1881 Zuo was appointed to serve in the Grand Council of the central government. Later, in 1884, he was once again put in
The Art of War

The numerous successes in Zuo Zongtang’s military career show his deep understanding of military knowledge and strategy, the foundations of which were laid out by Sunzi (also spelled Sun Tzu) in The Art of War, thought to date from the fourth century BCE:

**ATTACK BY STRATAGEM**

1 Sun Tzu said: In the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy’s country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy is not so good. So, too, it is better to recapture an army entire than to destroy it, to capture a regiment, a detachment or a company entire than to destroy them.

2 Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy’s resistance without fighting.

3 Thus the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy’s plans; the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy’s forces; the next in order is to attack the enemy’s army in the field; and the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities.

4 The rule is, not to besiege walled cities if it can possibly be avoided. The preparation of mantlets [a shield used to protect besieging soldiers], movable shelters, and various implements of war, will take up three whole months; and the piling up of mounds over against the walls will take three months more.

5 The general, unable to control his irradiation, will launch his men to the assault like swarming ants, with the result that one-third of his men are slain, while the town still remains untaken. Such are the disastrous effects of a siege.

6 Therefore the skillful leader subdues the enemy’s troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field.

7 With his forces intact he will dispute the mastery of the Empire, and thus, without losing a man, his triumph will be complete. This is the method of attacking by stratagem.


Further Reading


charge of all military affairs of China during the Sino-French War (1884–1885). After a settlement between China and France was reached, Zuo Zongtang died on 5 September 1885. Zuo Zongtang’s success in putting down rebellions shaped the military prowess and unity of China in the nineteenth century.

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