

# TikTok & The Art of War: A Qualitative Analysis of US Strategic Maneuvering Against Chinese Social Media Company ByteDance

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## Abstract

Chinese company ByteDance released the short-video app TikTok in 2018. Since then TikTok has exploded in popularity, chronicling all aspects of social media interactions: dance videos, social commentary, live streaming, fashion, news and more. As it has become more popular, the fact that it is a Chinese-owned company has garnered more and more scrutiny and concern as Chinese tech companies must share user data with the their government and the Communist Party when required. As the U.S. and other governments have looked to block TikTok from sharing their users' data, TikTok and ByteDance have countered those efforts. This game of strategic move and counter can be viewed through the strategic lens of the ancient Chinese General Sun Tzu and his axioms in his seminal work, *The Art of War*. This paper conducts a qualitative case study analysis to describe and explain the context of the moves and the desired outcomes of both sides.

**Keywords:** TikTok, Sun Tzu, ByteDance, Strategy, Social Media, China, The Art of War

## 1. BACKGROUND

In 2017, the Chinese tech company ByteDance acquired the popular short-video app Musical.ly and incorporated it into a new app they named TikTok. Musical.ly was already popular with teenagers in the U.S. and UK since 2014 for making short dance videos. By merging the two in 2018, ByteDance created a single destination for worldwide access to more than just dance videos. (Zeng, Abidin & Schaefer, 2021). The app soon found a broader audience with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. (Klug, Kaufman & Evans, 2022). Soon, TikTok became the go-to app for all social media, the use of visual filters and dance videos as well as evolving news, business, travel and social commentary.

The fact that TikTok operated under rules that any Chinese-owned company must turn over files and data to the government when asked, meant that all TikTok user data, including

American's data, was potentially ultimately observable by the Chinese Communist Party. This point brought about a great amount of concern among more conservative members of the U.S. government who wanted to protect American data from Chinese observers. Potential legislative actions were considered and the government began to ban TikTok from certain devices under its control, mainly government-owned devices, and began considering how to enact more comprehensive bans across the board. Congress began investigating the potential problem and requested the CEO of TikTok to appear before committees to explain how American's data could and should be protected from potential Chinese review. China began to push back against these direct actions of the Administration and Congress in ways that were not as obvious but seen as equally compelling and effective. Thus began the push and pull between China and the U.S. for control of TikTok data which drew comparisons to the war treatise

by the Chinese General, Sun Tzu; *The Art of War*.

Scholars are divided as to whether the man, Sun Tzu, ever existed, or where and when he was born and lived. Most who believed he was a real person believe he was born somewhere around 544 BCE. Even his name is suspect given that "Sun Tzu" could mean "Master Sun" as in a Master of military arts. Most likely he was born with the name Wu. (Cooper, 2018)

Sun Tzu: *The Art of War* is an ancient Chinese military treatise that was written 2,500 years ago [~512 BCE]. It did not reach the West until 1772, when the text was translated into French and published in Paris by Father Jean Joseph Marie Amiot, a French Jesuit who had spent many years in Beijing. (Yuen, 2014)

Regardless of its history, *The Art of War* still bears examination as a relevant discussion of strategic warfare tactics both for the battlefield and for other aspects of social interactions. Therefore, the convergence of Chinese political and social maneuvers to counter U.S. legislative actions against TikTok and ByteDance, as viewed under the rules of *The Art of War*, forms the basis for this research effort. How do ancient Chinese strategies in *The Art of War* describe modern Chinese actions and reactions to U.S. government efforts to control, contain and eliminate the social media app TikTok?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Case study analysis was selected as the research methodology for this qualitative study. Yin (2009) proposed that "case studies are the preferred method [of analysis] when (a) "how" or "why" questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (Yin, 2009). Case study utilizes three principles of data collection: 1) use multiple, different sources of evidence, 2) create a database of collected material, and 3) maintain a chain of evidence (Yin, 2009). This methodology was first utilized by the researcher in his Doctoral Dissertation analysis of the Hacktivist Group Anonymous (Pendergrass, 2013).

For this research, two primary binned topics were created based upon the overall holistic perception of the issue: appropriate Sun Tzu quotes, and ByteDance corporate and others'

actions and reactions. The two bins were then compared and contrasted to relate similar topics and actions. Multiple primary sources of collected secondary source material were utilized: TikTok videos, news articles from Google searches, academic research papers, Internet Archive material searches and checkouts, and other various and related sources from social and traditional media. From these searches and aligned comparisons, the below information related to the appropriate Sun Tzu quotes was compiled to show the alignment between ByteDance business decisions and strategy to social and political actions. From this material analysis, overarching trends of the situation are revealed.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has been both a military and a social reference in modern Western culture for over 200 years. Contemporarily, it has been quoted and referenced in a number of sources. For example, in the movie *Wall Street*, when the young and naive stockbroker Bud Fox, played by actor Charlie Sheen, tries to impress the older and wiser corporate raider Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas, he paraphrases Sun Tzu back to him to show how much he's learned from Gekko; "Sun-tzu: If your enemy is superior, evade him. If angry, irritate him. If equally matched, fight, and if not split and reevaluate." (Wall Street Quotes, 1987) This is drawn from Tzu's Chapter 3, *Attack by Stratagem*, warning in verse 9; "If equally matched, we can offer battle; if slightly inferior in numbers, we can avoid the enemy; if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him." Chapter 3 – 9 (Tzu, 2000)

Numerous books on the subject of strategic maneuvers in various actual past battles have been written. (Alexander, 2011; Handel, 1992) It remains a popular subject for business strategy. (Khoo, 1995; Michaelson, 2010; Sheetz-Runkle, 2014) and has even been used to describe how to work friendships (Bing, 2004) and Poker (Apostolico, 2005). It has been the basis for academic analysis of hybrid warfare strategies (Ploumis, 2022), semiotics (Xu & Hemchua, 2022), Clausewitzian strategic comparisons (Pars, 2013), war strategies in general (Metcalf, 2017) and in teaching (Wei, 2017). In this research, it will be used to align ByteDance/Chinese business strategies to the *Art of War* analogies.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

***"All warfare is based on deception"  
Chapter 1 – 18 (Tzu, 2000)***

Perhaps the most quoted Sun Tzu line deals with deception. On its face, it seems clearly obvious – In order to win, you need to keep the other side guessing. Never let them see you sweat. Keep the enemy running to where you are not, instead of where you are, etc. But the concept of deception runs both ways as each side moves to obtain and maintain the upper hand. The following Sun Tzu quotes, references by Chapter and Verse, help set the stage for the actions that both the U.S. and Chinese entities use.

***"Appear at points  
which the enemy must hasten to defend;  
march swiftly to places  
where you are not expected"  
Chapter 6 – 5 (Tzu, 2000)***

TikTok appears as this single face of the Chinese company ByteDance which is poised to singlehandedly obtain all American data associated with the app for unknown reasons, when actually, ByteDance has had several very popular other apps in use which could also be considered as threats to data. But these other apps, which are popular with their users, do not have the name recognition as TikTok and thus have flown under the radar during this period of scrutiny.

Lemon8 was created and released by ByteDance in early 2023 as an alternative to Instagram. Its photo-centric layout and peer-to-peer reviews greatly resemble Xiaohongshu, or 'Little Red Book,' the Chinese social commerce platform with 260 million monthly active users. Xiaohongshu which has been available in China for over a decade, has become the go-to online community for Chinese youth to learn about subjects such as maternity health and surviving centralized quarantine during the Covid Pandemic. (Liao, 2023) Even if TikTok were to ultimately be banned, Lemon8 will likely remain a functioning app under ByteDance's control. (Zaveri, 2023)

The video editing app CapCup is the third most popular app worldwide; heavily promoted on TikTok. It was first developed in China in 2018 and released internationally in 2020. It offers a suite of advanced, easy-to-use video-editing tools like visual filters, audio add-ons, photo-mixing, and integration with other video apps such as TikTok. (Pahwa, 2023) As short-video

platforms like TikTok, Instagram and YouTube continue to expand on vertical-swipe video content, and more and more users attempt to create and share their own videos, apps like CapCut are filling the need for easy photo-editing capabilities. (Espada, 2023)

Hypic enables users to touch up selfies or other face photos on the device of their choice. Features of the free app include "skin-smoothing, face-reshaping and -sculpting, and visual filters for overall ambience" (Pahwa, 2023). There are other lesser known and lesser used apps that ByteDance offers and maintains control of. They do not have the popularity or target-size of a TikTok, nevertheless they are part of ByteDance's repertoire and thus subject to the same professed dangers of a Chinese-owned company app.

***"Pretend to be weak,  
that he may grow arrogant"  
Chapter 1 – 22 (Tzu, 2000)***

In December 2022, Congress passed the "No TikTok on Government Devices Act" which requires deletion of the app from all official government devices. (Fitzpatrick, Kibel, Richman & Haripal, 2023) This action showed that the federal government is taking action with respect to those devices and situations that are within its control. It did not address privately owned devices nor did it outlaw TikTok as a service. ByteDance did not directly counter the action though privately it was working to garner support against further actions outside of government control. In addition to the federal government action, State governments also began to pass their own legislation to ban TikTok on State devices and at institutions such as State Colleges and Universities. (Fitzpatrick, et al., 2023; Golon, 2023; Witley, 2023) Montana went one further and passed the first ever ban of TikTok on all privately owned devices within the State.

SB 419 prohibits TikTok from operating "within the territorial jurisdiction of Montana," over fears the app could be manipulated by the Chinese government for espionage purposes. If TikTok or app stores violate the law, Montana's Department of Justice could slap them with penalties of up to \$10,000 per day for the length of the violation. Those fines would apply to entities facilitating TikTok's download rather than the app's users. (DeGeurin, 2023a)

The Bill will go into effect on January 1, 2024. (Silva, 2023b) TikTok responded by Tweeting that the bill “infringes on the First Amendment rights of the people of Montana by unlawfully banning TikTok, a platform that empowers hundreds of thousands of people across the state. We want to reassure Montanans that they can continue using TikTok to express themselves, earn a living, and find community as we continue working to defend the rights of our users inside and outside of Montana” (Silva, 2023b). Additionally, there are ways of getting around the ban through VPNs, or virtual private networks, which cloak your actual location. (Silva, 2023c). TikTok users in May, Montana have filed an Injunction against the State Attorney General complaining of infringement into their livelihoods and free speech. (Alario, Dirocco, Goddard, Held & Stout v. Knudsen, 2023; DeGuerin, 2023b). Additionally, TikTok, Inc. filed a lawsuit against Montana charging First Amendment right violation. (TikTok, Inc. v. Knudsen, 2023). Both lawsuits and subsequent appeals will likely take months to be resolved. In the meantime, TikTok remains available to everyone.

***“If the campaign is protracted,  
the resources of the State  
will not be equal to the strain”  
Chapter 2 – 3 (Tzu, 2000)***

The wheels of government move slowly. Congressional action requires majority agreement and that only comes after much discussion and often, much grandstanding. Because the wheels of government are often greased with outrage and outcries – often in front of cameras and the Press. That news cycle tends to run quickly as the public’s attention span is short and the news items are numerous to choose from. So, the Long Game is often the way to delay past the desire for fast reactions.

Washington decided that the way to avoid any perceived chance of China spying on American’s data through the app would be for ByteDance to sell TikTok to an American company. However, between ByteDance’s cash reserves, antitrust concerns and expected resistance from Beijing, almost no one believes Washington will be able to force the sale of the app. If that divestiture tactic fails, the government will need new authorities to prevent the courts from automatically ruling against them when it attempts a direct ban. Plus, there’s no guarantee that Congress can agree to grant those powers in time for President Biden to use them.

Banning TikTok is not a new idea; the Trump administration tried it and failed. (The White House, 2020) But this action has not been taking place in a vacuum; ByteDance has been playing its long game for a long time. As early as 2018, ByteDance had been lobbying Congress in support of their apps. (Fuchs, Goujard & Lippman, 2023) Ultimately, the argument of free speech rights under the First Amendment has trumped any external threats. For example, the Supreme Court’s 1965 ruling in *Lamont v. Postmaster General*, (*Lamont v. Postmaster General*, 1965) which dealt with the legality of restrictions on the mailing of foreign communist propaganda. (Bordelon, 2023)

In addition to any legal challenge to free speech, and perhaps even more powerful an argument against banning TikTok, is the recognition of its incredible popularity. “[More] than 150 million users in the U.S. enjoy TikTok’s hypnotic interface, and many could vote in 2024 when Biden and members of Congress are on the ballot.” (Fuchs, et al., 2023) While many Republicans favor banning TikTok, the outspoken junior senator from Kentucky worries that banning it could mean the party would “continuously lose elections for a generation.” (Adragna, 2023) Paul said, “We shouldn’t be completely oblivious to the fact that a lot of young people are on there and it is, frankly, their freedom of speech.” (Adragna, 2023)

***“In war,  
practice dissimulation,  
and you will succeed”  
Chapter 7 – 15 (Tzu, 2000)***

TikTok CEO Shou Chew was called before Congress to answer questions related to the app and its practices. It was crucial for Chew to convincingly dissuade Congress from its concerns regarding the potential for TikTok to share its data with the Chinese government. Chew faced 5 hours of Congressional testimony and was cool and calm in his delivery. Ultimately, it showed that Congress really has no idea how TikTok or even the Internet works. (Silva, 2023a)

While Chew came off as comfortable and friendly — more than some U.S. tech executives can say — he overstated some of the company’s achievements and side-stepped substantive answers on tough issues time and time again. (Hatmaker, 2023).

Chew discussed how TikTok does not share its content with China and in response to Congresses and the Administration's concerns, TikTok was actively working on what it called "Project Texas" which would retain all content on U.S. soil, in Texas, to prevent any concerns about data loss or misuse. Chew also cited a report from Internet watchdog Citizen Lab, claiming that the organization definitively found no connection between the Chinese government and TikTok data. Citizen Lab ultimately disputed that characterization. (Silberling, 2023) In the end, Chew provided a calm and rational face to TikTok which contrasted with Congressional fears and lack of knowledge on the subject.

***"Hold out baits to entice the enemy"  
Chapter 1 – 20 (Tzu, 2000)***

ByteDance has offered some large projects as diversions to help solve all their problems. Project Texas for the U.S. and Project Clover for the E.U. Project Texas is a "\$1.5 billion plan [to] create a separate US-based company to store all American data with Austin-based Oracle" (Scudder, 2023). This, according to ByteDance, would create an impenetrable firewall around U.S. user data which Chinese authorities could not get around. CEO Chew offered this solution during his testimony before Congress. Essentially, all new U.S. data has been sent to Oracle since October 2022 and the company began deleting all U.S. user data from non-Oracle servers in April 2023. Chew said he expects that the process will be done by the end of this year, 2023. (Scudder, 2023) Another effort, similar to Project Texas, dubbed 'Project Clover,' is ByteDance's effort to process European data in Ireland. (Goujard & Kayli, 2023) Both of these projects are meant to assuage lawmaker's fears of Chinese use of user data, neither of which touch on domestic use of their users' data.

***"Hence that general is skillful in attack  
whose opponent does not know  
what to defend;  
and he is skillful in defense  
whose opponent does not know  
what to attack"  
Chapter 6 – 8 (Tzu, 2000)***

TikTok's effect is actually larger than the app itself. "Some 28,251 apps use TikTok's software development kits, (SDKs), tools which integrate apps with TikTok's systems—and send TikTok user data—for functions like ads within TikTok, logging in, and sharing videos from the app"

(Germain, 2023). Some of the apps that use the TikTok SDK include popular games like *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*, *Trivia Crack*, and *Fruit Ninja*. There are also other apps like photo editors "VSCO and Canva, lesser-known dating apps, weather apps, WiFi utilities" and a large number of other apps in nearly every category of use (Germain, 2023). When the Administration and Congress threaten to shut down TikTok, they really have no idea of the cascading effects of that single action. If the government was truly serious about trying to protect Americans' data from Chinese surveillance, they would be looking at a larger set of threats. A 2020 investigation into TikTok threats found that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Gmail, Snapchat, and a number of other apps expose Americans' data to the same threats as TikTok because all of them partner with Chinese advertising technology firms, all of which are potentially subject to the same Chinese government surveillance threats. (Woodinsky, 2020)

[As recently as May 2023, the European Union] issued a record-breaking €1.2 billion (\$1.3 billion) fine to Facebook owner Meta over data transfers. After a lengthy investigation, officials found the social network's practice of moving EU citizens' data to US-based servers was in violation of the bloc's key digital privacy rules. (Cooper, 2023)

This action is precisely what the Administration railed against, only instead of China moving U.S. users' data, American companies are doing it. Finally, while TikTok may be viewed by many as a youth platform, that is not necessarily the case. TikTok is not limited to a single demographic; it runs from Boomers to Gen Z. "TikTok is a highly-effective platform for tapping into not only the most engaged young audiences, but also a diverse set of viewers." (Butts, 2023)

***"In all fighting,  
the direct method  
may be used for joining battle,  
but indirect methods will be needed  
in order to secure victory"  
Chapter 5 – 5 (Tzu, 2000)***

While Congress and the Administration debated on whether to ban TikTok and how to protect against Chinese data manipulation, ByteDance was quietly and purposefully gathering resources to work against the frontal attack.

TikTok and ByteDance [had] spent more than \$16 million on federal lobbying in the U.S. since 2019, according to public disclosures. But the total that the company has expended to save its existence in the United States is almost certainly dramatically higher. (Fuchs, et al., 2023)

That figure did not include lobbying at the state level, or the company's spending on Public Relations firms and internal staff expenses responding to that specific threat. In advance of CEO Chew's testimony before Congress, ByteDance had gathered a number of its more significant and popular TikTok Influencers for a trip to Washington to rally for the service. This was not a clandestine effort. TikTok covered either the travel and/or hotel accommodation expenses for more than 30 Influencers at a March 23<sup>rd</sup> news conference. (Laslo, 2023; Gutelle, 2023a) "Creators of popular accounts like 'Back in the Kitchen with Bae,' 'Sparks of Joy' and 'Chem Teacher Phil'" spent three days in Washington, advocating for TikTok (Kerr, 2023). In addition to the Press Conferences and interviews with Influencers, "[TikTok] launched a documentary web series called **TikTok Sparks Good**, which reveals its positive impact through 60-second vignettes" (Gutelle, 2023b, emphasis in original). They also announced new time limit safeguards for teen users in response to calls for protecting young people online. (Hernandez, 2023) All these ancillary efforts helped to contribute to the direct responses.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

**"If you know the enemy  
and know yourself,  
you need not fear the result of  
a hundred battles.**

**If you know yourself  
but not the enemy,  
for every victory gained  
you will also suffer a defeat.**

**If you know neither  
the enemy nor yourself,  
you will succumb in every battle"**  
**Chapter 4 – 18 (Tzu, 2000)**

Beijing routinely plays the long game while Washington typically goes for the fast sound bite response. China's efforts to influence the public as to the worth of the already popular social media app blow past the U.S. 18<sup>th</sup> Century response of legislative action and piecemeal bans. Looming over everything is the fact that free speech is guaranteed by the First

Amendment and there is little that will trump that argument in the Courts. While banning the service from government devices by government entities can seem like an effective tactic, all bets are off when taken into the public realm and trying to create a draconian ban on the app overall. As recently as the past Administration, this tactic failed miserably. China knows the landscape and has the visionary tactics while Washington plays for quick effects and newspaper headlines. Knowing the enemy and yourself is the key to winning the game. It would appear that China holds a winning hand in this game.

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