

THE THIRTY-SIX STRATAGEMS

(Classic Chinese war theories, 800-300 BC)

I. Stratagems when in Superior Position

瞞天過海 **Cross the sea under camouflage**

The perception of perfect preparation leads to relapsed vigilance. The sight of common occurrences leads to slackened suspicion. Therefore secret machinations are better concealed in the open than in the dark, and extreme public exposure often contains extreme secrecy.

圍魏救趙 **Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao/Surround one state to save another**

It is wiser to launch an attack against the enemy forces when they are dispersed than to fight them when they are concentrated.

借刀殺人 **Kill with a borrowed knife**

Your enemy's situation is clear but your ally's stand is uncertain. At this time, induce your ally to attack your enemy in order to preserve your strength. In dialectic terms, another man's loss is your gain.

以逸待勞 **Wait at ease for the enemy**

To weaken the enemy, it is not necessary to attack him directly. Tire him by carrying out an active defense, and in doing so, his strength will be reduced, and your side will gain the upper hand.

趁火打劫 **Loot a burning house**

When the enemy falls into a severe crisis, exploit his adversity and attack by direct confrontation.

聲東擊西 **Make a feint to the east while attacking in the west**

You spread misleading information about your intentions or make false suggestions, in order to induce the opponent to concentrate his defenses on one front and thereby leave another front vulnerable to attack.

II. Stratagems for Confrontation

無中生有 **Create something out of nothing**

Design a counterfeit front to put the enemy off-guard. When the trick works, the front is changes into something real so that the enemy will be thrown into a state of double confusion. In short, deceptive appearances often conceal some forthcoming dangers.

暗渡陳倉

Pretend to advance along one path while secretly getting along by a hidden path

You set up a false front, then penetrate the opponent's territory on other fronts while they are distracted by your false front.

隔岸觀火

Watch the fire burning from the other side of the river

When a serious conflict breaks out within the enemy alliance, wait quietly for the chaos to build up. Because once its internal conflict intensifies, the alliance will bring destruction upon itself. As for you, observe closely and make preparations for any advantages that may come from it.

笑裏藏刀

Conceal a dagger in a smile

You conceal your hostility by assuming outward friendliness. You ingratiate yourself with enemies, inducing them to trust you. When you have their confidence, you can move against them in secret.

李代桃僵

Sacrifice the plum for the peach/Ready to make sacrifice for the ultimate gain

When loss is inevitable, sacrifice the part for the benefit of the whole.

順手牽羊

Lead away a goat in passing: picking up something in the sly

Exploit any minor lapses on the enemy side, and seize every advantage to your side. Any negligence of the enemy must be turned into a benefit for you.

III. Stratagems for Attack

打草驚蛇

Beat the grass to startle the snake

When opponents are reserved and unfathomable, you create some sort of stir to see how they will react.

借屍還魂

Raise a corpse from the dead

Don't use what everyone else is using, but use what others' aren't using. This can mean reviving something that has dropped out of use through neglect, or finding uses for things that had hitherto been ignored or considered useless.

調虎離山

Lure the tiger out of the mountain

You don't go into the powerful opponents' territory, but induce them to come out of their stronghold.

欲擒故縱

Let the enemy off in order to snare him

Press the enemy forces too hard and they will strike back fiercely. Let them go and their morale will sink. Follow then closely, but do not push them too hard. Tire them out and sap their morale; capture them when they are in panic and flee helter-skelter.

拋磚引玉 **Toss out a glazed tile to draw a jade/Cast a brick to attract a gem**

Present something of superficial or apparent value to induce another party to produce something of real worth.

擒賊擒王 **To catch rebels, nab their king first**

When confronted with a massive opposition, you take aim at its central leadership and focus your resources on capturing the enemy chief.

IV. Stratagems for Confused Situations

釜底抽薪 **Take away the fire from under the cauldron**

When confronted with a powerful enemy, do not fight them head-on but try to win by undermining the enemy's resources and morale.

混水摸魚 **Fish in troubled waters**

You use confusion to your advantage, to take what you want. It may specifically mean taking advantage of a general or particular loss of direction in order to gather followers from among the uncommitted or disenfranchised.

金蟬脫殼 **The cicada sheds its skin**

This means leaving behind false appearances created for strategic purposes. Like the cicada shell, the facade remains intact, but the real action is now elsewhere.

關門捉賊 **Bolt the door to catch the thief**

When dealing with a small and weak enemy, surround and destroy him. If you let him retreat, you will be at a disadvantage in pursuing him.

遠交近攻 **Befriend a distant state while attacking a neighbor**

It is more advantageous to conquer the nearby enemies, because of geographical reasons, than those far away. So ally yourself temporarily with your distant enemies in spite of political differences.

假道伐虢 **Borrow a route to conquer Guo/Borrow the right of way to attach the neighbor**

You secure the temporary use of another party's facilities in order to move against a mutual enemy. After having used these facilities to prevail over the enemy, you then turn and use them against the party from whom you borrowed them.

V. Stratagems for Gaining

偷樑換柱 **Replace the beams and pillars with rotten timber**

You try to recruit top talent from among allies, inducing them to join your concern.

指桑罵槐 **Point at the mulberry only to curse the locust**

You criticize indirectly, getting your point across without confrontation.

假痴不癡 **Feigning foolishness**

At times, it is better to pretend to be foolish and do nothing than to brag about yourself and act recklessly. Be composed and plot secretly, like thunder clouds hiding themselves during winter only to bolt out when the time is right.

上屋抽梯 **Remove the ladder after the ascent**

You maneuver enemies into a point of no return by baiting them with what look like advantages and opportunities.

樹上開花 **Putting fake blossoms on the tree**

You dazzle and deceive the eyes of opponents by showy displays.

反客為主 **Host and guest reversed**

Even though you are a guest, you exercise enough influence on the host so that you are making key decisions to put the host under your control.

VI. Stratagems for Desperate Situations

美人計 **Beauty trap stratagem**

This refers to using the charms of women to influence key figures in an adversary organization. Setting traps to exploit the enemy's commanders' indulgence of sensual pleasures in order to weaken their fighting spirit.

空城計 **Empty city stratagem**

In spite of the inferiority of your forces, deliberately make your defensive line defenseless in order to confuse the enemy. The enemy may assume you are setting up an ambush, leading them to flee of their own accord.

反間計

Sow discord in the enemy's camp

You compromise insiders of other organizations to get them to work for you.

苦肉計

Inflict injury on oneself to win the enemy's trust

Inflict minor or non-fatal injury on oneself to gain the enemy's trust. This is a technique particularly for undercover agents: you make yourself look like a victim of your own people, in order to win the sympathy and confidence of enemies.

連環計

Interlocking stratagems

When facing a more powerful enemy, you don't oppose by force, and don't concentrate all your resources on only one avenue of strategy; you keep different plans operating simultaneously in an overall scheme.

走為上計

When retreat is the best option

When overwhelmed, you don't fight; you surrender, compromise, or flee. Surrender is complete defeat, compromise is half defeat, flight is not defeat. As long as you are not defeated, you have another chance to win.