



# THE WILES OF WAR

36 Military Strategies  
from Ancient China

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## **36 Military Strategies from Ancient China**

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## PREFACE

"Of the thirty-six strategies, running away is the best choice." This is a familiar remark, in literary works as well as in real life, from people who want to get around a situation that they are unable to cope with for the moment. The expression first appeared in the official *History of Southern Qi* about fifteen hundred years ago. Since then, it gained increasing currency until an anonymous scholar (estimated a contemporary of late Ming or early Qing) laid out the entire thirty-six strategies in a small book called *Secret Art of War: Thirty-Six Strategies*. At first it circulated only in hand-written copies and did not find its way into any bibliography of military writing. First printed in 1941 by the Xinghua Printing House in Chengdu, it did not attract general attention until after the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Apart from a preface and an afterword, the book falls conveniently into thirty-six sections, each consisting of the title, text, and comment of a strategy. The title invariably takes the form of a four-character idiom, which sometimes refers directly to a renowned battle in history. All the idioms have been in wide use among both the élite classes and the common people for at least hundreds of years; most have taken on diverse military imports. Therefore the title itself can elicit plentiful reminiscences in an average Chinese reader, who may interpret the

ensuing text according to his or her own military knowledge or experience. In fact, the text of each strategy, consisting of less than a dozen characters, is so condensed that one has to read one's own thoughts into it. More often than not, the text contains a quotation from the most revered classic of China, *I Ching (Book of Changes)*. This is followed by a relatively lengthy comment, which explicate the text and cites one or two ancient battles to illustrate the application of the strategy.

The present book offers a precise translation of the title and text of each strategy. A purport, based mainly on the original comment but also incorporating ideas from other sources, then expounds the common usage of the titular idiom and its military connotations. This is sometimes followed by quotations from various ancient military works to further exemplify the strategy. The account of a historical battle or campaign featuring the successful application of the strategy makes up the final part of each section. All the stories are adapted mainly from official history records but may also draw upon miscellaneous writings of credit.

According to a recent incomplete survey, more than twenty-three hundred titles of military writing from ancient China have survived. About fifty of them are well-known and still enjoy a broad readership among military leaders. They cover all aspects of ancient warfare: strategy and tactics, natural conditions in relation to war, manufacture and usage of weapons and gears, organization and discipline of the armed forces, tactical formations, frontier defense, training of professional troops, and military history.

All the above subjects appeal to researchers in the

history of ancient Chinese warfare, but those who look for ancient theories applicable in modern warfare generally prefer the books on strategy and tactics. In those works, one finds brilliant expositions on problems faced by military leaders of all times and cannot but marvel at the depth and scope attained by the ancient masters.

Though its technical side has undergone remarkable progress toward greater complexity and more dimensions, war as an art has certain fundamental truths that remain valid all through the ages. For instance, war is a political organ to achieve goals that cannot be brought about by peaceful means. A military leader builds up and maintains his strength and weakens that of his opponent, conceals his intentions and capabilities and endeavors to detect those of his opponent, avoids battle at his disadvantage and maneuvers to achieve superiority at the focal points where he chooses to give battle. Modern technology has greatly transformed warfare, but generals and even line officers today often face the same problems that confronted their ancient counterparts. After all, war is launched, conducted, and terminated by humans; therefore it conforms to certain intrinsic laws that are a projection of human nature. As long as human nature does not change, war as a human activity will follow some ageless rules in the course of time.

*Secret Art of War: Thirty-Six Strategies* was composed in conformity to the yin-yang doctrine formulated in *I Ching*. Six, the primal yin number, denotes secret ruses in military contexts, and six square means a whole bag of tricks. The summary of various strategies in terms of the yin-yang antithesis makes possible a simplistic treatment of the complex subject matter. Yin and yang represent an endless series of opposites in the universe; in

warfare they are mainly embodied in the pair of *xu* (cowardice, weakness, disorder, hunger, fatigue, numerical inferiority, unpreparedness) and *shi* (bravery, strength, order, full stomach, leisure, numerical superiority, preparedness). Thus in *Li Jing's Reply to Emperor Taizong of Tang* (Tang Tai Zong Li Jing Wen Dui), the emperor observes, "In my opinion, the various military works contain nothing other than Sun Zi's *Art of War*, and the *Art of War* contains nothing other than *xu* and *shi*." Another familiar twosome is *qi* (extraordinary) and *zheng* (normal), whose relationship has been clarified in Sun Zi's well-known maxim, "Engage the enemy by your normal force and defeat it by your extraordinary forces."

Naturally, the transformation of modern warfare by technological innovations calls for a reexamination of the ancient rules. In fact, since ancient times the rules have always been flexible. They are not really rules but modes of thinking and call for the combination of common sense and extraordinary ruses, with which the military leader adjusts his decisions to the ever-changing situation in war. In this sense, the thirty-six strategies are thirty-six basic ideas distilled from military experiences in ancient Chinese warfare. Therefore they may serve to promote and activate rather than restrain military planning and decision-making today.

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## **Strategy One**

### **Cross the Sea Without Heaven's Knowledge**

**第一计 瞒天过海** 备周则意怠，常见则不疑。阴在阳之内，不在阳之对。太阳，太阴。

#### **Translation**

People who take ample precautions are liable to be off guard. Familiar sights do not rouse suspicion. Yin is the inner instead of the opposite aspect of yang. The great yang contains the great yin.\*

#### **Purport**

This common expression came from the story of an ingenious Tang general who devised a method to transport the emperor (regarded as the Son of Heaven in imperial China) safely across the sea, doing so without even the emperor's own knowledge. The word *heaven* may also be interpreted literally. In ancient times it was easy to conduct secret military operations on land by taking cover in natural shelters, such as mountains and forests, whereas the open water of the sea provided no hiding-place. Therefore, in order to cross the sea without heaven's knowledge, one had to move openly over the sea but

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\*Secret ruses are not incompatible to, but hide in, open acts. Utmost openness conceals utmost secrecy.

act as if one did not intend to cross it.

Each military maneuver has two aspects: the superficial move and the underlying purpose. By concealing both, one can take the enemy completely by surprise. But such ideal secrecy can seldom be attained in actual warfare. In most cases, to keep the enemy completely ignorant of one's operations is no easier than to "cross the sea without heaven's knowledge." The only alternative is to make the enemy neglect or misinterpret the underlying purpose of one's operation. In other words, if it is highly unlikely that the enemy can be kept ignorant of one's actions, one can sometimes play tricks right under its nose.

## Quotations for Reference

One who is good at marshalling troops does so by putting the enemy in the unfathomable situation of fighting with shadows. He assumes no posture and reveals no shape so that there is nothing he cannot achieve. He reveals no shape and shows no move so that there is no change he cannot make. This is the supreme art of war.

*Book of Master Guan* (Guan Zi), Chapter Seventeen.

Yin refers to the unpredictable way. Use yang, which other people do not recognize as yang, so that the yang has also the attributes of yin. Use yin, which other people do not recognize as yin, so that the yin has also the attributes of yang. A good war strategist either practices yin under the cover of yang or uses yin to supplement yang. The essence of the method lies in seizing opportunity to make extraordinary moves, such as a surprise attack or an ambush; the enemy will surely be subdued

in the end. Who can say that yin (secret) ruses cannot overcome yang (animate) spirit?

*Master Jie's Canon of War* (Jie Zi Bing Jing), Tome One

A good defender hides under nine layers of earth; a good attacker moves above nine layers of heaven. Thus he is able to both preserve himself and achieve a complete victory.

Wang Xi's Note: A defender perceives no chance for attack. He conceals his shape and remains quiet so that the enemy cannot detect him. An attacker perceives a chance for attack. He moves from afar in a fabulous speed and takes the enemy by surprise so that it has no time to get ready for defense.

*Art of War* (Sun Zi Bing Fa), Chapter Four.

Superb military maneuvers leave no trace. When leaving no trace, they cannot even be detected by deep-probing spies nor can be counteracted by persons of wisdom.

*Ibid.*, Chapter Six.

### **Zhao She Rescues Yuyu**

Zhao She was a low-ranking official with the Section for Cultivated Fields in the state of Zhao. On one occasion, Lord Pingyuan's family refused to pay land tax. Zhao She, dealing with the case according to the law, had nine stewards of Lord Pingyuan executed. Thereupon the lord burst into a fury. He was about to send his guards to kill Zhao She when the latter called on him in person. He pleaded with the lord, "Your Lordship enjoys the high status of a noble scion in Zhao. If you allow your house

servants to infringe upon public interests, the law will be undermined. If the law grows ineffective, the state will be weakened. If the state becomes weak, the neighboring powers will attack us. If Zhao is attacked and subdued, how will you be able to retain your position and wealth?"

Greatly impressed by Zhao She's argument, Lord Pingyuan discerned that he was a worthy man of honesty and wisdom and recommended him to the king. Thus Zhao She was put in charge of the state treasury. He proved his worth at his new position; before long, taxes were being collected in a well-organized and fair manner. As a result, the people of Zhao prospered and the state treasury and barns were filled to the brim. Naturally, the king included Zhao She among his most trusted courtiers.

The state of Zhao bordered on the powerful Qin to the west. In its military policy, Zhao had to give priority to checking Qin's eastward expansion. Thus a sort of alliance was established among Zhao, Hann, and Wei, the three neighboring states to the east of Qin.

In 269 B.C. the Qin army, under the command of General Hu Shang, invaded Hann and made camp at Yuyu (modern Heshun County in Shanxi Province). The King of Zhao sent for General-in-Chief Lian Po and asked, "Is it possible for us to rescue Hann?"

The old general replied, "The road is too long and dangerous." Another general, Yue Sheng, gave a similar answer. Then the king summoned Zhao She and asked his opinion. "The way is far and narrow," said Zhao. "If a battle takes place, it will be like two rats fighting in a small hole—the braver will turn out the victor." Satisfied, the king commanded Zhao She to lead troops to rescue Hann.

When the army had barely gone thirty *li* from the

capital city of Handan, Zhao She issued orders to halt and make camp. He also sternly forbade the soldiers to make any comment on the plan of battle, announcing, "Anyone who disobeys the order will be punished with death."

A band of the Qin troops, dispatched by Hu Shang to check the advance of reinforcements from Zhao, were stationed west of Wu'an, over a hundred *li* to the south of Yuyu. There they practiced military exercises to the accompaniment of drums and battle cries, creating such a clamor as to shake the roofs of the surrounding houses. A scout of the Zhao army came to Zhao She and urged him to make haste to rescue Wu'an. But Zhao She had the soldier beheaded on the spot for violating military discipline. The Zhao army was stationed there for a full twenty-eight days without advancing a single *li*. Zhao She spent all this time building ramparts to strengthen his camp site, as if he had no other intention than to stay there and protect himself.

By that time the Qin general Hu Shang had suspended the siege of Yuyu and rearranged his troops to make ready for an engagement with the Zhao army, which to his great perplexity did not show up as expected. Thereupon he dispatched some scouts to find out the situation. They returned to report that the King of Zhao had indeed sent an army of reinforcements under the command of Zhao She, who had proceeded for no more than thirty *li* from Handan and had then made camp. Still suspicious, Hu Shang sent a trusted assistant as envoy to the Zhao army. A few days later, the envoy arrived at the camp of the Zhao army and was brought to Zhao She's presence. He said to Zhao She in a haughty tone, "The Qin army is attacking Yuyu and will capture it in no time. If you are able to fight, come quickly to meet us!"

Zhao She did not seem to be offended by this challenge. He assumed a humble air and replied, "My sovereign received an urgent call from Hann, our neighbor, and had no choice but to send me here to guard against emergencies. How can I have the impudence to fight the powerful army of Qin?" With this, he treated the envoy to a sumptuous banquet and showed him around the fortified camp.

On hearing the envoy's report, Hu Shang was greatly pleased and said to himself, "The Zhao troops are only thirty *li* from their capital, and yet they have stopped and built ramparts to protect their camp. It is all too obvious that they have no intention to fight. Now I will capture Yuyu for certain!" Thereupon he pulled back all the troops deployed to guard against Zhao and threw all his weight on the city of Yuyu, aiming to seize it as soon as possible.

After the envoy had left, Zhao She summoned the troops and led them on a forced march toward Yuyu. The vanguard, consisting of several thousand mounted archers, reached Yuyu in two days and one night and made camp about fifty *li* from the city. Hu Shang did not get the news until the Zhao army had settled down in an advantageous position. Shamed and angry at being fooled, the Qin general forthwith lifted the siege of Yuyu and led his troops in full force to challenge Zhao She.

In the meantime, a low-ranking officer named Xu Li asked permission to see Zhao She and offer his advice. Zhao She had him brought to his commander's tent. Xu Li said, "The men of Qin did not expect us to arrive so suddenly, and now in great anger they are coming to challenge us. You must arrange the troops in well-ordered formations to withstand the initial assaults of the enemy

and seize the right moment to fight back and defeat them. This is the only way to cope with the superior Qin forces."

"Good!" Zhao She nodded approvingly. "However, as you have disobeyed my order, make ready to receive the punishment you deserve!"

To this Xu Li calmly replied, "I would prefer to be executed by axe."

"Well," said the general, "We'll settle the matter after our return to Handan."

"But first let me finish my suggestion. In the area around Yuyu, no place stands higher than the North Hill. By taking that position, we will have a great topographical advantage. But we have to act quickly before the Qin army gets around to it."

"Excellent idea!" Zhao She exclaimed in appreciation and forthwith sent Xu Li with ten thousand men to occupy the top of the North Hill. Soon after, Hu Shang arrived with his troops, only to find that the Zhao army had already seized the commanding ground. Losing his head in anger, Hu Shang ordered his men to besiege the hill. In response, the Zhao army rolled big stones down from the hilltop. Failing to gain any advantage, Hu Shang called off the assault to search for an easy route uphill when all of a sudden Zhao She arrived with the main force of Zhao and closed in on the flanks of the Qin troops. Hastily, Hu Shang prepared his forces to withhold the attack. At this juncture, however, Xu Li led ten thousand men in an overwhelming charge downhill. Assailed on all sides and cut into separate parts, the Qin army fell into disorder and suffered a crushing defeat. Hu Shang led the remnants of his troops in a wild homeward flight, traveling over fifty *li* before he finally threw off the pursuing Zhao army.



Thus the siege of Yuyu was relieved. The king of Hann went in person to Zhao She's camp to offer thanks, as well as handsome gifts, to the victorious Zhao army. Upon his return to Handan, Zhao She received the noble title Lord Mafu, ranking equal with Lian Po, the most distinguished general of Zhao. As for Xu Li, the soldier who achieved great merit by offering useful advice at the danger of his life, Zhao She highly recommended him to the king, who appointed him as Defender-in-Chief of Zhao.

Zhao She had a son named Kuo. Kuo had taken an interest in military science since he was only a child. He liked to discuss strategy with his father, getting to be so eloquent that Zhao She could hardly find a question to baffle him. Kuo's mother was very proud of him and once remarked to Zhao She in a contented tone, "Look at our son. How true it is that a general's family can produce another general!" On hearing this, Zhao She looked very grim, as if greatly annoyed. "Kuo should never be made a general!" he declared decisively. "It will be good luck for the state of Zhao if he is never employed to command a battle."

"But why?" asked his wife in perplexity. "Kuo has studied all your treatises and is matchless when discussing strategy. Why do you think him unfit to be a general?"

"Kuo believes that no one in the world is a match for him," explained Zhao She. "That is why he cannot be a general. War is such a perilous affair that, even when a general acts very cautiously and listens attentively to the views of others, he should still examine and reexamine his decisions to prevent possible errors in his battle plan, for the slightest mistake may lead to the downfall of the entire army. But Kuo takes war so lightly! If he is put in command of the Zhao army, he will undoubtedly be