



三 十 六 計 釋

# **The Wiles of War**

## **36 Military Strategies**

### **from**

## **Ancient China**



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孙 武 著

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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 elite 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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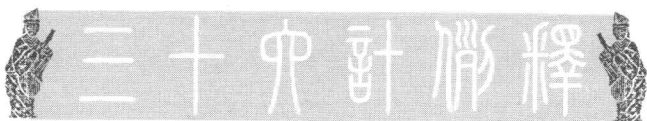
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# THE WILES OF WAR

36 Military Strategies from Ancient China



## 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, do-

ing 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 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.

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

Superb military maneuvers leave no trace. When leaving no trace, they cannot even be detected by deepprobing 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