



偷梁换柱

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Strategy 25

Replace The Beams With Rotten Timbers

The general is the supporting pillar of the state. If his talents are all-encompassing, the state will invariably be strong. If the supporting pillar is marked by fissures, the state will invariably grow weak.

Sun Zi, *The Art of War*

Disrupt the enemy's formations, interfere with their methods of operations, change the rules in which they are used to following, and go contrary to their standard training. In this way, you remove the supporting pillar, the common link which makes a group of men an effective fighting force.

Warring States Period China

In 259 B.C., Qin invaded Zhao, the two armies confronting each other at Changping. After several skirmishes, the Zhao forces dug in and waited behind fortified positions refusing to come out despite daily

taunts from the enemy. Knowing it was futile to lure the Zhao out, and that a prolonged stalemate worked in their favor, the Qin general schemed to remove the Zhao general leading the defense.

Spies were sent to the Zhao camp to spread the rumor that the one thing Qin feared was that Zhao Kuo, son of the famous general Zhao She, would be put in charge of the army. When reports of this rumor reached the king, he relieved the current commander and replaced him with Zhao Kuo.

What the king of Zhao did not know was that years earlier when the famous general Zhao She was still alive he had tested his son on the art of war and found him wanting. While the son proved knowledgeable in all aspects of war, his father still disapproved.

When asked why, he told his wife, *"To fight war entails fatal danger, but Zhao Kuo passed it off as something easy in his talk. It would be better if our king did not appoint him as commander. If he does, he will surely be the one to lead our troops to doom."*

When Zhao Kuo took over command, he set about restructuring the army, reissuing orders and rules, and dismissing many senior officers.

When the Qin general heard of this, he attacked. Using the strategy 'Lure the Tiger Down the Mountain' he faked a retreat. Zhao, overconfident and self-assured, assumed the retreat to be real and abandoned his fortifications to give chase. The Qin then circled back and destroyed the Zhao supply depot.

Forty days later the Zhao troops were starving. Zhao Kuo and his personal guard made a last stand against the Qin, but were brought down in a hail of arrows.

The Qin general knew that a seasoned general would never fall for such an obvious tactic, but playing on the younger general's weakness, he succeeded in neutralizing their initial advantage.

Warring States Period China

Almost thirty-one years later, in 228 B.C., Qin was again attacking Zhao, but for the last time. During the previous years, Qin had continued to expand, eating up smaller kingdoms on its borders. Once a mighty state, Zhao had been reduced to bribing Qin with territory as it frantically tried to buy time to rebuild its army.

Zhao's only hope lay in the prowess of its leading general, *Li Mu*, to rally the remaining troops and devise some stratagem to save them from almost certain annihilation.

The equally famous Qin general *Wang Jian* schemed to remove the pillar of the Zhao state through court intrigue.

Now, it was known that King Yu of Zhao kept a homosexual lover by the name of *Han Cang* to whom he turned for advice in running the state. Han Cang was jealous of General Li's acclaim and eagerly accepted a bribe from Qin to slander Li, saying he was conspiring with Qin to commit treason.

General Li was summoned to court where Han Cang read out the charges. *"You were seen in the presence of the king with a dagger concealed in your sleeve. Thus you must have been plotting assassination. The penalty is execution!"*

"But what you saw up my sleeve was not the handle of a dagger, but a splint for my crippled arm," replied Li Mu. *"My left arm is crippled and weak. When kneeling at court I have difficulty rising and, since I do not wish to cause a distraction before his Majesty, I bound a splint to my arm so that I could rise without difficulty."*

But Han Cang was not swayed, he said, *"My instructions are to have you executed without argument. There will be no pardon. However, as a concession I will allow you to commit suicide."*¹⁸

Li Mu bowed gratefully and retired from the audience chamber to fall upon his sword. However, his crippled arm would not extend far

¹⁸ Since punishments for treason in those days were particularly gruesome.

The Thirty-Six Strategies of Ancient China - S. H. Verstappen

enough to allow him to hold the tip to his belly, so he placed the sword in his mouth, dashed against a pillar, and killed himself.

Five months later Qin attacked and Zhao was destroyed forever.

Six Dynasties Period China

In the year 383, Emperor *Fu Jian* of Qin personally led a cavalry of five thousand mounted soldiers to attack General *Xie Shi* of Jin.

Discovering that the Jin forces were greater than he anticipated, the emperor had his army form defensive positions along the bank of the river. The Jin armies likewise encamped on the opposite side. Neither side wished to cross first, since it was well known that an army is most vulnerable when crossing a river.

General Shi sent an envoy across the river with a message that read, *"My lord, your army has entered deeply into our territory, and in deploying your ranks you have crowded upon the river. This is the plan for a lengthy stalemate. Do you really want to fight? If you will order your men to withdraw to a safe distance and allow us to cross we can then fight it out and settle the matter quickly."*

The emperor agreed to the request. When his advisors objected, Emperor *Fu Jian* told them that he planned to turn his army about and attack the Jin after half their troops had crossed.

But General *Xie* anticipated the emperor's treachery and sent scouts disguised as imperial troops to infiltrate the Qin ranks. When the emperor ordered his army to pull back, the disguised Jin troops began to incite panic by spreading the rumor that Qin was withdrawing in defeat and that Jin was in hot pursuit. The retreat quickly turned into a rout as the Qin troops broke formation to escape.

The emperor and his generals raced frantically after the fleeing soldiers with whips in hand to stop them, but to no avail. The Jin army quickly crossed the river and pursued the Qin forces, inflicting enormous casualties. The emperor was wounded and narrowly escaped. He was captured and strangled a few weeks later

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Summary

Commanding a large body of men is like dealing with an unthinking beast: its actions are not determined so much by what is logical as by circumstance of terrain and habit. An army that is invincible in a certain formation can be useless if that formation is broken. By changing the rules and habits under which the enemy is used to fighting, you take away his physical and moral foundation.

