

Openly Repair the Walkway, Secretly March to Chencang



明修棧道
暗渡陳倉

Míng Xiū Zhàn Dào, Àn Dù Chéncāng

Strategy 8
Openly Repair the Walkway,
Secretly March to Chencang

To win victory in battle, the leader must know how to use both direct and indirect methods. The interplay between direct and indirect methods generates countless tactics.

Sun Zi, *The Art of War*

Attack the enemy with two convergent forces. The first is the direct attack, one that is obvious and for which the enemy prepares his defence.

The second is the indirect attack, the attack sinister, that the enemy does not expect and which causes him to divide his forces at the last minute, leading to confusion and disaster.

Warring States Period China

In 270 B.C. the town of Ouyu, bordering the kingdom of Zhao, was besieged by Qin. The king of Zhao consulted his advisors, most of whom recommended against marching to save Ouyu, citing that the terrain was too rugged and difficult to cross. Only *Zhao She* suggested an attack regardless of the terrain.

He said, "*Qin is unsure whether we will attack since Ouyu is on the far border of our territory with difficult terrain between us. If I suddenly showed up, it would be like two rats in a hole - the most spirited fighter will win.*"

The king approved and Zhao She left the capital at the head of the relief forces. However, he had marched only thirty li when he halted the army and began constructing a fortified encampment. For twenty-eight days Zhao She continued to dig trenches and erect stockades.

During this time he sent out spies to patrol the countryside. They soon reported seeing a scouting party of Qin troops spying on the encampment. Zhao She ordered that these spies were to be allowed to escape and report back to Qin, and that he be notified the minute they departed.

When the Qin spies reported back that Zhao was constructing a fortified camp the Qin general was relieved, since it meant that they were not going to relieve the siege. He reasoned that since Ouyu was not inside Zhao territory they were not really concerned about it. The Qin general therefore failed to prepare defences to his rear concentrating all his forces instead on taking the town.

Unknown to the Qin general, Zhao She had broken camp the same day the spies departed and had followed closely behind them arriving on the scene only hours later. The Qin general having relaxed his guard was totally shocked by the sudden appearance of the Zhao forces setting up positions on the favorable North Hill.

Caught between the Zhao forces to their rear and the Ouyu garrison in the front, the Qin suffered a serious defeat and were forced to flee across the border.

Qin Dynasty China

Toward the end of the Qin dynasty there were numerous rebellions as the old kingdoms broke away from central imperial rule. The most powerful of the rebel leaders was *Xiang Yu*, warlord of western Chu.

He proclaimed that any rebel general that succeeded in capturing the Qin capital would be granted the territory of Qin as reward. But when the capital was captured by a mere peasant rebel named *Gaozu*,⁶ Xiang Yu was not pleased since he had fully expected to capture the capital himself.

Gaozu, however, wisely refused the honour and was given instead the governorship of the remote province of Han. This in effect exiled Gaozu and spared Xiang Yu both the embarrassment and threat of his presence at court.

The shortest path to reach Han was through a precipitous valley where part of the road consisted of a wooden walkway that ran along the steep cliff walls and which was supported by beams inserted into deep holes carved into the solid rock.

Gaozu's advisor, *Jiang Liang* concerned that Xiang Yu might think them too much of a threat to allow them to escape said, "*Would it not be wise to burn and destroy the wooden roadway which you have passed over? This would prove to the world that you have no intention of marching east' again and thus set Xiang Yu's mind at ease.*"

Gaozu agreed and the army burned the walkway as they passed.

⁶ In Chinese written history emperors are known by several names depending on what point in their career the story takes place. In this instance, the founder of the Han Dynasty is called Liu Qi while he was a peasant, the Duke of Bei when he became a general, the King of Han when he was assigned the kingdom of that name, Liu Bang when he became emperor (although, the use of this name was forbidden during his lifetime and so does not appear in the contemporary histories) and finally his posthumous title Gaozu. To avoid unnecessary confusion, I have used the posthumous title, Gaozu, throughout this current work.

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

However, after a month of preparation, Gaozu was ready to march east and fight Xiang Yu for control of the empire. First he ordered a large work detail to begin repairing the wooden walkway while secretly sending his main force along narrow mountain trails through Chencang.

When news that they were repairing the walkway reached Xiang Yu, he ordered the king of Yang, Chang Han, to lead an army and position themselves at the terminus of the walkway. There they could bottle Gaozu's forces in a narrow valley leaving them with no chance of breaking out. This was the obvious strategy for such a situation and Gaozu had counted on whoever was sent to oppose him to use it.

Meanwhile Gaozu's general *Han Xin*, who had set out weeks earlier, came out of the mountains well behind Chang's troops waiting at the valley entrance. They launched a surprise attack from the rear while Gaozu and his troops charged out of the valley from the front.

Chang was defeated but managed to escape to the capital with the news.

Xiang Yu sent out three armies to attack Gaozu chasing him all the way to Zhongyang where Gaozu and the remnants of the Han army were trapped. Gaozu would triumph in the end but not until after he employed the strategy *Shed Your Skin Like the Golden Cicada* (see Chapter 21)

Muromachi Period Japan

In 1560 one of Japan's greatest warlords, Oda Nobunaga, then still a minor commander, marched his force of two thousand men to stop the incursion of a rival warlord, Imagawa Yoshimoto.

Even though Nobunaga was outnumbered twelve to one he set out humming a tune. Nobunaga's scouts reported that Imagawa was resting his troops at a village that was nestled near a narrow gorge that Nobunaga knew would be ideal for a surprise attack. The scouts further reported that Imagawa's troops were celebrating and viewing the heads taken in a previous battle.

Openly Repair the Walkway, Secretly March to Chencang

Nobunaga devised the following ploy. He made camp some distance away from the village. He placed numerous flags and had straw dummies made to give the impression that a large host had arrived. Imagawa's forces thus expected an attack to come from the direction of the enemy camp.

Meanwhile, Nobunaga's troops secretly made a forced march in a wide circle in order to come up from behind the Imagawa encampment.

Weather favoured Nobunaga's scheme, for late in the day there was a heavy downpour. Taking advantage of the foul weather, Nobunaga's troops launched a sudden attack from the rear. So unexpected was this attack that Imagawa first thought that a brawl had broken out among his own troops. Only when he saw two enemy samurai charging towards him did he realize he was under attack.

This realization came too late, and Imagawa was beheaded and his troops scattered. The battle lasted only a few minutes, but it made Oda Nobunaga's reputation and he quickly rose to power, eventually becoming one of Japan's greatest warlords.

Summary

Against a seasoned and wary opponent, feints will prove ineffective. Instead one must make an actual attack to gain his attention. Once his forces are concentrated in defending the obvious attack, you attack from a second direction, thus catching him by surprise.

