

Trouble the Water to Catch the Fish



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Strategy 20

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Every day have the vanguard go forth and instigate skirmishes with them in order to psychologically wear them out.

Have our older and weaker soldiers drag brushwood to stir up the dust, beat the drums and shout, and move back and forth- some going to the left, some going to the right, never getting any closer than a hundred paces from the enemy.

Their general will certainly become fatigued, and their troops will become fearful. In this situation, the enemy will not dare to come forward.

Then when we come forth with our three armies the enemy will certainly be defeated.

The Six Secret Teachings of the Tai Gong

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

Before engaging your enemy's forces create confusion to weaken his perception and judgment. Do something unusual, strange, and unexpected as this will arouse the enemy's suspicion and disrupt his thinking. A distracted enemy is thus more vulnerable.

Spring And Autumn Period China

In 632 B.C., the armies of Jin and Chu faced each other at Chengdu before the battle of the same name. Chu sent an envoy to Jin requesting to fight a chariot duel the next day to which the Jin ruler, Duke Wen, agreed.

In the morning, Duke Wen climbed to the top of an observation tower and looking down on his camp's preparations said, *"Young and old conduct themselves according to ritual. They are fit for use!"*

He then ordered his troops to cut down trees to be used as part of an unorthodox tactic. While the chariot duel was underway, Duke Wen launched a sudden cavalry attack against the Chu right wing causing it to collapse.

At the same time as the right was being pushed into the main body, the Jin troops in the center raised the retreat pennants and began pulling back. As the Jin troops retreated, they dragged behind them the trees they had cut down earlier that morning. This raised such a dust cloud that the Chu commanders thought the Jin were fleeing in panic and eagerly gave chase.

When the main body of the Chu army was enveloped in the cloud of dust they were unable to see that the Jin forces had split into two divisions and had turned around.

The Jin attacked in a classical pincer movement on both of the Chu flanks. The result was a resounding defeat after which the Chu general was ordered to commit suicide.

Duke Wen had taken advantage of the distraction provided by the chariot duel to launch both a surprise attack, and a retreat, manipulating the Chu forces into a trap.

Warring States Period China

The three central states of Qi, Wei, and Han made an alliance to attack the northern state of Yan that in turn, sought help from the southern state of Chu. The king of Chu sent his general *Xing Yang* to rescue Yan.

Unable to attack the combined forces concentrated in Yan, Xing Yang used the strategy ‘Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao’, and captured the Wei city of Yongqiu.

Wei and Qi were concerned that with the enemy holding a fortified position to their rear their lines of communication would be cut, so they set off to recapture the city.

There were two roads that led to the city of Yongqiu and it was decided that the Wei forces would occupy the western road while the Qi, the eastern. This was to prevent Xing Yang from escaping.

Xing Yang had succeeded in drawing the enemy away from Yan but he now had to extricate himself from a near hopeless situation. He resorted to an unorthodox strategy.

Knowing the tenuous nature of any alliance during those ruthless times, Xing Yang ordered the west gate opened. By day he sent riders and carriages up the road towards the Wei camp but once they were out of sight in the woods they would wait for a while, then turn around and return. By night he had men run up and down the same road carrying torches. The Qi observers thought that the daytime activity looked suspiciously like envoys bearing gifts and tribute, while the nighttime activity looked like messengers bearing urgent communications.

Believing that Wei had struck a deal with Xing Yang and that both were preparing a sneak attack on them, the Qi army withdrew during the night and returned home. The next day the Wei army learned that Qi had abandoned the field and they were left alone to retake the city.

Thinking better of the idea, the Wei army also left the field, allowing Xing Yang to return to Chu after having successfully rescued Yan.

Five Dynasties Period China

General *Li Suyuan* of Jin was sent to relieve the siege of Yuzhou and drive the invading Khitan tribes out of the empire.

The Khitans set up defensive positions in advantageous terrain with the intention of using the strategy 'Await the Exhausted Enemy at Your Ease'. Their plan was to attack the Jin troops before they had a chance to form battle lines. However, General Li's scouts reported that the Khitans were already waiting in formation, giving away their intentions.

Li Suyuan ordered his infantry to hold back while the weak and weary soldiers went ahead dragging brushwood and burning fires as they neared the Khitan formations. This created such a cloud of dust and smoke that the Khitan commander could not see the Jin army and assumed the dust was being kicked up by a large infantry. Seeing an advantage, he ordered his men to break formation and attack what he believed would be an army of Jin troops blinded by the smoke and dust.

But as the Khitans attacked, the Jin soldiers dropped their branches and ran off so that the Khitans advanced through the dust cloud surprised to discover no army there. As the disoriented Khitan army turned to escape from the clouds of dust, Li Suyuan ordered his army to charge in from the rear. The result was a rout and slaughter. The siege of Yuzhou was lifted.

Summary

Man and beast alike will spontaneously pay attention to anything unusual within their environment. Magicians, card sharks, pick pockets, and prize fighters rely on this trait to momentarily trap the person's attention elsewhere while they secretly carry out another action.

