



樹上開花

Shù Shàng Kāi Huā

Strategy 29

Tie Silk Blossoms To The Dead Tree

Spreading out pennants and making the flags conspicuous are the means by which to cause doubt in the enemy. Analytically positioning the fences and screens is the means by which to bedazzle and make the enemy doubtful.

Sun Bin, *Art of Warfare*

Tying silk blossoms on a dead tree gives the illusion that the tree is healthy. Through the use of artifice and disguise make something of no value appear valuable; of no threat appear dangerous; of no use, useful.

Han Dynasty China

During the later Han dynasty, the Qiang barbarians revolted and invaded Han territory. The empress Dowager Teng appointed General *Yu Xu* to raise an army and drive out the barbarians.

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

The Qiang led several thousand troops to occupy the strategic pass of Yaoku to await the Han. Outnumbered, General Yu halted his army some distance from the pass and publicly announced that he would wait until reinforcements arrived before venturing any further. When the Qiang heard this, they relaxed their formations and divided up into raiding parties to plunder the local countryside.

Taking advantage of their scattering, General Yu broke through the pass and advanced at double the normal speed covering more than a hundred li a day. The Qiang regrouped to give chase, but the Han already had a day's head start on them.

General Yu sought to dissuade the Qiang from attacking. On the first night, he ordered his soldiers to light one cooking fire for every man. On the second night each man was to light two cooking fires, and on the third, three. Seeing that the number of cooking fires increased each night, the Qiang did not dare to attack.

Someone asked, "*Sun Bin reduced his cooking fires but you increased them (see Chapter 28). Furthermore, according to THE ART OF WAR, an army on the march should not exceed thirty li a day, yet today you have advanced a hundred. Why is this?*"

Yu replied, "*The enemy troops are numerous while our soldiers are few. When the barbarians see our fires increasing each day they will certainly interpret it as evidence that reinforcements from the garrison are joining us.*"

Believing that our numbers are many while our speed is quick, they will hesitate to pursue us. Sun Bin manifested weakness, but I now display strength because our relative strategic power is different."

The Qiang became ever more wary of engaging in battle and finally decided to disperse and return to their homelands. It was then that General Yu turned about and pursued the retreating barbarians inflicting severe casualties and driving them out of the territory.

Three Kingdoms Period China

Duke *Zhou Yu* asked assistance from *Liu Bei* in his plans for attacking their mutual enemy *Cao Cao*. *Liu Bei* lent the duke the famous strategist *Kong Ming* to assist with his planning.

The duke however became miffed with *Kong Ming* because of his outspoken and usually contrary opinions.

The duke wanted to execute him but another minister, *Lu Su*, intervened and said that they could not outright execute an advisor without just cause, as this would destroy their alliance with *Liu Bei*. The duke conceded and decided to set up *Kong Ming* for a failure, after which, *Kong* would be forced to commit suicide.

The duke called all his generals to counsel. In front of these witnesses the duke turned to *Kong* and asked, "*Renowned advisor, in several days Cao Cao will arrive and we will do battle along the river and its environs, what do you believe to be the most important weapon for such an engagement?*"

Kong Ming replied, "*For river combat, the bow and arrow are the most important.*"

"*I cannot agree with you more,*" said the duke. "*But we are in short supply, I wonder then if you will oversee the production of one hundred thousand arrows to be delivered within ten days.*"

Kong Ming sensed the trap. To produce ten thousand arrows a day was a near impossible task, should he fail to produce the arrows within the appointed time he would be forced to commit suicide. Not to be outdone however he replied, "*Cao Cao's forces may arrive any day, ten days is too long to wait, instead I shall deliver the arrows within three days.*"

The duke and his advisor *Lu Su* couldn't believe their luck for surely *Kong Ming* would fail to do in three days what was nearly impossible to do in ten.

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The next day Kong Ming did nothing but relax and stroll about the parks. The duke seeing this was impressed with Kong's dispassionate resolve to die, since it seemed he was not even trying to fulfill his promise.

The second day Kong Ming secretly borrowed twenty river junks and had them outfitted by lining the hull, cabin walls, and gunwales with hundreds of bundles of straw.

Before daybreak on the third day, Kong Ming had the junks chained together. He woke up Lu Su and asked if he wished to accompany him as he went to pick up his shipment of one hundred thousand arrows. Lu Su, curious to see this for himself, agreed to go along.

In the morning fog, the ships slowly made their way up-river towards the encampment of Cao Cao. As the junks neared the camp, they suddenly became visible to the startled Wei guards. They immediately alerted Cao Cao who, suspecting a surprise attack, ordered all his archers to rain arrows at the approaching fleet.

As the junks made their way up past the enemy encampment the bundles of straw facing the enemy camp were filled with arrows. Kong Ming then turned the ships around and filled the other side with arrows as well before disappearing back into the fog. Cao Cao, fearing a trap, refused to let his naval commanders go after the retreating junks.

When the junks returned to base the arrows collected exceeded more than one hundred thousand. When Lu Su made his report the duke said, *"Alas, this man is superior to me."* Kong Ming later became prime minister under the duke.

Three Kingdoms Period China

During the final years of the Three Kingdoms, *Sima Yan* usurped the throne of Wei, made himself king, and changed the name of the kingdom from Wei to Jin. News of this reached the neighboring king of Wu who knew that his kingdom would be the next likely target of the ambitious Sima. He worried so much that he died several days later.

Sun Hao then inherited the throne of Wu and immediately took to pleasure and vice, neglecting state affairs. Over the next few years, the new king of Wu grew increasingly paranoid and had dozens of his advisors and commanders and their entire families executed on the slightest suspicion. As a result, he was widely reviled.

Hearing that the people of Wu despised their king, Sima ordered a naval attack led by Commander *Wang Chun*. The king of Wu had no idea of what to do against the impending naval attack. He convened what remained of his council and one advisor recommended stringing a bamboo barrier across the river to prevent the fleet from reaching the Wu capital of Jian Ye. The king agreed and heavy bamboo cords were made and strung just below the surface.

When Commander Wang heard about the barrier he laughed. He ordered his men to build huge rafts from timbers on which were erected straw dummies dressed in armor and holding weapons. The dummies were soaked in oil and a trip mechanism was attached that would ignite the dummies when the rafts struck the barrier.

The rafts burned through the bamboo and continued on downstream to the Wu capital. The spectacle of a fleet of rafts full of burning men so frightened the Wu troops, they fled in terror.

Sima captured Wu and went on to found the short-lived Jin dynasty.

Summary

While it is important to learn of your enemy's plans, it is equally important to conceal your own. Through the use of props, facades, and camouflage, you keep the enemy in doubt of your strengths and weaknesses. Not knowing where to attack, the enemy is led to defeat.

