

Seize the Opportunity to Lead a Sheep Away



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## Strategy 12

### Seize the Opportunity to Lead a Sheep Away

*While following the rules of strategy and tactics be prepared to take advantage of circumstances not covered by conventional thinking. If opportunities present themselves, then the leader should be flexible in his plans and adapt to the new circumstances.*

Sun Zi, *The Art of War*

While carrying out your plans be flexible enough to take advantage of any opportunity that presents itself, however small, and avail yourself of any profit, however slight.

### Spring And Autumn Period China

In 770 B.C. The duke of Chen joined forces with Liu and Qi and together they attacked Song. Since the main body of the Chen army was on campaign, the duke of Song used the strategy *Attack Wei to Rescue Zhao* and attacked the now poorly defended state of Chen. This

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caused the duke of Chen to break off his invasion of Song and return to rescue his own capital.

When the duke of Song heard that the Chen army was returning, he withdrew his army. As the Song army retreated they passed through the small kingdom of Tai who had remained neutral during the war between Chen and Song. An advisor to the duke of Song suggested that since the king of Tai had refused to ally himself against Chen, why not lay siege to the city and take their territory since they were already there.

The duke agreed and he ordered his troops to surround the capital of Tai. The king of Tai was outnumbered so he sent a secret message to the duke of Chen asking for reinforcements. A couple of days later the Song scouts reported that the Chen army was approaching. Once again the duke of Song abandoned the field and fled back to his home territory.

The siege lifted, the king of Tai threw open the gates and welcomed his new allies into the city. The duke of Chen, finding himself and his troops inside the walls of a foreign city saw an opportunity that occurs but seldom. He seized the king and made him prisoner while his troops quickly overcame the unsuspecting Tai guards and took control of the city.

Duke Chen, with scarcely any fighting, was able to annex another kingdom to his rule.

### **Qin Dynasty China**

In 209 B.C. China revolted against years of oppressive Qin rule. The Qin general, *Chang Han*, was sent out to put down the rebellion. He defeated the forces of Chu and then crossed the Yellow River to lay siege to the city of Chulu in Zhao.

The King of Chu gathered his remaining divisions and placed them under the command of General *Song Yi*. As second in command he appointed the aristocrat general *Xiang Yu* and sent them to lead the army to rescue Zhao.

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Song Yi marched the army out but stopped half-way and made camp, where they sat and waited for forty-six days.

Xiang Yu was becoming impatient and went to see Song Yi and said, *"News has come that the Qin army has besieged the king of Zhao at Chulu."*

*If we lead our troops across the Yellow River at once, we can attack them with our forces from the outside, Zhao will respond by attacking from the city, and we are sure to defeat the Qin army."*

*"Not so," replied Song Yi. "He who merely slaps at the gadfly on the cow's back will never succeed in killing the pesky lice. Qin is attacking Zhao. If she is victorious in battle, then her troops will be exhausted and we can take advantage of her weakness. If she fails, then victory has already been assured."*

*Therefore it is better to let Qin and Zhao fight it out. You see, when it comes to fighting with a sword, I may not be a match for you, but when it comes to laying out strategy, you are no match for me!"*

After this meeting there was no love lost between the two generals and Song Yi secretly let it be known that he would reward anyone who assassinated Xiang Yu.

Shortly afterwards Song Yi received orders from the king of Chu to send his son back to Qi to become prime minister. Delighted by his son's promotion, Song Yi and the entire army escorted him back to the capital marching for a whole day until arriving at Wuyan city.

That night, and well into the next day, Song Yi and his son celebrated at a drinking party in the comfort of the city while the remainder of the army bivouacked outside. The day was cold and a heavy rain was falling so that the soldiers were chilled and starving.

Xiang Yu had had enough and declared before the senior officers, *"We joined forces for the purpose of attacking Qin, but instead we have sat here all this time without advancing."*

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*The year is lean, the people poor, and our men eat nothing but taro root and pulse. We have no provisions for our army, and yet Song Yi holds a great drinking party.*

*He will not lead us across the river so that we may live off the food of Zhao and attack Qin. Now if Qin should succeed in defeating the newly formed Zhao she will be stronger than before, then what sort of weakness will there be that we can take advantage of?*

*Our troops suffered only a single defeat, yet we are all brought together under Song Yi's sole command so that the entire safety of our state depends on this one move.*

*Song Yi takes no thought for our soldiers, but attends only to his personal affairs. He is a traitor to the altars of our soil!"*

Early the next morning Xiang Yu went to make his daily report to the supreme general. When he entered the tent, he quickly drew his sword and cut off Song Yi's head.

Then he went outside and announced, "*Song Yi was plotting with Qin against Chu. The king of Chu secretly sent me an order to execute him.*"

All the other commanders submitted to him in fear. Xiang Yu became Supreme General and marched his army across the river, and in nine battles defeated the Qin forces.

Xiang Yu went on to conquer more than half of the empire before losing to Gaozu, the founder of the Han dynasty.

## **Yuan Dynasty China**

During the final days of the Yuan dynasty, rebellion had broken out throughout the empire. Initially there were several contenders vying to be the first to found a new dynasty on the imminent fall of the house of Yuan, but the field was narrowed to two: *Chu Yuanchang* and *Chen Yifu*. The two armies met at Poyang Lake where a naval engagement was to take place.

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General Chen had the advantage of both troops and ships. His ships were large and sturdy and he had them lined up side by side across the entire expanse of the lake. He furthermore had the ships joined together with iron chains so as to create an impenetrable barrier.

General Chu sent his ships to attack but they were defeated, having failed to break through the cordon. Fortunately for Chu, the next day a violent northwest gale began to blow. Since Chen's flotilla was situated downwind, Chu took advantage of the situation to launch fireboats against the barrier.

Soon Chen's troops were in a frenzy to save their ships from both the rising storm and the fire which was fanned into a blazing fierceness by the wind.

Taking advantage of the panic and confusion that ensued, Chu launched his own fleet into the attack and they completely defeated Chen's forces.

General Chen was killed by an arrow through his eye while general Chu became the founder of the Ming dynasty.

### Summary

Even the wisest planner cannot calculate certainty into his schemes. The element of chance is ever present and a watchful eye is needed to spot when the door of opportunity is opening.

