



假痴不癲

Jiǎ Chī Bù Diān

Strategy 27

Feign Madness, But Keep Your Balance

It is the gnarled and crooked tree that escapes the woodsman's axe.

Lao Zi, *The Tao Te Ching*

When an eagle is about to attack, it will fly low and draw in its wings. When a fierce cat is about to strike, it will fold back its ears and crouch low. When the Sage is about to move, he will certainly display a stupid countenance.

The Six Secret Teachings Of The Tai Gong

Hide behind the mask of a fool, a drunk, or a madman to create confusion about your intentions and motivations. Lure your opponent into underestimating your ability until, overconfident, he drops his guard. Then you may attack.

Warring States Period China

Sun Bin was making a reputation for himself after graduating from the mysterious Ghost Valley School when he was invited to become an advisor to the king of Wei. 20 Another advisor at the court, Pang Juan, became jealous of Sun Bin's increasing popularity with the king and devised a scheme to frame Sun as a traitor. He convinced Sun that he should write to his family and plan a return trip home to show off his success.

Sun was concerned about taking a leave from the court so soon after his appointment, but Pang reassured him that this was customary in Wei. Sun complied and wrote a letter to his family announcing his forthcoming visit. Pang had the letter intercepted and brought it to the king explaining that, since Sun had only spent three months at court, his imminent return could only mean that he was a spy and was planning to return with state secrets.

The king was outraged and he had Sun imprisoned and the tendons behind his knees cut, hence Sun's first name Bin, meaning "crippled." A year later, Sun heard that an emissary from his home state would be visiting Wei, and he planned to escape.

First, he feigned madness to relax the guard's vigil. He rubbed his own feces over his body and alternately screamed and wept, and then convulsed with laughter. Pang suspected this to be an act and so he tested him by placing a bowl of food and a bowl of feces through the bars. Sun ignored the delicious food and ate the contents of the other bowl instead.

Convinced Sun had truly gone insane, Pang and the prison guards soon forgot about the "mad" prisoner. When the embassy from Yue arrived,

20 Probably the most famous of the many rustic 'academies' that have existed in China since ancient times to train men in the arts of war. Typically these schools taught strategy, diplomacy, and martial arts. A tradition that *Guigu Xiansheng* (The Sage of Ghost Valley) was the teacher of renowned Warring States generals Sun Bin and Pang Juan is also considered to be a late confabulation.

they received a secret message detailing Sun's plight. Determined to rescue their fellow countryman they sought permission to visit with the famous but now insane strategist.

The king gave his consent and, since the guards paid little attention, they were able to switch Sun for a double who volunteered to take his place. Sun was secretly spirited back to Yue where he went on to conquer Wei and kill Pang Juan using another famous tactic. (see Chapter 28)

Sui Dynasty China

During the final years of Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty, there appeared a ballad that foretold the fall of the house of Sui and the ascent of a man named Li as emperor. The ballad became immensely popular among the disaffected subjects of Emperor Yang's infamous rule.

The emperor, being superstitious and believing in the prophesy himself, began a campaign to search out and execute anyone of importance with the surname Li. He had numerous ministers and officials along with their entire families put to the sword.

A minor official by the name of Li Yuan was serving as superintendent in the provinces when he was summoned to the court. Li Yuan delayed appearing in court by claiming poor health.

Li Yuan had a niece who was a palace maid. One day the emperor asked her where her uncle Li had been. The lady replied that her uncle was ill. The emperor said, *"I wonder if he is courting death?"*

When Li Yuan got word of this, he was certain that if he obeyed the summons to court he would never return. Thereupon he feigned madness and pretended to become an incorrigible drunk. When the imperial spies reported Li's behavior the emperor thought that a madmen could never fulfill the prophesy and was no longer suspicious of Li.

Surprisingly, two years later the Sui emperor placed Li in charge of a field army to defend the empire against barbarian incursions. Li fought

bravely, won the respect of his troops, marched on the capital, and went on to found the illustrious Tang dynasty, thus fulfilling the prophecy.

Ming Dynasty China

Just before his death in 1398, the founder of the Ming dynasty, *Hongwu*, bequeathed that the throne be passed over his sons to his grandson *Huidi*. Only sixteen when he was appointed emperor, Huidi was counseled by treacherous advisors to eliminate the other branches of the family. One by one, the young emperor's uncles were summoned to court to answer to charges of corruption. Always found guilty, they were stripped of their rank, reduced to the status of commoner, and exiled to a remote district.

One of the uncles, the prince of Shang, refused the summons and, in protest, set fire to his palace, burning his family to death. Then, mounting his terrified horse, he charged into the fire to his meet his own death.

A year later, five of the princes had been eliminated, leaving only one uncle that still retained position in the government: the prince of Yan.

The prince was alone and isolated, waiting for the inevitable summons to court which he could not refuse since, in keeping with tradition, his own sons were held as hostages in the capital. To give himself time to plan a way of saving himself, he feigned madness.

He ran through the streets of Beijing screaming and yelling, stealing food and wine, and sleeping in gutters. For days he sank into deep depressions and would see no one. In warm weather he sat by the stove, shivering and complaining of the cold.

But it was all a smoke screen meant to deceive the emperor. When the emperor heard these reports he said, *"Alas, my poor uncle has gone truly insane. Let us release his sons to him in the hope that they may bring him back to reason."*

This was the young emperor's fatal mistake. With his sons' safe, the prince of Yan was free to openly challenge the emperor's authority.

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He raised an army and by 1402 the young emperor was dead and the prince of Yan assumed the throne as Emperor Yongle, one of the Ming dynasty's greatest rulers.

Summary

It is well known that the strongest contender in any sphere of activity automatically fears, and therefore becomes an enemy to the second strongest. To hide your strength, feign madness since without the power of rational thought, all other powers are useless. When you cease being a threat, hostile attentions will be focused on the next most powerful. This buys you time to scheme for victory.

