



趁火打劫

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Strategy 5 Loot a Burning House

Now, when your army is exhausted and your resources are spent, this is the time that new opponents enter the field to take advantage of your weakness. No matter how clever the leader is, once this situation has come about, the end is inevitable.

Sun Zi, *The Art of War*

When a country is beset by internal conflicts, when disease and famine ravage the population, when corruption and crime are rampant, then it will be unable to deal with an outside threat. This is the time to attack.

Spring and Autumn Period China

In the year 499 B.C. the king of Wu, *Fu Chai*, conquered the state of Yue and captured its king, *Gou Jian*. Rather than have him executed, the king of Wu made the deposed king of Yue work as a stable boy cleaning the imperial stables.

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After three years, the king of Wu was feeling quite invincible and released Gou Jian to return to his country to serve as a vassal to the state of Wu.

Once back in his home country, Gou Jian set about rebuilding his economy and reputation. Through his benevolent rule, the people prospered and upstanding counselors and commanders were drawn to his court to offer their services. After seven years of enlightened rule, Gou Jian knew that his citizens and his commanders would be willing to suffer even the hardships of war for his cause.

To prepare for the impending attack on Wu, Gou Jian began with The Strategy of Sowing Discord (see Chapter 33). First, he bribed Wu's chief minister with eight beautiful women and a thousand pieces of gold. Next, he had false evidence planted against Wu's chief councilor who was thereby forced to commit suicide.

Then fate provided Gou Jian with another strategy. That year Wu was experiencing a severe drought and the people were hungry. The king of Wu had spent copiously from his treasury in order to build a new palace and was reluctant to provide relief.

Seizing the opportunity, Gou Jian sent a tribute consisting of a huge shipment of building materials with full honor guard in parade dress. This ostentatious display of wealth slowly wound its way through the hardest hit areas of the drought. The impoverished peasantry, seeing that the king was spending the treasury on lumber for his palace instead of rice for his starving subjects, began a revolt.

The fatally arrogant king of Wu still balked at the earnest advice to send provisions to the drought ridden provinces, and sent out the army instead. This left the Wu capital poorly defended. As soon as his spies had reported on this, Gou Jian launched an attack on the capital of Wu.

The king of Wu woke the next day to find his city surrounded and his army far away on campaign. Left with no able commanders and only the advice of the few ineffectual courtiers that survived his purges, the king fled into the countryside where he was dealt with later (see

Chapter 22). Thus, the king of Yue looted the burning house of Wu by setting the spark.

Warring States Period China

Qi and Han were allies when *Zhang Yi* attacked Han with the combined forces of Qin and Wei. Han asked Qi for assistance.

The king of Qi said, "*Han is our ally and since Qin has attacked her we must go to her rescue.*"

But his minister *Su Tianchen* disagreed saying, "*Your majesty's planning is faulty. You should merely agree to assist Han but take no action there.*"

However, in the kingdom of Yan, their king has recently resigned the throne to his despised prime minister. This has enraged both the noble houses and the common people causing turmoil at court.

Now, if Qin attacks Han, Chu and Zhao will surely come to her aid, and this will be as good as heaven bestowing Yan upon us."

The king approved and promised the Han envoy assistance before sending him back to Han believing he had Qi's backing.

When Qin attacked Han, Chu and Zhao intervened as expected. While all the major kingdoms were thus engaged in the battle for Han, Qi stealthily attacked Yan. Within thirty days, Yan was captured.

Six Dynasties Period China

It is written that King *Hou Zhuwei* of Northern Qi employed perverse sycophants to govern the realm and exercise control over planning. Each of these men in turn maintained their own personal factions, promoting their own cronies outside the normal order.

The laws were relaxed, official matters advanced by wealth, lawsuits were concluded through bribes, and chaotic government harmed the people. Subsequently these actions brought about the specter of drought and flooding rains, while raiders and thieves both increased. Moreover,

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the ruler was suspicious and jealous of other kings so that they suffered harm even though they were innocent. Several high officials fell under suspicion and were executed even though they had not committed any crime.

Gradually the signs of corruption and decay were being manifest so that the end was in sight. Shortly thereafter, the emperor Wu of Northern Zhou took advantage of the situation to attack and exterminate the kingdom of Northern Qi. 5

Summary

The death of every civilization is brought on by three events: starvation, disease, and war. A culture suffering from any two becomes the target for the third. An ancient proverb states that when a tiger is sick or wounded, jackals gather nearby.



5 “Drought and Rain” is a reference to Chinas’ dike and canal system that was the expensive and ongoing responsibility of the central governments. If the government was lax in its maintenance, and allowed the system to fall into disrepair, then irrigated areas would suffer drought while silt on the river beds would build up until the river overflowed the dikes flooding the lowlands. The degree o which this system was maintained was considered an indicator of the stability of the government.