



空城計

Kōng Chéng Jì

Strategy 32 The Strategy Of Open City Gates

One who excels as a war, does not appear formidable; One who excels in defeating the enemy does not join issue. This is known as the virtue of non-contention.

Lao Zi, *Tao Te Ching*

When the enemy is superior in numbers and your situation is such that you expect to be overrun at any moment, then drop all pretense of military preparedness and act casually.

Unless the enemy has an accurate description of your situation, this unusual behavior will arouse suspicions. With luck he will be dissuaded from attacking. 23

23 This is the strategy of reverse psychology. Since Sun Zi's axiom "Appear strong weak..." was so universally understood, most commanders will assume that by appearing weak, you are actually strong and are simply baiting a trap.

Han Dynasty China

In 166 B.C. General *Li Cuang* of the Han dynasty was out on patrol with a hundred cavalymen when they spotted three Xiongnu horsemen on a scouting patrol. The Han cavalry gave chase killing two and capturing the third. On their return to their main camp they were spotted by several thousand Xiongnu horsemen in the distance.

The troop commanders were all for making a run for it, but Li Cuang knew they could never outride thousands of horsemen over a hundred kilometers to reach their main army. Instead of running away, Li Cuang ordered his men to advance towards the enemy until they were within two kilometers. Then he ordered them to stop out in the open and dismount. He further ordered that all the horses be unsaddled and the men to relax and lie down in the grass.

The Xiongnu sent scouts to investigate but Li Cuang sent a few of his men out to chase them away. Watching from a distance, the Xiongnu commanders suspected that the Han patrol was a decoy and the rest of the army lay somewhere nearby waiting in ambush.

The Xiongnu decided to stay and watch from a distance. That night they heard the Han soldiers singing and drinking, certainly not making any effort to escape. This seemed to convince the Xiongnu that the Han were using a clever ruse in order to launch a surprise night attack.

The next morning Li Cuang and his men discovered the Xiongnu had disappeared and they were able to leisurely make their way back to the main camp.

Three Kingdoms Period China

In 149 B.C. the famous strategist *Kong Ming* of Shu, wishing to attack the state of Wei, sent an advance force to scout for the enemy. Leading the army of Wei was *Sima Yi* who also sent an advance force of fifty thousand troops. The two vanguards met and engaged in battle, but the Wei forces were superior and won the day.

The defeated Shu vanguard raced back to the main body of Kong Ming's army whose troops, seeing the look of fear in the faces of their

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comrades, thought that the enemy was upon them, and fled in panic. Kong Ming and a few bodyguards fled to the city of Yangping with the Wei army in hot pursuit.

Vastly outnumbered and unable to either retreat or sustain a siege, Kong Ming played a last resort strategy that made him famous throughout China. He removed all the guards and battle flags from the walls and had all four of the city gates flung open. When Sima Yi approached the city he could see only a few old men nonchalantly sweeping the grounds within the gates. Kong Ming was seen sitting in one of the towers smiling and playing his lute.

Sima Yi remarked to his advisors, *"That man seems to be too happy for my comfort. Doubtless he has some deep laid scheme in mind to bring us all to disaster."* As they stood spellbound, the strains of Kong Ming's lute reached their ears, and this only heightened their sense of foreboding.

Such peculiar behavior was too suspicious. Fearing a clever trap, Sima Yi turned his army back and retreated. After the army left, Kong Ming and his remaining troops departed in the opposite direction and made their way safely back to their capital.

Hojo Regency Japan

During the battle of Mikatagahara in 1572, the Takeda army, led by Takeda Shingen, was planning to lay siege to Hamamatsu castle belonging to Tokugawa Iyasu. To avoid being besieged and starved out by the vastly superior Takeda army, Iyasu prepared defensive positions three kilometers away in order to engage the Takeda before they could reach the castle. The battle was fiercely fought throughout the day, but by nightfall, the Tokugawa forces were exhausted and were retreating for the castle with the Takeda giving chase.

The commander of the castle wanted to close and bolt the city gates, but Iyasu interrupted him saying, *"Closing the gates is exactly what Shingen is expecting. Then our remaining troops would be left out in the open where they would be hunted down one by one."*

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

Tokugawa ordered that the gates be left open and a huge brazier lit in front of the gates to guide the fleeing soldiers through the dark countryside. In addition, he ordered a large war drum to be beaten so that his troops could follow the sound until they saw the beacon.

When the Takeda forces arrived at the castle to see the gates open and a brazier burning in front, Shingen immediately suspected a trap and ordered his troops to pull back.

In this way Ieyasu was able to prevent the Takeda from attacking while allowing his remaining forces to find their way back to the safety of the castle.

Summary

In a desperate situation, often the only recourse is to do something completely unexpected. Unusual behavior in a time of crises arouses suspicions and doubts. Placing doubt in your enemy's mind means he is already half defeated. However, this strategy requires supreme self-control. Those nervous about the chances for failure will, by their actions, give away the bluff.

