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Wú Zhōng Shēng Yǒu

Strategy 7 Create Something from Nothing

Turning back is how the Way moves; weakness is the means the Way employs. The myriad things in the world are born from Something, and Something from Nothing.

Lao Zi, *Tao Te Ching*

Use the same feint twice. Having reacted to the first and often the second feint as well, the enemy will be hesitant to react to a third feint. Therefore, the third feint is the actual attack catching your enemy with his guard down.

Six Dynasties Period China

General *He Ruodun* of the Northern Zhou led his troops across the Yangtze to attack the state of Chen. General *Hou Qi* of Chen was sent forth to stop the Zhou invasion. Both armies set up fortified camps along opposite sides of the river.

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

Shortly after arriving on the scene, heavy rains caused flooding which cut off the supply lines of the invading Zhou army. Their troops were forced to scavenge for supplies while the Chen troops had supplies ferried along the river in small river craft.

General He knew that without supplies his army would be forced to retreat, so he sought to likewise cut the Chen supply lines.

First he had several boats built to resemble the local style and late at night ferried them to the Chen encampment. Inside the boats were hidden heavily armed shock troops. When the Chen troops waded out to receive what they believed to be their supply boats, they were taken by surprise. The shock troops inflicted heavy casualties and captured several Chen soldiers to be brought back for interrogation. From these captured troops General He learned that several of his own troops had deserted by riding down river until they were picked up by the Chen patrol boats.

To prevent further desertions, General He had some horses brought onto his boats and then whipped. After this was repeated several times the horses became deathly afraid of boats and would rear and kick whenever one came close.

He then sent a light division down river to set up an ambush. Several soldiers were given the boat-shy horses and told to ride along the river and pretend to defect to the Chen side. When the Chen river patrol saw the potential deserters, they brought the boats to the shore to pick up the new recruits. But when the horses were being loaded on board, they reared and kicked. Distracted by the commotion, the Chen troops were surprised and killed by the Zhou troops waiting in ambush.

Thereafter, anytime a boat came down river, the Chen forces would chase it away, fearing another ambush. And anytime they saw troops willing to desert, they would refuse, fearing another trap.

Sui Dynasty China

In 587 the first Sui emperor, *Wendi*, launched an attack on the state of Chen. He sent one of his generals, *He Nuobi*, to encamp on the north side of the Yangtze River (which marked the boundary between the two

kingdoms) opposite the enemy's capital. Now every general knows that to be attacked while crossing a river is disastrous, so both camps waited for the other to make the first move.

Each day He Nuobi ordered his troops to practice manoeuvres and create a great deal of noise as though preparing for battle, but he did not cross the river.

The first time this happened, the Chen commanders were certain that the invasion had begun and they ordered their men to form defensive positions. But by sunset still no attack had come. Day after day this continued until finally the Chen general said, *"That old fool is only playing games with us. We will pay no further attention to his antics."*

Meanwhile, General He Nuobi secretly bought or confiscated as many river boats as he could get hold of and had them hidden. Then he found a few dozen old hulks and used them to patrol the river. When the Chen patrols saw these wrecks they believed that the Sui army had, in any event, no usable boats with which to cross. By this time the Chen patrols ceased being on the alert.

Having lowered the enemy's guard, General He Nuobi readied his hidden armada and prepared his men for battle.

As a final precaution just before he launched his attack, he sent a group of soldiers disguised as hunters across the river to create a commotion by riding through the underbrush. The Chen troops were distracted by the sounds of the hunting party and failed to notice the Sui army crossing the river.

The Chen forces were taken by surprise and all were put to the sword but one, who was allowed to escape to bring the news back to the capital. When the lone survivor gave his report, the king of Chen ordered his remaining troops to immediately set out for the border.

He Nuobi had anticipated this move and had prepared an ambush that succeeded in wiping out the remaining Chen forces. When the Sui army arrived at the Chen capital, the king had no troops left with which to defend the city. The king was taken prisoner, and the state of Chen became a province of the Sui Empire.

Tang Dynasty China

During the An Lushan rebellion in A.D. 756 the Tang general *Zhang Xun* was under siege by the forces of General *Linghu Chao*.

Outnumbered twenty to one, the defending Tang forces soon ran out of arrows. To remedy this General Zhang ordered his men to make straw dummies and dress them in black uniforms.

That night the dummies were lowered over the city walls by ropes, accompanied by the beat of war drums and gongs. General Linghu thought the enemy was launching a surprise night offensive and ordered his archers to shower the figures descending the walls with arrows. Once the dummies were riddled with arrows the Tang soldiers pulled them back up over the walls, thus restoring their supply of arrows.

The next day General Linghu, feeling humiliated, attacked the walls in revenge. That night the Tang again lowered the dummies but General Linghu ordered his men to ignore them believing it was the same trick to get more arrows.

When General Zhang saw that no one was firing at the straw dummies, he ordered five hundred of his best troops to be lowered instead. They made a lightning raid on the encamped soldiers, catching them completely by surprise. The siege was lifted and General Linghu's army fled the field.

Summary

Sun Zi wrote that the direct attack and the indirect attack are interchangeable depending on the enemy's expectation. Here a feint (Nothing) becomes the direct attack (Something) which, due to the enemy's assumptions, is in fact an indirect attack. This is what is meant by being interchangeable.

