

The Thirty Six Strategies

Category: [East Asia: China](#)

It is unclear who the author of the Thirty Six Strategies is. The two people thought to have written these up are Sun Tzu or Zhuge Liang. However, it is very likely that many generals and philosophers edited these to their own liking.

All of these are reasonable ideas, and, yet, the last is often considered the best of all of the thirty six.

The Thirty Six Strategies

I. Stratagems when in a superior position

1. Fool the Emperor to Cross the Sea

Moving about in the darkness and shadows, occupying isolated places, or hiding behind screens will only attract suspicious attention. To lower an enemy's guard you must act in the open, hiding your true intentions under the guise of common every day activities.

2. Besiege Wei to Rescue Zhao

When the enemy is too strong to attack directly, then attack something he holds dear. Know that in all things, he cannot be superior. Somewhere there is a gap in the armour, a weakness that can be attacked instead.

3. Kill with a Borrowed Sword

When you do not have the means to attack your enemy directly, then attack using the strength of another. Trick an ally into attacking him, bribe an official to turn traitor, or use the enemy's own strength against him.

4. Await the Exhausted Enemy at Your Ease

It is an advantage to choose the time and place for battle. In this way you know when and where the battle will take place, while your enemy does not. Encourage your enemy to expend his energy in futile quests, while you conserve your strength. When he is exhausted and confused, you attack with energy and purpose.

5. Loot a House On Fire

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.

6. Clamor in the East, Attack in the West

In any battle the element of surprise can provide an overwhelming advantage. Even when face to face with an enemy, surprise can still be employed by attacking where he least expects it. To do this, you must create an expectation in the enemy's mind through the use of a feint.

Contents »

[The Thirty Six Strategies](#)

[I. Stratagems when in a superior position](#)

[II. Stratagems for confrontation](#)

[III. Stratagems for attack](#)

[IV. Stratagems for confused situations](#)

[V. Stratagems for gaining ground](#)

[VI. Stratagems for desperate situations](#)

[Sources](#)

II. Stratagems for confrontation

7. Create Something From Nothing

You 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.

8. Openly Repair The Walkway, Secretly March to Chencang

Attack the enemy with two convergent forces. The first is the direct attack, one that is obvious and for which the enemy prepares his defense. The second is the indirect, the attack sinister, that the enemy does not expect and which causes him to divide his forces at the last minute, leading to confusion and disaster.

9. Observe the Fire on the Opposite Shore

Delay entering the field of battle until all the other players have become exhausted fighting amongst themselves. Then go in full strength and pick up the pieces.

10. Hide Your Dagger Behind a Smile

Charm and ingratiate yourself to your enemy. When you have gained his trust, you move against him in secret.

11. Sacrifice the Plum Tree In Place of the Peach

There are circumstances in which you must sacrifice short-term objectives in order to gain the long-term goal. This is the scapegoat strategy, whereby someone else suffers the consequences so that the rest do not.

12. Seize the Opportunity To Lead a Sheep Away

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.

III. Stratagems for attack

13. Beat The Grass To Startle The Snake

When you cannot detect the opponent's plans launch a direct, but brief, attack and observe your opponent's reactions. His behavior will reveal his strategy.

14. Borrow a Corpse to Raise the Spirit

Take an institution, a technology, or a method that has been forgotten or discarded and appropriate it for your own purpose. Revive something from the past by giving it a new purpose or to reinterpret and bring to life old ideas, customs, and traditions.

15. Lure the Tiger Down the Mountain

Never directly attack a well-entrenched opponent. Instead, lure him away from his stronghold and separate him from his source of strength.

16. To Catch Something, First Let It Go

Cornered prey will often mount a final desperate attack. To prevent this you let the enemy believe he still has a chance for freedom. His will to fight is, thus, dampened by his desire to escape. When, in the end, the freedom is proven a falsehood, the enemy's morale will be defeated and he will surrender without a fight.

17. Toss Out A Brick To Attract Jade

Prepare a trap then lure your enemy into the trap by using bait. In war the bait is the illusion of an opportunity for gain. In life the bait is the illusion of wealth, power, and sex.

18. To Catch the Bandits First Capture Their Leader

If the enemy's army is strong, but is allied to the commander only by money or threats, then take aim at the leader. If the commander falls the rest of the army will disperse or come over to your side. If, however, they are allied to the leader through loyalty, then beware, the army can continue to fight on after his death out of vengeance.

IV. Stratagems for confused situations

19. Steal The Firewood From Under the Pot

When faced with an enemy too powerful to engage directly you must first weaken him by undermining his foundation and attacking his source of power.

20. Trouble The Water To Catch The Fish

Before engaging your enemy's forces, create confusion to weaken his perception and judgment. Do something unusual, strange, and unexpected as this will arouse the enemy's suspicion and disrupt his thinking. A distracted enemy is, thus, more vulnerable.

21. Shed Your Skin Like the Golden Cicada

When you are in danger of being defeated and your only chance is to escape and regroup, then create an illusion. While the enemy's attention is focused on this artifice, secretly remove your men, leaving behind only the facade of your presence.

22. Shut the Door to Catch the Thief

If you have the chance to completely capture the enemy then you should do so, thereby bringing the battle or war to a quick and lasting conclusion. To allow your enemy to escape plants the seeds for future conflict. But, if they succeed in escaping, be wary of giving chase.

23. Befriend a Distant Enemy to Attack One Nearby

It is known that nations that border each other become enemies, while nations separated by distance and obstacles make better allies. When you are the strongest in one field, your greatest threat is from the second strongest in your field, not the strongest from another field.

24. Borrow the Road to Conquer Guo

Borrow the resources of an ally to attack a common enemy. Once the enemy is defeated, use those resources to turn on the ally that lent them in the first place.

V. Stratagems for gaining ground

25. Replace The Beams With Rotten Timbers

Disrupt the enemy's formations, interfere with their methods of operations, change the rules in which they are used to following, go contrary to their standard training. In this way, you remove the supporting pillar, the common link that makes a group of men an effective fighting force.

26. Point At The Mulberry But Curse The Locust Tree

To discipline, control, or warn others whose status or position excludes them from direct confrontation, use analogy and innuendo. Without directly naming names, those accused cannot retaliate without revealing their complicity.

27. Feign Madness But Keep Your Balance

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.

28. Lure Your Enemy Onto the Roof, Then Take Away the Ladder

With baits and deceptions lure your enemy into treacherous terrain. Then, cut off his lines of communication and avenue of escape. To save himself he must fight both your own forces and the elements of nature.

29. Tie Silk Blossoms to the Dead Tree

Tying silk blossoms on a dead tree gives the illusion that the tree is healthy. Through the use of artifice and disguise, make something of no value appear valuable; of no threat appear dangerous; of no use, useful.

30. Exchange the Role of Guest for that of Host

Defeat the enemy from within by infiltrating the enemy's camp under the guise of cooperation, surrender, or peace treaties. In this way you can discover his weakness, and, then, when the enemy's guard is relaxed, strike directly at the source of his strength.

VI. Stratagems for desperate situations

31. The Strategy of Beautiful Women

Send your enemy beautiful women to cause discord within his camp. This strategy can work on three levels. First, the ruler becomes so enamored with the beauty that he neglects his duties and allows his vigilance to wane. Second, other males at court will begin to display aggressive behavior that inflames minor differences, hindering cooperation and destroying morale. Third, other females at court, motivated by jealousy and envy, begin to plot intrigues, further exasperating the situation.

32. The Strategy of Open City Gates

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.

33. The Strategy of Sowing Discord

Undermine your enemy's ability to fight by secretly causing discord between him and his friends, allies, advisors, family, commanders, soldiers, and population. While he is preoccupied settling internal disputes, his ability to attack or defend is compromised.

34. The Strategy of Injuring Yourself

Pretending to be injured has two possible applications. In the first, the enemy is lulled into relaxing his guard, since he no longer considers you to be an immediate threat. The second is a way of ingratiating yourself to your enemy by pretending the injury was caused by a mutual enemy.

35. The Tactic of Combining Tactics

In important matters, one should use several strategies applied simultaneously. Keep different plans operating in an overall scheme; in this manner, if any one strategy fails, you would still have several others to fall back on.

36. If All Else Fails Retreat

If it becomes obvious that your current course of action will lead to defeat, then retreat and regroup. When your side is losing there are only three choices remaining: surrender, compromise, or escape. Surrender is complete defeat, compromise is half defeat, but escape is not defeat. As long as you are not defeated, you still have a chance.