

## **Never Obsolescent - A Modern View of the Thirty-Six Strategies -**

Human behavior is quite interesting. Modern theories of human behaviors can be always found in ancient records. Machiavelli of Roman Empire and Sun-Zi of China, for instance, are two most famous strategists in history. We can always find their wisdom applicable to the modern world. Believing that ancient wisdom is still invaluable nowadays, I choose to review ancient philosophy with a modern view, to summarize what I've learned this semester. Instead of reviewing Machiavelli or Sun-Zi, which focus on military and reigning practice, I choose to review one of the wittiest folk principles, the Thirty-Six Strategies.

The Thirty-Six Strategies is a unique collection of ancient Chinese proverbs that describe some of the most cunning and subtle strategies ever devised. Whereas other Chinese military texts such as Sun Zi's The Art of War focus on military organization, leadership, and battlefield tactics, the Thirty-Six Strategies are more suitably applied in the fields of politics, diplomacy, and espionage. These proverbs describe tactics used in psychological warfare to undermine both the enemy's will to fight - and his sanity. Though other Chinese military works of strategy have at least paid lip service to the Confucian notion of honor, the Thirty-Six Strategies make no pretence of being anything but ruthless.

Following are the Chinese Thirty-Six strategies with my contemporary explanations and suggested applications.

### **Strategy 1 - Deceive the Sky (Emperor) to cross the ocean. (Man Tian Kuo Hai)**

Hide a secret scheme behind an open act. From a modern view, this can apply to the use of the press. Firms oftentimes announce in public plan A, to mislead competitor's attention, yet they are actually doing plan B. (The "sky" actually refers to the emperor in ancient China.)

### **Strategy 2 - Surround Wei to rescue Zhao. (Wei Wei jiu Zhao)**

It is not always necessary to encounter your enemy directly. One should do research to know where the OP's weaknesses are. You can constrain the OP's leeway by "threatening" on their weakness. Use the least physical/material resource to achieve your goal.

### **Strategy 3 - Kill with a borrowed knife. (Jien Dao Sha Ren)**

Using a third party's power to weaken your enemy. This is observed in the Tower Market simulation. Some different parties actually have same enemy. Once a party finds that it can be benefit by letting another party to do the negotiating job. You can sometimes do no work but still taste the success.

**Strategy 4 - Make your enemy work while you wait at leisure ( Yi Yi Dai Lao )**

Throw tough or unexpected questions to your OP. Let them busy, and attrite the energy. Always be prepared in negotiation, be poised when tough questions are thrown to you. Don't waste energy on miscellaneous issues.

**Strategy 5 - Loot a burning house. (Chen Huo Da Jie)**

Defeat your enemy while they are in plights. It is easier to win when the OP has internal organizational, financial, or managerial problems, and this is why we see more takeovers in a languid market.

**Strategy 6 - Display in the east and attack in the west. (Sheng Dong Ji Xi)**

Inducing the enemy to make wrong decision by giving them wrong information. This can be used when you have a flexible bargaining mix. One can strategically make his OP think that he cares about issue A whereas who really cares about issue B.

**Strategy 7 - Create something from nothing. (Wu Zhong Sheng Yo)**

Lie when it is strategically valuable. This might relate to ethical issues. There is a fine line between tactics and deception. We discussed that in the Bullard House simulation, and I believe everyone should have a moral ruler in mind.

**Strategy 8 - Pretend to take one path while sneaking down the other. (An Du Chen Cang)**

When your major issue is difficult to achieve, combine it with other negotiable issues, and pretend that "other" issue is important. Distract your OP's intention to block your main issue.

**Strategy 9 - Watch the fires burning across the river. (Ke An Kuan Huo)**

When noticing "internal" conflict within the OP group, be quite, and let them fight. Observe which member is closer to your stance. Disunite them, if possible.

**Strategy 10 - Knife hidden under the smiling face. (Xiao Li Cang Dao)**

Being friendly and sincere while still firm on your stance. Build relationship with OP to reduce their distrust/ animosity, and make the deal beneficial to you. However, be alert that the OP is using the same strategy to you.

**Strategy 11 - Plum tree sacrifices for the peach tree. (Li Dai Tao Jiang)**

When it is necessary, sacrifice minor benefit to secure the overall benefit. This is what we discussed in the Creative Advertising. It is sometimes better to think about the overall benefit than your own interest, if the negotiation air is right.

**Strategy 12 - Take the opportunity to pilfer a goat. (Shuen Sho Qian Yang)**

When OP concedes in one issue, take the opportunity to ask more, before they get to

think seriously. This is useful when you have multiple goals to achieve. You can package the issues or assume that the other issue simultaneously agreed (even though the OP didn't really agree).

**Strategy 13 - Disturb the snake by hitting the grass. (Da Cao Jieng She)**

Always make sure that you know as much as you can, especially in an uncertain environment. Make sure that the environment is not harmful and your OP is not malevolent.

**Strategy 14 - Raise a corpse from the dead. (Jie She Huan Huen)**

Never give up. Take every opportunity you see, even those seemingly irrelevant ones.

**Strategy 15 - Entice the tiger to leave the mountain. (Diao Hu Li Shan)**

Make the agenda advantageous to you, if possible. Plan ahead seriously. Choose timing, location wisely.

**Strategy 16 - In order to capture, one must let loose. (Yu Qien Gu Zong)**

When the OP is in a "weaker" position, show generosity to your OP. With their appreciation, you will win the issue, plus trust and respect.

**Strategy 17 - Bait a piece of jade with a brick. (Pao Zhuan Yin Yu)**

When the intention or preference of your OP is unclear, circumambulate your OP with other similar issues. If the OP still does not show strong preference, emphasize your own preference. Let the OP follow your preferred assumption.

**Strategy 18 - Defeat the enemy by capturing their chief. (Qing Ze Qing Wang)**

When negotiating with a group, know whom you are talking to. Do study on your OP group. Emphasize on the main decision-maker. Be aware that some OP are just agents without full authority.

**Strategy 19 - Remove the firewood under the cooking pot. (Fu Di Cho Xin)**

Try to change the physical environment or the negotiation vibe to affect your OP's morale. Lower the OP's expectation.

**Strategy 20 - Fish in troubled waters. (Huen Shue Mo Yu)**

When dealing with more than one OP, one can benefit from other people's competition. If you are the only "clear-headed" party in the chaos, you will be the biggest winner. Don't get involved in any escalating arguments.

**Strategy 21 - Slough off the cicada's shell. (Jin Chan Tuo Ke)**

When sense the situation is getting disadvantageous, try to find your way out. Make excuses or whatsoever. Walk out safely.

**Strategy 22 - Shut the door to catch the thief. (Kuan Men Zhuo Zei)**

If the power of OP is weaker than yours, beleaguer your OP and make their position

even precarious. Let them know, they have no way out.

**Strategy 23 - Befriend a distant state while attacking a neighbor. (Yuan Jiau Jing Kong)**

When you are either the weakest or strongest party, ally with the weaker OP to against the most powerful OP. This is observed in the Coalition simulation. Also confirms the article “Two Against One”. This is what we talk about “strategic alliance” today.

**Strategy 24 - Obtain safe passage to conquer the Kingdom of Guo. (Jia Dao Fa Guo)**

When dealing with more than one OP, and *all* of them are more powerful than you are, help whichever of them that is in a weaker position. By helping the OP, even though it is more powerful than you, the power structure alters.

**Strategy 25 - Replace the beams and pillars with rotten timber. (Tou Liang Huan Zhu)**

Replace the OP’s anchorman by a weaker one. Today, we see the tactic when lawyers choose a “favorable” jurymen. In a business negotiation, if possible, always choose the representative (of the other side) who has good will to you. The tactic is even important in a cross-culture negotiation, where the more the OP negotiator understand about your culture/norm, the smoother the negotiation is.

**Strategy 26 - Point at the mulberry and curse the locust. (Zhe Sang Ma Huai)**

Give your OP implications about how your reaction responding to certain situation may be. One can explicitly or implicitly let the OP knows he like/dislike certain choices, to prevent any irreversible consequence.

**Strategy 27 - Pretend to be a pig in order to eat the tiger. (Jia Dian Bu Che)**

Play dumb. Don’t be too clever. People unconsciously give more information than you expect, when they are not alert to you.

**Strategy 28 - Cross the river and destroy the bridge. (Shang Wu Cho Ti)**

Give your OP some small favors in exchange of other issues. In an integrative bargaining, it can create mutual benefit to all parties, if preferences differ.

**Strategy 29 - Deck the tree with bogus blossoms. (Shu Shang Kai Hua)**

Do not let your OP know whatever you do not want them to know. Hide your resistant point. If you do not have a good BATNA, bluff works sometimes.

**Strategy 30 - Make the host and the guest exchange places. (Fan Ke Wei Zhu)**

Even though you are not the main player in a negotiation, you can change that. By aggressively getting involved in the discussion, you can gradually gain a better bargaining position. Be constructive, and then you will be respected.

**Strategy 31 - Beauty trap. (Mei Ren Ji)**

Distract your OP. Arrange possible environmental influences to affect your OP's decision. In Asia, businessmen like to "hang out" after work. By building such personal relationship, one might get business done on a dining table but not a negotiating table.

**Strategy 32 - Empty city (Kong Cheng Ji)**

Acting inactive to your OP's threat: people are suspicious. They do not go further because they might think it is your trick. The tactic is similar to the "bogus tactic", which is to pretend you are not interested.

**Strategy 33 - Let the enemy's own spy sow discord in the enemy camp. (Fan Jian Ji)**

Use double agents. Your OP's agent can become your agent. You can try to let the OP's agent believes it is better to work for you but not for the OP, if you see the agent is not loyal.

**Strategy 34 - Inflict injury on one's self to win the enemy's trust. (Ku Rou Ji)**

Make the OP believe you are poorly in a weak position. Use your OP's sympathy to get your own better deal.

**Strategy 35 - Chain together the enemy's ships. (Lian Huan Ji)**

Be prepared. Make a good bargaining mix for yourself and anticipate your OP's reaction. Always have a prepared response to your OP's move.

**Strategy 36 - Escape is the best policy. (Zou Wei Shang Ce)**

Walk away and come back another day. If the situation is disadvantageous to you, don't feel shame to walk away. Don't submit to time pressure or ego. You can always have time to think again, and avoid making irrational decision under pressure.

The Thirty-Six Strategies is really valuable and wise. Even though I am a Chinese and hear about all the strategies all the time, I still have to think seriously about the real meanings behind the words and their contemporary applications. I am glad I did this rethinking job, which makes me not only review the essence of this class but also know my ancient's wisdom better.

Ancient wisdom is not obsolescent. Just keep installing modern meanings to the ancient value, old stuff is always noteworthy.