

***Project Business Management*^{1,2}**

Project Business and Chinese Stratagems, Pt. 3: Stratagems for Attacks

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“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

Sun Tzu, The Art of War



Summary

This article describes stratagems No 13 to 18 of the ancient 36 Chinese Stratagems (sānshíliù jì, 三十六計). They focus on offensive approaches to win a battle. They can also help improve Project Business. And often, they serve as warnings.

More stratagems will be discussed in the coming articles.

¹This is the 49th in a series of articles by Oliver Lehmann, author of the book *“Project Business Management”* (ISBN 9781138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis. See full author profile at the end of this article. A list of the other articles in PM World Journal can be found at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann>.

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The Third Set of Stratagems

In the first set of six stratagems collected in ancient China, the application was for a situation of strength. In this second article of the series, written for professionals in Project Management and even more in Project Business Management³, the focus of the next six stratagems was on deception.

The third set of stratagems is offensive, these are stratagems that make attacks more likely to succeed.

And for the following explanations, it is again true that they are also warnings: Do not get deceived by others applying them.

The Series of Articles

The stratagems are ordered into six groups, which are each discussed in dedicated article:

1. Introduction, Stratagems for a position of strength⁴ (previous article)
2. Deceptive stratagems⁵ (second article)
3. Stratagems for attacks (this article)
4. Stratagems for confusion
5. Stratagems to win ground
6. Stratagems in the moment of defeat

The Stratagems for Attacks

In a position of obvious strength, one may want to avoid exhausting resources unnecessarily and taking avoidable risks. The following six stratagems can help win in such situations:

³ (Lehmann, 2018)

⁴ (Lehmann, 2023a)

⁵ (Lehmann, 2023b)

13. Hit the grass to disturb the snake

(打草驚蛇)

In order to gain an upper hand over your adversary or another party in a project, it's wise to think outside the box and do something that catches their attention.

This unexpected move can prompt them to inadvertently disclose their strategies or location, divert their attention to a specific issue, or spur them into taking action they wouldn't normally take. Creativity and unpredictability are key to throwing them off their game and piquing their curiosity or making them feel alarmingly uncomfortable.

Furthermore, this stratagem may also serve as a precautionary measure to steer clear of potential hazards: "Don't hit on the grass, you could disturb the hidden snake", comparable to "not waking sleeping dogs" in the West.

An example of the application of the stratagem is Benefit Engineering⁶. It is a highly effective technique utilized within the realm of Project Business to resolve problems, even crises, and steer a project toward success. Essentially, contractors apply this technique by thoroughly examining and comprehending the customer's problems, risks, and unmet business goals, in order to offer a solution that the customer would not be able to achieve on their own.

The contractor expects to receive certain benefits in exchange for their services, such as additional monetary compensation or deadline extensions. However, even if the customer decides not to accept the offered solution, the technique can still be incredibly helpful in directing their focus toward the project and building trust by demonstrating the contractor's genuine care for the customer's needs and goals.

14. Borrow a dead body to let the soul come back

(借屍還魂)

The power that comes from of repurposing things or people from the past is remarkable.



Figure 1: Chinese Yuan note portraying Mao Zedong

Through creative thinking, one can transform an old and long-abandoned institution, technology, method, personality, or ideology into a tool that serves today's goals. The old times linked with the item or person are often glorified and glossed over – weren't they so much better and greater than what we have today?

An example: All around China, "Chairman" Mao Zedong is visible and celebrated. Dead since 1976, he

⁶ (Lehmann, 2017)

is still omnipresent in images, statues, on money, and his words, collected in books, are still read by the people.

Indeed, he was responsible for major famines and environmental destruction. He was responsible for the “War against the sparrows”, in 1960 during the “Great famine”, a campaign to eradicate small birds that competed with people for grain⁷. This campaign led to one of the worst environmental disasters ever, damaging the strained ecosystem even further and increasing the famine of these days even more⁸. Estimates of victims of the famine range between 15 and 55 million people.

Mao turned China from a totalitarian regime under the Kuomintang regime into one under the Communist Party that he controlled. In the year 1966, he launched the “Cultural Revolution”, eradicating the intellectual life in China, which brought chaos and violent disorder to China until its end in 1976. Bands of so-called Red Guards ransacked historical and religious sites and terrorized the population if there were not fighting other Red Guard bands or committed cannibalism in order to “celebrate their triumph over counterrevolutionaries.”⁹

Given a normal yardstick, Mao Zedong would at least be considered one of the most incompetent politicians of the 20th Century. In the words of historian Frank Dikötter, “between 1958 and 1962, China descended into hell.”¹⁰

Other tyrants with a similar record of incompetence and violence, such as Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin, have been condemned by history in their own countries and globally. Not so Mao Zedong. He is still a useful vehicle to pacify the Chinese people. For the younger ones, he is a center of identification. For the older people a reminder of what the Communist Party of China is able and prepared to do if they do not fully submit to it.

Some companies celebrate their history. It may center around iconic people, such as the fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, which even has the portrait of its founder Harland Sanders in its logo.

Other organizations cultivate corporate museums, such as the Mercedes-Benz Museum and the Porsche Museum, both in Stuttgart and both celebrating their most epochal historic cars in presentations that communicate background knowledge and emphasize their significance for the history of the automobile.

⁷ (Dvorky, 2012)

⁸ (Houser, Sands & Xiao, 2009)

⁹ (Kristof, 1993)

¹⁰ (Dikötter, 2011, p. xi)



Figure 2: One of the most iconic cars in the Porsche Museum in Stuttgart, the Model 356 (No 1 series with split windscreen) from 1948, the first sports car developed, produced, and distributed by the company.

Product vendors and service providers in Project Business often use similar approaches. They begin their bids and proposals with a quote from their founder or another formerly important person from the firm's history to give the offer depth and value. It also communicates the long history of the organization to build trust and the perception of proficiency.

Even more persuasive can be an approach to research the history of the prospective customer and find quotes of its formerly important people such as CEOs or Presidents that can be used to open the offer. Here the quote signals deep respect for the prospect and its history, but also that the offeror has taken the time to learn more about the potential customer and what it takes to make it and its people happy.

15. Lure the tiger from the mountain

(調虎離山)

Tigers live anywhere from low-lying rain forests to mountainous levels up to over 4,000m elevation.¹¹ This stratagem obviously relates to the mountain tigers.

In hilly terrain, these tigers are a true force to be reckoned with. Their strength and agility are unmatched, allowing them to hide behind rocks and launch surprising attacks on unsuspecting prey. They maneuver through steep slopes and rocky terrain with ease and can attack humans when they expect it the least.

However, when taken out of their element and placed in the open lowlands, the tigers become vulnerable and can be easily overpowered by a few well-armed people.¹²

The stratagem serves as a reminder that we should always strive to act in our element and play to our strengths in order to emerge victorious. In dealing with stakeholders - especially those who are hostile - it can be helpful to be on familiar terrain, for example, in a well-known meeting room or by being an insider in the matter discussed, ideally in an area that is much less familiar to the other party.

In times of conflict, for example on contractual matters, it may be helpful to carefully shift the topic of discussions to areas to which one is more accustomed and where one may even be able to help the other party.

16. To capture something, one must first let it go

(欲擒故縱)

Chinese communism is built based on the work of Karl Marx. Marx postulated that the development toward the – in his understanding – desirable but also inevitable final communist society goes along a number of stages from tribal origins:

1. Urkommunismus (primitive communism)
2. Feudal society
3. Capitalism
4. Socialism
5. Communism

¹¹ (Dhendup, 2017)

¹² Indeed, poaching by humans has brought tigers to the brink of extinction. However, for the authors of the stratagems, this was not foreseeable.

In this understanding, history was not driven by powerful people as historians commonly see it, but by the distribution of the means of production and by emerging “contradictions”, inefficiencies that develop in each of these social and economic systems that lead the society into the next stage.

Probably starting in the year 1976, after the end of the cultural revolution, the Chinese Communist Party obviously analyzed the failures in its own history and that of other socialist countries. They identified a problem in the attempt to skip the capitalist phase and move from a feudal society directly to socialism. In this analysis, the contradictions of the feudal system do not lead to socialism, but those of the capitalistic systems do.

As a solution, they soon opened the country to a phase of extreme private enterprise, inviting foreign capital and know-how against the promise of high profitability. This change did not include a political change; the Communist Party of China stayed in unlimited power and could end the Capitalist phase whenever it seemed appropriate, taking away the limited freedoms it had given to its people and the profits from companies that had invested in the country.¹³

Apart from going back to the order of stages originally prescribed by Karl Marx, this step brought China a lot of money and wealth but also massive societal and environmental warps so far unseen anywhere else in the world. These distortions are – in communist understanding – not unwanted or tragic; they are the necessary “contradictions” that will end the Capitalism phase leading to socialism and, from there, to the final stage of communism.

Or, in the words of the Constitution of the Communist Party of China: “The Party’s highest ideal and ultimate goal is the realization of communism.”¹⁴

For a Western understanding, this approach seems unfamiliar and hard to understand. If we want to bring something from A to B, we carry it towards B. The ancient Chinese stratagem, however, instead assumes a pendulum that is hauled away from B in the opposite direction of where it ought to be and then let loose to swing back in the desired direction towards B.

In Project Business, trying to keep everything under control and micromanaging a network of contractors, subcontractors, etc. can be quite taxing and even bruising. If the partners in the project are trustworthy, it may be a much better approach to allow them the freedom to do a convincing job. So, the art is not to keep everything under control but to select trustworthy partners where this is unnecessary.

¹³ While I am writing these lines, this is a process that seems to be happening in China.

¹⁴ (Communist Party of China, 2022)

17. Throwing a brick away to win a jade stone

(拋磚引玉)

This stratagem resembles stratagem 11, where one lets a plum tree die to salvage a peach tree. The difference: Here, the party using the stratagem is active.

Following the stratagem, the player gives away the easily replaceable brick, in ancient China made from dried mud or fired clay, and takes in return jade, a far more valuable stone used for jewelry, art, and other purposes, a gemstone symbolizing purity and endurance.

Applying the stratagem, one first gives away something of low value – the brick – to receive something later with a much higher value in return. In chess, we refer to this as a pawn sacrifice. In gambling, rookies get lured to playing and losing high sums by first letting them win small sums.

Ancient Greeks sacrificed animals (and, as their myths tell us, sometimes humans) to ensure their gods' support before setting up their troops for battle. Ancient Chinese seem to have done the same; at times, human sacrifices seemed to be a regular practice¹⁵. A disposable good was given to the gods to receive a more valuable good in return from them: Victory.

Another common application in battles is the use of small bands of soldiers to lure enemies into a position that makes them easy to attack and defeat with the full army's power. For the small band, the likeliness of survival is small, they are the pawn sacrificed to help the big army win. Alternatively, small groups may block the opponent's supply lines, bringing famine and upheaval to their troops.

To do projects, organizations invest money to receive benefits later that could be strategic, monetary returns, compliance with regulations, and other forms of mandatory requirements. In its essence, any investment is "casting a brick for a Jade gem." In trading goods and services, each party gives away what it considers a brick to receive a Jade gem from the other party. Trade works when one party's brick is the other party's jade.

18. Defeat the enemy by capturing their chief

(擒賊擒王)

In situations when the enemy has a powerful and fiercely loyal military force, it is wise to focus on capturing their commander. This tactical approach can significantly increase the chances of causing the remaining troops to disperse or even switch sides thus avoiding unnecessary losses in open battle. By removing the leader of the opposition, their chain of command can be disrupted, and the loyalty of their followers can be shaken, ultimately leading to a more favorable outcome for the own forces.

¹⁵ (Yatesyates, 2013)

A strategy implemented to influence and weaken Western societies has been implemented by China (and with more success by Russia before the Ukraine war) in the form of “Elite Capturing”. Some examples:

- During the Cold War, individuals and politicians from the Warsaw Pact and China had limited job and board opportunities in the West. However, things have changed today, with abundant opportunities available. Since the year 2020 however, there was a noticeable increase in appointments of Western leaders to well-paid boards positions of organization from Russia and China.
- One interesting development was the presence of four members from the British political and business establishment serving on the UK board of Huawei, a major Chinese telecom vendor. Three of them were knighted, while one was a member of the House of Lords.¹⁶
- Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder worked for Russian gas companies Gazprom, Rosneft, and Nord Stream, companies heavily influenced by the Russian government¹⁷ and is still found celebrating memorial days inside the Russian embassy.¹⁸
- The former Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl also held a position on the board of Rosneft until May 2022.¹⁹

There is also strong evidence that Russia’s influence in the USA reached the highest ranks; even up to former President Donald Trump.

The stratagem to capture the chief was successful for Russia and China in times of peace. However, since Russia’s violent assault on Ukraine and China’s open threat to destroy the Democracy in Taiwan using military force, the stratagem backfires by destroying the reputation of these “chiefs”.

What does the stratagem mean for Project Business?

When we do business with organizations, it is rarely enough to convince staff members of our offers. We have to persuade their bosses and decision-makers.

In the next article: 4. Stratagems for confusion.

¹⁶ (Hamilton & Ohlbert, 2020)

¹⁷ (Spiegel, 2022)

¹⁸ (Spiegel, 2023)

¹⁹ (kurier.at, 2022)

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Oliver F. Lehmann, MSc, ACE, PMP, is a project management educator, author, consultant, and speaker. In addition, he is the owner of the website Project Business Foundation, a non-profit initiative for professionals and organizations involved in cross-corporate project business.



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