

## Project Business Management<sup>1,2</sup>

# Project Business and Chinese Stratagems, Pt. 4: Stratagems for Confusion

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*“Famine wreaks greater havoc in an army than the enemy and is more terrible than the sword.”*

Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, De Re Militari<sup>3</sup>



## Summary

This article discusses stratagems 19 to 24 of the ancient 36 Chinese Stratagems (also known as sānshíliù jì, 三十六計). The focus of these stratagems is on creating chaos in order to gain an advantage in a battle or war. Applied in Project Business, the advantage may be monetary or have a different nature.

However, they are also a warning: Someone may use stratagems against you to weaken your position and gain an advantage.

<sup>1</sup>This is the 50<sup>th</sup> 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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<sup>3</sup> (Vegetius, 1982)

## The Fourth Set of Stratagems

The first set of six stratagems, carried over from ancient China focussed on a situation of strength. The second article of the series, written for professionals in Project Management and even more in Project Business Management<sup>4</sup>, looked at six stratagems using deception. The third set included offensive stratagems for attacks.

In this fourth collection, the focus is on discord, chaos, and distrust

And for these as for all stratagems described in this series, the article is also a warning: Do not get deceived by others applying them.

## The Series of Articles

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

1. Introduction, Stratagems for a position of strength<sup>5</sup> (previous article)
2. Deceptive stratagems<sup>6</sup> (second article)
3. Stratagems for attacks<sup>7</sup> (third article)
4. Stratagems for confusion (this article)
5. Stratagems to win ground
6. Stratagems in the moment of defeat

## The Stratagems for Confusion

By sowing confusion in a battle or war, a party can weaken its opponents and pave the way for an easier victory. This approach allows it to conserve its resources and improve its chances of success.

In the world of Project Business, confusion on the side of another party can open up opportunities that might not be visible or viable otherwise:

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<sup>4</sup> (Lehmann, 2018)

<sup>5</sup> (Lehmann, 2023a)

<sup>6</sup> (Lehmann, 2023b)

<sup>7</sup> (Lehmann, 2023c)

## 19. Remove the firewood under the cooking pot (釜底抽薪)

Defeating a powerful enemy requires a detailed and strategic approach. Implementing the stratagem, one starts by gathering as much information as possible about the enemy, including their strengths and weaknesses. This helps identify the source of their strength to then take steps to undermine it and demoralize the opponent.

Here's a story from Chinese history that reportedly happened in 200 AD during the battle of Guandu. Warlord Cao Cao was trapped inside a fortified city by another warlord named Yuan Shao, who had an army that was ten times larger. However, Cao Cao used a group of men who pretended to be reinforcement troops of the enemy and managed to infiltrate their enemy's stronghold. They then set fire to the enemy's grain stores, causing them not only to face difficulties in feeding their soldiers but also to be afraid of this seemingly superior opponent.

Cao Cao increased this fear by sending mutilated enemy soldiers, whose noses were cut off, back to their comrades. As a result, Yuan Shao's terrified forces scattered in disarray while he himself fled with a small group of soldiers that were left to him.



*Figure 1: Cao Cao*

One effective way of removing the enemy's strength is to steal their resources. This could involve sabotaging their supply chain, stealing their weapons or equipment, or taking control of their communication systems. Another method is to destroy their resources by damaging their infrastructure and other critical installations.

Disabling the enemy's chain of command can also be effective. This could involve targeting their key personnel, such as their leaders or commanders, or using cyber attacks to disrupt their operations.

In addition to physical attacks, psychological strikes can also be effective. Attacking the enemy's morale can weaken their resolve and make them more vulnerable to defeat. This could involve spreading misleading propaganda, creating disinformation campaigns, or launching gaslighting<sup>8</sup> attacks on their psychological resources.

Implementing this stratagem involves avoiding direct confrontation with the enemy's strong points. Instead, one focuses on finding their vulnerabilities and weak spots to attack.

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<sup>8</sup> Make people distrust their own observations and ability to draw sensible conclusions

In Project Business, for example, attacking a competitor's price can be effective if the vendor's staff is highly qualified and its infrastructure is in good condition. Conversely, questioning a competitor's qualifications and infrastructure can be effective if their price is low.

In an ideal world of Project Business, customers and contractors should not be in conflict with each other. However, in reality, there often exists a constant tug-of-war between the parties regarding the contractor's performance and the payments made by the customer in return. A means to protect the own strength is diligent documentation. The ability to win disputes by being able to show records is among the strongest success criteria to avoid that conflicts end at court or, when this is no more possible, to win the lawsuit.

It is important to strike when the enemy's spirits are already weakening, by removing the source of their strength, you can further weaken them and increase your chances of success. However, as mentioned before, it is important to stay alert, as others may use this stratagem to advance their own agenda too.

## **20. Go fishing in troubled waters**

(混水摸鱼)

The stratagem uses the observation that the urgent is the most vicious enemy of the important. It is similar to the previous 19<sup>th</sup> stratagem in its use of unrest and instability, however, here the waters are not troubled by the party applying the stratagem, it's already there.

Faced with situations that require urgent response, many important things remain unresolved and the natural behavior of protecting one's own assets gets weakened.

When faced with challenging situations, it is essential to remain calm and composed. This approach involves taking a step back from the situation and assessing it objectively and from a distance. By doing so, we can develop better decisions than those who may be feeling overwhelmed or confused.

Maintaining perspective is key to this approach. Even when others lose sight of what's important, we stay focused on the bigger picture and our goals. This allows us to steer the project in a positive direction, even in the most challenging circumstances, while still achieving the benefits we're seeking.

The stratagem is also a warning that while the world becomes increasingly chaotic, it is crucial to remain alert and vigilant. It serves as a reminder that during times of commotion and upheaval, we must be extra careful. It is possible that an opportunistic individual is trying to take advantage of the situation by attempting to access our valuable assets such as money, knowledge, or other possessions, while we are distracted by pressing issues that

demand our attention and action. Therefore, it is important to stay focused and not let our guard down during such times.

It's important to remember that disruptive events can often present opportunities for growth and improvement. By remaining level-headed and providing leadership during times of turmoil, we can successfully navigate through difficult situations and help others do the same.

## **21. The golden cicada sheds its shell** (金蝉脱壳)

Cicadas live in temperate and tropical climates. As other insects, they molt several times during growth. They have a hard exoskeleton that cannot grow with them, so they have to shed it from time to time, replacing it with a larger one.

The last molting is the most spectacular one. They have spent several years underground as nymphs (larvae) feeding on liquids of plant roots. Shortly before the end of their lifecycle, they leave the ground and molt into an adult, winged insect. From this moment on, their life is very short, so males have an organ that can make noise of up to 100dB in order to quickly find a mate.<sup>9</sup>

For Chinese emperors, the cicada was a symbol of purity, but also of the long preparation and studies emperors had to go through before they could take over the office. Cicadas' empty exoskeletons after the molt have similarities with clothes left behind. The insects also symbolize rebirth with changed appearance, as in contrast to the adults, nymphs do not need camouflage while underground, are silent, and can't fly.



*Figure 2: Molting Cicada*

The stratagem involves changing one's appearance to create an illusion of doing one thing while actually doing another. It includes appearing to be doing nothing while taking serious action, or seeming busy while one is rather idle, possibly waiting. Camouflage, dummies, smokescreens, or other means can be used to capture or avoid attention and hide your true intentions. Applying the stratagem, people maintain a public and a private face. The public face shows only what the player wants others to see, while the true self remains hidden and protected.

<sup>9</sup> (TDtangents, 2021)



Contractors in Project Business often present themselves as caretaking stewards and custodians of the interests of the customer and the project, while their true interest may just be sending invoices and getting them paid. Customers in return sometimes make the impression that they mean good business for vendors and service providers, when their true interest is getting their hands on know-how to drop the contractor when they have it.

Successful Project Business builds on a “Mission Success First” culture and on behavior that puts completing over competing. However, achieving this success requires all parties involved to be prepared to support and implement these principles. Therefore, it is crucial for the contract parties/partners to be vigilant in ensuring that all other parties adhere to these principles.

## **22. Shut the door to catch the thief**

(关门捉贼)

Laying out traps to ensnare and defeat a potentially superior opponent is probably the most common form of stratagem. Such ruses bear a lot of risk, but when they are successful, military academies analyze and teach them over centuries.

In 9 AD, a Roman cavalry officer named Arminius, who was of Germanic descent, led three Roman legions into an ambush in the dense forest of the Teutoburger Wald near modern-day Osnabrück. The Romans were unable to utilize their superior discipline, weaponry, or numbers in such an environment, and as a result, the German tribes killed between 16,000 and 20,000 Roman soldiers with very few losses of their own.

In the famous battle of Azincourt<sup>10</sup>, Northern France, in 1415, the English army lured the French heavy infantry and cavalry on a freshly mown field, soaked with water from a nightly rainfall, where the French fighters were almost unable to move and became an easy target of the English longbow archers. The French outnumbered the English by a factor of two but lost the battle. The number of casualties on the French side is estimated at around 6,000, while the English lost fewer than 600 soldiers.

When it comes to Project Business, implementing this stratagem may involve legal traps. One side may try to entice the other into taking actions that can lead to lawsuits or other complications, consuming valuable time and resources. In these situations, the most effective defense is having proper documentation that can be used to support one’s position in court if necessary.

Another method that is used is to quietly gather a set of critical resources or knowledge so that one party can use blackmail to achieve its ends against the other one.

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<sup>10</sup> Named Agincourt in William Shakespeare’s drama Henry V

One should not ignore that another implementation of this stratagem may lie in corruption, the dark side of Project Business. Knowledge about misbehavior of people may be the basis of blackmail.

## **23. Befriend a distant state while attacking a neighbour**

(远交近攻)

As a stratagem of war, it is considered a better tactic to invade nearby countries rather than those that are farther away.

Not only will distant countries take longer to reach and require more resources, but the invader will also become more vulnerable to attacks from neighboring nations. Instead, the stratagem advises focusing on building relationships with countries that are distant and concentrating one's strength on invading nearby nations.

Since the end of World War II, China invaded, tried to invade, or threatened to invade<sup>11</sup>:

- The South China Sea (1947)
- Tibet (1950)
- Taiwan (repeatedly since 1954)
- India (1962, 1967)
- Soviet Union (1969)
- Vietnam (1974, 1979-1991)

Most of these attacks failed, but not all; so is Tibet today an "Autonomous Region", essentially a province of China.

It is noticeable that all these fights were along China's national borders and coasts. Countries at a distance from China were safe so far, but neighboring countries were not.

China, over this time, did not have many alliances. Apart from their neighbor North Korea, it formed alliances with Albania, the USA (temporarily), African countries through The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), and more recently through the BRICS group, made of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

BRICS is currently in discussions to accept more countries such as Saudi Arabia, Emirates, Argentina, and Iran<sup>12</sup>. Apart from India and Russia, BRICS is becoming a multilateral vehicle to connect with "distant states", while China insists on bilateralism in its direct vicinity<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> This list does not include fights in which China was a member of a larger alliance of countries, such as in Mali, since 2012.

<sup>12</sup> (Ashby et al., 2023)

In Project Business, the stratagem could be interpreted as forging alliances with companies where the overlap in skills and business interests is small while competing with companies that have a similar set-up and address similar markets.

Alliances between organizations can facilitate teaming relationships, like prime-subcontractor networks or consortia, to achieve goals that a single organization may not be able to accomplish alone. The more distance there is between these organizations, the less competition they should have and the easier it should be for them to collaborate.

## **24. Borrow a false way to conquer the Kingdom of Guo** (假道伐虢)

The stratagem refers to an event in 658 BC<sup>14</sup> at a time called the Spring and Autumn Period:

China was separated into several kingdoms and duchies. One of them, a powerful duchy named Jin ruled by Duke Xiang, planned to invade another one with the name of Guo. However, Jin's army had to pass through a duchy named Yu to get to Guo.

The Duke of Yu, convinced with a jade treasure he could not resist, considered it safest to befriend the King of Jin and form an alliance with him against the advice of his best ministers who distrusted Jin. He then allowed Jin's troops to pass through his duchy and conquer Gao. The campaign was successful, and when Jin's army returned, the Duke of Yu received even more treasures, of course, taken from Gao by Jin.

Three years later, Jin planned another campaign against Gao, this time with the objective of complete annexation. Expecting even more fortunes, the greedy Duke of Yu allowed passage again. On the way back, Jin's troops additionally conquered Yu.

Jin now encompassed Yu and Gao, who ceased to exist as independent states.

The stratagem centers around a core topic of Project Business Management: Utilizing another organization's assets and turning them temporarily into project resources. Customers use contractors' assets, such as people, know-how, equipment, licenses, and more. Contractors, in turn, tap into the monetary assets of their customers.

Yet, what we wish to avoid in our business dealings is that they lead to our downfall, as was the case with gullible Yu. Repeated mutuality and friendliness can make it seem that the people we are dealing with appear trustworthy, so that we become careless and start ignoring business risks. As with the duchy of Yu, it may well happen that someone takes advantage of our foolhardiness.

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<sup>13</sup> (Oxford Analytica, 2022)

<sup>14</sup> Depending on the source, other years are sometimes given



We must never forget that Project Business is high-risk business and requires the permanent attention of the parties involved.

*In the next article: 5. Stratagems to win ground.*

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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](http://Project Business Foundation), a non-profit initiative for professionals and organizations involved in cross-corporate project business.



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He has been a member and volunteer at PMI, the Project Management Institute, since 1998 and served as the President of the PMI Southern Germany Chapter from 2013 to 2018. Between 2004 and 2006, he contributed to PMI's *PM Network* magazine, for which he provided a monthly editorial on page 1 called "Launch," analyzing troubled projects around the world.

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