

Thirty-six Stratagems and the Commentary of Zuo: A Contextual Analysis

三十六計と春秋左氏伝の関連性

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Abstract. Over the last few decades, there has been in the west a strong interest for ancient Chinese texts in military strategy such as the *Art of War* by Sun Tzu and the *Thirty-six Stratagems*. In particular, concrete applications of the concepts enunciated in these texts have been found not only in modern warfare but also in corporate strategy. However, one ancient historical text little known in the west is of equal or greater relevance to ancient Chinese strategy: *The Commentary of Zuo*. In this paper, we demonstrate the importance of this text through a contextual analysis involving each of the thirty-six stratagems. Examples are provided.

Keywords: military strategy, ancient Chinese texts, Spring and Autumn period

要約: 欧米では、この数十年間「孫子兵法」や「三十六計」等、古代中国の兵法に注目が集まっている。特に、その文献に記載される概念は戦術だけではなく企業の戦略にも応用されてきた。しかし、同じく重要な古代中国の兵法である古典「左伝」は欧米ではあまり知られていない。本稿は「左伝」の重要性を示すため、三十六計との関連分析を行い事例も記述する。

キーワード: 兵法、中国古典、春秋時代

1. Introduction

In China, there is a well-known saying: "Of all stratagems, retreat is best 走为上計". A close English equivalent might be: "When in doubt, run". In Japan, this saying is equally well-known and its rendering is slightly more specific: "Of all thirty-six stratagems, retreat is best 三十六計逃げるに如かず". Along with Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, the text of the *Thirty-six Stratagems* is at the theoretical core of Chinese military strategy. Since the eighties, it has gained vast popularity around the world and its underlying principles are now applied not only to modern warfare but also to various areas of business (see for example Senger, 2006, Krippendorf, 2008 or Moriya, 2004). While the origins of the text remain unclear, one hypothesis is that they lie in the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BC). Other hypotheses involve later periods such as the Warring States (475–221 BC), the Three Kingdoms (220–280 AD) and the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD). This paper presents a contextual analysis of the *Thirty-six Stratagems* with respect to the Spring and Autumn period, the era in which Sun Tzu purportedly lived. The focus is on the *Commentary of Zuo* 左傳, an important historical source for that period. While many books on the *Thirty-six Stratagems* have been published in the west, sadly, the same cannot be said of the *Commentary of Zuo*, which seems to have fallen into neglect not long after being first translated to English by James Legge (1871). One of the goals of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of the *Commentary of Zuo* for a thorough understanding of the thought system inherent in the *Thirty-six Stratagems*.

2. The Secret Book of the Art of War

The author of the *Thirty-six Stratagems* is unknown and there are only speculations regarding the period in which the text was written. The earliest known mention of the thirty-six stratagems is in the *Book of Southern Qi*, a set of historical records on the Southern Qi dynasty written during the Liang dynasty (502-557 AD). In it appears the quote at the origin of the saying mentioned in the introduction of this paper: "Of all thirty-six stratagems of Master Tan, retreat is best". Master Tan, or Tan Daoji 檀道濟, was a prominent general known not only for his numerous victories on the battlefield but also for achieving the safe and timely retreat of his troops in times of defeat. However, nothing is written in these records regarding the nature of Master Tan's thirty-six stratagems and the consensus is that, if Master Tan indeed had a set of thirty-six stratagems, it is highly unlikely that they were the same as those described in the text at hand. A predominant speculation is that the number of thirty-six in these records might have been simply used euphemistically to express that the stratagems of Master Tan were numerous (Senger, 1991, p.4).

The earliest known mention of the current version of the *Stratagems* is in the September 16, 1961 issue of the *Guangming Daily* 光明日報, Dongfeng Supplement 東風副刊, in which a man named Shu He 叔和 wrote:

More than ten years ago, at a roadside bookstall in Chengdu, I found by chance a small book printed on handmade paper [...] On its cover, it bore the title *Thirty-six Stratagems* followed in smaller letters by *The Secret Book of the Art of War*.

This turned out to be a book printed in 1941 by the Xinghua Press 興華印刷廠, Chengdu, Sichuan. While this is only a speculation, the consensus is that the *Stratagems* were probably written in the late Ming period (Sawyer, 2007, p.355).

3. The Commentary of Zuo

The *Commentary of Zuo*, or *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳, is one of the earliest works of narrative history. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, this text seems to have been neglected in the west. Yuri Pines (2009) writes:

[...] despite its standing as the largest pre-imperial text, despite its canonical status, and despite its position as a fountainhead of Chinese historiography—the *Zuo zhuan* was virtually neglected by mainstream Occidental Sinology throughout the twentieth century [...] the wide gap between the *Zuo zhuan*'s monumental importance in the history of Chinese classical studies, historiography, and literature, on the one hand, and the meager interest in this work among earlier generations of Western scholars, on the other, is surprising, to put it mildly.

In addition to the importance of the *Commentary of Zuo* in historiography and literature, one must stress that it is also the progenitor of most military tactics and principles discussed in Sun Tzu's *Art of War*. In the preface to his treatise titled *Master Zuo's Art of War* 左氏兵法, Qing dynasty thinker Li Yuan-chun 李元春 writes:

The discussions of Sun Tzu and Wu Tzu are all empty words, while the discussions in the *Commentary of Zuo* have all been attested in experience. People of later times who excelled in warfare all learned their tactics from the writings of Sun Tzu and Wu Tzu. Yet, little did they benefit from the clarity of concrete examples such as the stratagem of elephants pulling lighted torches, as described in the *Commentary of Zuo* (Duke Ding, Year 4). One should first learn from such examples.

In a vein similar to this last argument, the main objective of this paper is to establish the strong relevance of the *Commentary of Zuo* to the *Thirty-six Stratagems*.

4. Structure of the Texts

The chapters of the *Commentary of Zuo* consist of historical events which took place during the reign of a ruler of the state of Lu 魯 and are named after each ruler as follows.

Ruler of Lu	First Year	Ruler of Lu	Year
隱公 Duke Yin	722 BC	宣公 Duke Xuan	608 BC
桓公 Duke Huan	711 BC	成公 Duke Cheng	590 BC
莊公 Duke Zhuang	693 BC	襄公 Duke Xiang	572 BC
閔公 Duke Min	661 BC	昭公 Duke Zhao	541 BC
僖公 Duke Xi	659 BC	定公 Duke Ding	509 BC
文公 Duke Wen	626 BC	哀公 Duke Ai	494 BC

The six chapters of the *Thirty-six Stratagems* are structured as follows.

I. 勝戰計	Stratagems When in a Superior Position	II. 敵戰計	Stratagems for Confrontation
1. 瞞天過海	Fool the Emperor and Cross the Sea	7. 無中生有	Create Something from Nothing
2. 圍魏救趙	Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao	8. 暗渡陳倉	Secretly March to Chencang
3. 借刀殺人	Kill with a Borrowed Knife	9. 隔岸觀火	Watch the Fires from Across the River
4. 以逸待勞	Await the Exhausted Enemy	10. 笑裏藏刀	Hide a Dagger Behind a Smile
5. 趁火打劫	Loot a Burning House	11. 李代桃僵	Sacrifice the Plum in Place of the Peach
6. 聲東擊西	Clamor in the East, Attack in the West	12. 順手牽羊	Lead the Sheep Away

III. 攻戰計	Stratagems for Attack	IV. 混戰計	Stratagems for Creating Chaos
13. 打草驚蛇	Beat the Grass to Startle the Snake	19. 釜底抽薪	Steal the Firewood from Under the Pot
14. 借屍還魂	Borrow a Corpse for the Soul's Return	20. 渾水摸魚	Trouble the Water to Catch the Fish
15. 調虎離山	Lure the Tiger out of the Mountains	21. 金蟬脫殼	The Golden Cicada Sheds its Shell
16. 欲擒故縱	To Catch Something, First Let It Go	22. 關門捉賊	Shut the Door to Catch the Thief
17. 拋磚引玉	Toss Out a Brick to Attract Jade	23. 遠交近攻	Befriend a Distant Enemy, Attack one Nearby
18. 擒賊擒王	Capture the Bandits' Leader	24. 假道伐虢	Borrow the Road to Conquer Guo
V. 並戰計	Stratagems for Gaining Ground	VI. 敗戰計	Stratagems for Desperate Situations
25. 偷梁換柱	Replace the Beams with Rotten Timbers	31. 美人計	The Beauty Trap
26. 指桑罵槐	Point at the Mulberry, Curse the Locust	32. 空城計	The Open City Gates
27. 假痴不癡	Feign Madness but Keep your Balance	33. 反間計	Sowing Discord
28. 上屋抽梯	Take the Ladder Away from the Roof	34. 苦肉計	Injuring Oneself to Win the Enemy's Trust
29. 樹上開花	Deck the Tree with False Blossoms	35. 連環計	Chain Reaction
30. 反客為主	The Host and the Guest Exchange Roles	36. 走為上計	Retreat is Best

5. Contextual Analysis

We begin the contextual analysis of the *Stratagems* and the *Commentary* with the relations of first degree between the two texts, namely, instances in which references to the Spring and Autumn period are explicitly made in the source text of the *Stratagems*.

5.1 Primary Relations

Explicit references to the Spring and Autumn period are made in the source text with regards to the stratagems listed below.

Number	Stratagem	Relation	Reference
3. 借刀殺人	Kill with a Borrowed Knife	Duke Huan of Zheng 鄭桓公	<i>Han Feizi</i> 韓非子, Book 31
4. 以逸待勞	Await the Exhausted Enemy	Guan Zhong 管仲	<i>Shiji</i> 史記, Book 62
5. 趁火打劫	Feign Madness but Keep your Balance	King of Yue 越王	<i>Guoyu</i> 國語, Book 21
17. 拋磚引玉	Toss Out a Brick to Attract Jade	Qu Xia 屈瑕	<i>Duke Huan</i> 桓公, Year 11
22. 關門捉賊	Shut the Door to Catch the Thief	Wu Zi 吳子	<i>Duke Cheng</i> 成公, Year 7
24. 假道伐虢	Borrow the Road to Conquer Guo	Lord of Jin 晉侯	<i>Duke Xi</i> 僖公, Year 2
31. 美人計	The Beauty Trap	Xi Shi 西施	<i>Mozi</i> 墨子, Book 1, Chapter 1
34. 苦肉計	Injuring Oneself to Win the Enemy's Trust	Duke Wu of Zheng 鄭武公	<i>Han Feizi</i> 韓非子, Book 12

5.2 Secondary Relations

While explicit references to the Spring and Autumn period are not made in the source text with regards to some stratagems, such references were made in later publications by analysts and researchers on the stratagems listed below.

Number	Stratagem	Relation	Reference
11.李代桃僵	Sacrifice the Plum in Place of the Peach	Gongsun Chujiu公孫杵臼	<i>Shiji</i> 史記, Book 43
12.順手牽羊	Lead the Sheep Away	Duke Zhuang of Zheng 鄭莊公	<i>Duke Yin</i> 隱公, Year 10
13.打草驚蛇	Beat the Grass to Startle the Snake	Meng Mingshi 孟明視	<i>Shiji</i> 史記, Book 5
16.欲擒故縱	To Catch Something, First Let It Go	Yan Ying 晏嬰	<i>Duke Xiang</i> 襄公, Year 17
18.擒賊擒王	Capture the Bandits' Leader	Ximen Bao 西門豹	<i>Shiji</i> 史記, Book 44
20.渾水摸魚	Trouble the Water to Catch the Fish	Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公	<i>Duke Xi</i> 僖公, Year 27

The primary and secondary relations can then be summarized by category of stratagems as in the following table.

Chapter	Title	Primary Relation	Secondary Relation	Total
I.勝戰計	Stratagems When in a Superior Position	3, 4, 5		3
II.敵戰計	Stratagems for Confrontation		11, 12	2
III.攻戰計	Stratagems for Attack	17	13, 16, 18	4
IV.混戰計	Stratagems for Creating Chaos	22, 24	20	3
VI.敗戰計	Stratagems for Desperate Situations	31, 34		2
Total		8	6	14

The above table shows that Stratagems When in a Superior Position had the most primary relations and Stratagems for Attack had the most secondary relations. For reference, we list the categories of relations and their conditions considered in the above table.

Conditions

A: The stratagem was derived from a known historical incident.

B: The historical incident at hand is at the source of the stratagem.

C: The historical incident at hand exemplifies the stratagem.

Relation	Condition A	Condition B	Condition C
Strongest	Yes	Yes	Yes
Strong	Yes	Yes	No
Weak	Yes	No	Yes
Weakest	No	No	Yes

In view of the above table of relations and conditions, Stratagem 24 "Borrow the Road to Conquer Guo" is an example of a Strongest Relation, for its title makes a clear reference to a known historical incident involving the State of Guo. Stratagem 13 "Beat

the Grass to Startle the Snake" is an example of a Strong Relation, for its etymology arises from a known historical incident while the source text uses a different historical incident in order to better exemplify the ultimate meaning and use of the stratagem. The same Stratagem 13 is also an example of a Weak Relation, for the other historical incident used to exemplify it does not lie at the origin of that stratagem. The majority of the relations considered in the above two tables for the contextual analysis fall in the category of a Weak or Weakest Relation, and in many cases, the actual etymology of a stratagem remains unknown while its idiomatic usage has become widespread over time.

Overall, approximately half of the stratagems have relations with the Spring and Autumn period, and of these relations, approximately half can be readily found in the text of the *Commentary of Zuo*. We also note that many of the remaining stratagems have relations with the Warring States period and that many incidents from that period also have a strong causality with the Spring and Autumn period. While no concrete evidence has been found, it is then not impossible for some of these remaining stratagems to have indirect relations with the *Commentary of Zuo*.

6. Conclusion

We have analyzed various causal and etymological relations between the *Thirty-six Stratagems* and the *Commentary of Zuo* and found that approximately half of the stratagems had relations with historical incidents from the Spring and Autumn period. This can reasonably suffice to demonstrate the importance of the *Commentary of Zuo* with respect to Ancient Chinese Strategy, an area of study which has proven to remain relevant to many fields ranging from modern warfare to corporate strategy. As the *Commentary of Zuo* has been neglected in the west for most of the twentieth century, one hopes that attention to ancient stratagems from China such as the *Thirty-six Stratagems* will also trigger a renewed interest in this important historical text.

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