

CHAPTER III

ATTACK BY STRATAGEM

1. Sun Tzu said: In the practical art of war, the best thing of all is to take the enemy's country whole and intact; to shatter and destroy it is not so good. So, too, it is better to recapture an army entire than to destroy it, to capture a regiment, a detachment or a company entire than to destroy them.¹⁰⁷

2. Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.¹⁰⁸

3. Thus the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans¹⁰⁹; the next best is to prevent the junction of the enemy's forces¹¹⁰; the next in order is to attack the enemy's army in the field¹¹¹; and the worst policy of all is to besiege walled cities.

¹⁰⁷ The equivalent to an army corps, according to Ssu-ma Fa, consisted nominally of 12500 men; according to Tsao Kung, the equivalent of a regiment contained 500 men, the equivalent to a detachment consists from any number between 100 and 500, and the equivalent of a company contains from 5 to 100 men. For the last two, however, Chang Yu gives the exact figures of 100 and 5 respectively.

¹⁰⁸ Here again, no modern strategist but will approve the words of the old Chinese general. Moltke's greatest triumph, the capitulation of the huge French army at Sedan, was won practically without bloodshed.

¹⁰⁹ Perhaps the word "balk" falls short of expressing the full force of the Chinese word, which implies not an attitude of defense, whereby one might be content to foil the enemy's stratagems one after another, but an active policy of counter-attack. Ho Shih puts this very clearly in his note: "When the enemy has made a plan of attack against us, we must anticipate him by delivering our own attack first."

¹¹⁰ Isolating him from his allies. We must not forget that Sun Tzu, in speaking of hostilities, always has in mind the numerous states or principalities into which the China of his day was split up.

¹¹¹ When he is already at full strength.

4. The rule is, not to besiege walled cities if it can possibly be avoided¹¹². The preparation of mantlets, movable shelters, and various implements of war, will take up three whole months¹¹³; and the piling up of mounds over against the walls will take three months more¹¹⁴.

5. The general, unable to control his irritation, will launch his men to the assault like swarming ants¹¹⁵, with the result that one-third of his men are slain, while the town still remains untaken. Such are the disastrous effects of a siege.¹¹⁶

6. Therefore the skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field.¹¹⁷

7. With his forces intact he will dispute the mastery of the Empire, and thus, without losing a man, his triumph will be complete¹¹⁸. This is the method of attacking by stratagem.

¹¹² Another sound piece of military theory. Had the Boers acted upon it in 1899, and refrained from dissipating their strength before Kimberley, Mafeking, or even Ladysmith, it is more than probable that they would have been masters of the situation before the British were ready seriously to oppose them.

¹¹³ It is not quite clear what the Chinese word, here translated as "mantlets", described. Tsao Kung simply defines them as "large shields," but we get a better idea of them from Li Chuan, who says they were to protect the heads of those who were assaulting the city walls at close quarters. This seems to suggest a sort of Roman TESTUDO, ready made. Tu Mu says they were wheeled vehicles used in repelling attacks, but this is denied by Chen Hao. See supra II. 14. The name is also applied to turrets on city walls. Of the "movable shelters" we get a fairly clear description from several commentators. They were wooden missile-proof structures on four wheels, propelled from within, covered over with raw hides, and used in sieges to convey parties of men to and from the walls, for the purpose of filling up the encircling moat with earth. Tu Mu adds that they are now called "wooden donkeys."

¹¹⁴ These were great mounds or ramparts of earth heaped up to the level of the enemy's walls in order to discover the weak points in the defense, and also to destroy the fortified turrets mentioned in the preceding note.

¹¹⁵ This vivid simile of Tsao Kung is taken from the spectacle of an army of ants climbing a wall. The meaning is that the general, losing patience at the long delay, may make a premature attempt to storm the place before his engines of war are ready.

¹¹⁶ We are reminded of the terrible losses of the Japanese before Port Arthur, in the most recent siege which history has to record.

¹¹⁷ Chia Lin notes that he only overthrows the Government, but does no harm to individuals. The classical instance is Wu Wang, who after having put an end to the Yin dynasty was acclaimed "Father and mother of the people."

8. It is the rule in war, if our forces are ten to the enemy's one, to surround him; if five to one, to attack him¹¹⁹; if twice as numerous, to divide our army into two¹²⁰.

9. If equally matched, we can offer battle¹²¹; if slightly inferior in numbers, we can avoid the enemy¹²²; if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him.

10. Hence, though an obstinate fight may be made by a small force, in the end it must be captured by the larger force.

11. Now the general is the bulwark of the State; if the bulwark is complete at all points; the State will be strong; if the bulwark is defective, the State will be weak.¹²³

12. There are three ways in which a ruler can bring misfortune upon his army:--

13. (1) By commanding the army to advance or to retreat, being ignorant of the fact that it cannot obey. This is called hobbling the army¹²⁴.

¹¹⁸ Owing to the double meanings in the Chinese text, the latter part of the sentence is susceptible of quite a different meaning: "And thus, the weapon not being blunted by use, its keenness remains perfect."

¹¹⁹ Straightway, without waiting for any further advantage.

¹²⁰ Tu Mu takes exception to the saying; and at first sight, indeed, it appears to violate a fundamental principle of war. Ts'ao Kung, however, gives a clue to Sun Tzu's meaning: "Being two to the enemy's one, we may use one part of our army in the regular way, and the other for some special diversion." Chang Yu thus further elucidates the point: "If our force is twice as numerous as that of the enemy, it should be split up into two divisions, one to meet the enemy in front, and one to fall upon his rear; if he replies to the frontal attack, he may be crushed from behind; if to the rearward attack, he may be crushed in front." This is what is meant by saying that 'one part may be used in the regular way, and the other for some special diversion.' Tu Mu does not understand that dividing one's army is simply an irregular, just as concentrating it is the regular, strategical method, and he is too hasty in calling this a mistake."

¹²¹ Li Chuan, followed by Ho Shih, gives the following paraphrase: "If attackers and attacked are equally matched in strength, only the able general will fight."

¹²² The meaning, "we can WATCH the enemy," is certainly a great improvement on the above; but unfortunately there appears to be no very good authority for the variant. Chang Yu reminds us that the saying only applies if the other factors are equal; a small difference in numbers is often more than counterbalanced by superior energy and discipline.

¹²³ As Li Chuan tersely puts it: "Gap indicates deficiency; if the general's ability is not perfect (i.e. if he is not thoroughly versed in his profession), his army will lack strength."

14. (2) By attempting to govern an army in the same way as he administers a kingdom, being ignorant of the conditions which obtain in an army. This causes restlessness in the soldier's minds.¹²⁵

15. (3) By employing the officers of his army without discrimination¹²⁶, through ignorance of the military principle of adaptation to circumstances. This shakes the confidence of the soldiers.¹²⁷

16. But when the army is restless and distrustful, trouble is sure to come from the other feudal princes. This is simply bringing anarchy into the army, and flinging victory away.

17. Thus we may know that there are five essentials for victory:

(1) He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.¹²⁸

(2) He will win who knows how to handle both superior and inferior forces¹²⁹.

¹²⁴ Li Chuan adds the comment: "It is like tying together the legs of a thoroughbred, so that it is unable to gallop." One would naturally think of "the ruler" in this passage as being at home, and trying to direct the movements of his army from a distance. But the commentators understand just the reverse, and quote the saying of Tai Kung: "A kingdom should not be governed from without, and army should not be directed from within." Of course it is true that, during an engagement, or when in close touch with the enemy, the general should not be in the thick of his own troops, but a little distance apart. Otherwise, he will be liable to misjudge the position as a whole, and give wrong orders.

¹²⁵ Tsao Kung's note is, freely translated: "The military sphere and the civil sphere are wholly distinct; you can't handle an army in kid gloves." And Chang Yu says: "Humanity and justice are the principles on which to govern a state, but not an army; opportunism and flexibility, on the other hand, are military rather than civil virtues to assimilate the governing of an army"--to that of a State, understood.

¹²⁶ That is, he is not careful to use the right man in the right place.

¹²⁷ I follow Mei Yao-chen here. The other commentators refer not to the ruler, as in SS. 13, 14, but to the officers he employs. Thus Tu Yu says: "If a general is ignorant of the principle of adaptability, he must not be entrusted with a position of authority." Tu Mu quotes: "The skillful employer of men will employ the wise man, the brave man, the covetous man, and the stupid man. For the wise man delights in establishing his merit, the brave man likes to show his courage in action, the covetous man is quick at seizing advantages, and the stupid man has no fear of death."

¹²⁸ Chang Yu says: If he can fight, he advances and takes the offensive; if he cannot fight, he retreats and remains on the defensive. He will invariably conquer who knows whether it is right to take the offensive or the defensive.

¹²⁹ This is not merely the general's ability to estimate numbers correctly, as Li Chuan and others make out. Chang Yu expounds the saying more satisfactorily: "By applying the art

- (3) He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks.
- (4) He will win who, prepared himself, waits to take the enemy unprepared.
- (5) He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign¹³⁰.

18. Hence the saying: If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat¹³¹. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.¹³²

of war, it is possible with a lesser force to defeat a greater, and vice versa. The secret lies in an eye for locality, and in not letting the right moment slip. Thus Wu Tzu says: 'With a superior force, make for easy ground; with an inferior one, make for difficult ground.'

¹³⁰ Tu Yu quotes Wang Tzu as saying: "It is the sovereign's function to give broad instructions, but to decide on battle it is the function of the general." It is needless to dilate on the military disasters which have been caused by undue interference with operations in the field on the part of the home government. Napoleon undoubtedly owed much of his extraordinary success to the fact that he was not hampered by central authority.

¹³¹ Li Chuan cites the case of Fu Chien, prince of Chin, who in 383 A.D. marched with a vast army against the Chin Emperor. When warned not to despise an enemy who could command the services of such men as Hsieh An and Huan Chung, he boastfully replied: "I have the population of eight provinces at my back, infantry and horsemen to the number of one million; why, they could dam up the Yangtze River itself by merely throwing their whips into the stream. What danger have I to fear?" Nevertheless, his forces were soon after disastrously routed at the Fei River, and he was obliged to beat a hasty retreat.

¹³² Chang Yu said: "Knowing the enemy enables you to take the offensive, knowing yourself enables you to stand on the defensive." He adds: "Attack is the secret of defense; defense is the planning of an attack." It would be hard to find a better epitome of the root-principle of war.