

# The Research on the Psychological Tactic of Covering the Dagger With a Smile

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*Thirty-Six Stratagems* is one of the most important military works of ancient China. As the name of the book, it totally includes 36 stratagems that can be used in many different fields such as military, business, and politics. Covering the dagger with a smile is one of the most common ones in these stratagems. At the same time, it is the most insidious one. As a kind of psychological tactic, it usually acts as the secret weapon of the weak. Though this stratagem should not be seen as a kind of predominant strategy, it is still worth being researched deeply, because knowing more about this psychological tactic will offer a good reference for the researchers of ancient art of war.

*Keywords:* psychological tactic, covering the dagger with a smile, *Thirty-Six Stratagems*

## Introduction

The word “covering the dagger with a smile” first appeared in *Old Book of Tang* (Liu, 2000). At the very beginning, it was used to describe a type of personality. As time went by, it became the name of a kind of psychological tactic. In *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, the concept of covering the dagger with a smile is introduced clearly. According to the book, you need to charm and ingratiate yourself with your enemy (In Depth Military Editorial Board, 2019). When you have gained his trust, move against him in secret (In Depth Military Editorial Board, 2019). Just from the words, we can easily see the guile of this stratagem.

As a matter of fact, the word “covering the dagger with a smile” can describe three different things: a kind of psychological tactic, a type of personality, and a type of behavior. We can easily see the personality and the behavior of covering the dagger with a smile in our daily life. For example, someone usually pretends to have a good relationship with a friend or a colleague. At the same time, he always says bad things about his friend or colleague secretly because his friend or colleague does better than him in some fields. There is no doubt that this kind of personality or behavior is despicable. In Chinese, there is another word to describe this kind of behavior—“a honey tongue, a heart of gall”. In Chinese historical records, “a honey tongue, a heart of gall” was first used to describe Li Linfu (683-753), a prime minister of Tang Dynasty (618-907) (Sima, 2007). He was jealous of the officials who had literary talent (Sima, 2007). He first pretended to be friendly with them (Sima, 2007). After that, he would frame them by hook or by crook (Sima, 2007).

After coming to the fields of military and international relations, this stratagem is usually adopted by the side whose power is relatively weak. In these fields, it is hard to define good and evil absolutely. As a matter of fact, in Chinese war history, this stratagem was usually adopted by the vulnerable side to defeat the enemy who

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was much more powerful. We have to acknowledge that sometimes psychological tactic is the tactic that needs the lowest cost. For the stratagem of covering the dagger with a smile, it is a really excellent tactic for the small countries when facing the countries with stronger national strength.

After all, covering the dagger with a smile is seen as an important kind of psychological tactic which is the most important value. It is a pity that most of the researchers have not paid enough attention to the importance of the flexibility of these stratagems recorded in *Thirty-Six Stratagems* at present. The aim of this paper is to make an attempt, taking the tactic of covering the dagger with a smile as an example, exploring the way of using the stratagems recorded in *Thirty-Six Stratagems* flexibly.

### **The Analysis of Covering the Dagger With a Smile From the Angle of Psychological Tactic**

As a matter of fact, in military field covering the dagger with a smile is a kind of psychological tactic that is commonly seen during the war. In the field of interpersonal relationship, we usually see it as a kind of insidious behavior. But after coming to the field of military, we need to take a new look in covering the dagger with a smile. According to *Hanfeizi*, an important political science work of the Period of Warring States (475-221 B.C.), there is no objection to deceit in war (Han, 2011). Therefore, as a kind of deception, covering the dagger with a smile is seen as a kind of useful tactic that is popular among the strategists of ancient China.

The key of covering the dagger with a smile is the smile. Here, smile means the way of gaining enemy's trust. In this way, you can break through your enemy's psychological defense line, letting him relax his vigilance. After that, you will get the chance to defeat him. Many examples of Chinese war history have proved that this tactic is of great use when facing a proud enemy.

As a matter of fact, in Chinese war history, the usage of covering the dagger with a smile tactic had different methods. I will analyze them with different examples in the next parts of this paper.

### **Pretending to Surrender: The Basic Application of Covering the Dagger With a Smile**

#### **The Classic Battle of Pretending to Surrender**

As a matter of fact, pretending to surrender is a tactic commonly seen in the war history of China. It can be seen as the basic application of the stratagem covering the dagger with a smile.

In 284 B.C., during the Period of Warring States (475-221 B.C.), there was a famous battle named the five states (Yan, Zhao, Han, Wei, and Qin) conquering the State of Qi. Under the attack of five states' army, the State of Qi lost its more than 70 cities in a short time (Sima, 2006; Zuo & Liu, 2011). The remnant troops of the Qi army had to build defensive lines in Ju (located in today's Rizhao, Shandong Province, China) and Jimo (located in today's Qingdao, Shandong Province, China), the only two cities that had not been occupied by the army of the five states (Sima, 2006).

The battle of Jimo totally lasted for five years. In 279, the Qi army's commander named Tian Dan (?-?) started a series of military actions to counterattack. One of his most important actions was pretending to surrender. In order to let the general of the Yan army named Qi Jie (?-279 B.C.) believe that the surrender was true, Tian ordered the magnates of Jimo to offer Qi a bribe with much wealth (Sima, 2006). After that, the whole Yan army started to relax its vigilance.

Before long, Tian's army started to counterattack. Qi Jie was killed during this process (Sima, 2006). Finally, more than 70 cities of the State of Qi were finally recaptured (Sima, 2006).

#### **The Analysis of the Battle**

In the battle of Jimo, Tian's military action could be seen as a great victory. He made full use of the stratagem of covering the dagger with a Smile. Pretending to surrender was the smile of him. In order to let the smile become more authentic, he adopted the way of bribing the general of the Yan army. Though the method he adopted was a little crafty, it was of great use. Finally, Tian protected his own country successfully.

From another angle, we can also see that the level of the Yan army's commander was really low. He relaxed his vigilance just because he gained much wealth from the magnates of Jimo. From this event, we can see that money can be an important tool to make the smile become more authentic. It is a warning to the strategists and politicians of all eras.

### **Covering the Dagger With a Smile Combining With Other Stratagems**

#### **Covering the Dagger With a Smile Combining With Using Seductive Woman to Corrupt the Enemy**

Using seductive woman to corrupt the enemy is a common tactic that can be seen all around the world. Therefore, its concept does not need to be explained in detail in this paper. When combining with covering the dagger with a smile, it can help the weaker side turn defeat into victory.

As we all know, during Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.), Xiongnu (a grassland empire located in Mongolian Plateau) was one of the largest enemies of Han Dynasty. However, before the war between Han Dynasty and Xiongnu, there was a war between Xiongnu and Eastern Hu (an ethnic group once inhabiting the south-eastern part of Inner Mongolia). The war between these two grassland regimes finally determined Xiongnu's grassland hegemonic position.

The tactic that Xiongnu adopted was covering the dagger with a smile combining with using seductive woman to corrupt the enemy. According to *Historical Records* (91 B.C.) and *Book of Han*, two important history books finished by the historians of Han Dynasty, at the beginning, the chief of Eastern Hu asked the leader of Xiongnu named Modu (?-174 B.C.) to give him a fine horse and an empress of Xiongnu (Sima, 2006; Ban, 2007). Modu did it according to the requirements (Sima, 2006; Ban, 2007). After that, the chief of Eastern Hu became prouder and prouder because he thought that Xiongnu was really weak. However, when he asked for the land between Eastern Hu and Xiongnu, the Xiongnu army started to attack the territory of Easter Hu without hesitation (Sima, 2006; Ban, 2007). Defenselessly, the army of Eastern Hu was defeated (Sima, 2006; Ban, 2007). After that, Eastern Hu divided into many small nomadic tribes, starting its migration.

#### **The Analysis of the Battle**

With the stratagem of using seductive woman to corrupt the enemy, Modu pretended to show weakness to Eastern Hu. In this process, the chief of Eastern Hu let down his guard. When the Xiongnu army came, he even had no chance to fight back. For Xiongnu, it was a successful attempt of covering the dagger with a smile. This tactic helped it become the governor of the grassland. Also, this battle offers us a really good example of covering the dagger with a smile.

#### **Covering the Dagger With a Smile Combining With Killing Someone With a Borrowed Knife**

Killing someone with a borrowed knife is another psychological tactic recorded in *Thirty-Six Stratagems*. When you do not have the means to attack your enemy directly, attack him using the strength of another (In Depth Military Editorial Board, 2019).

Compared with the tactic introduced before, the smile of this situation does not mean showing your

weakness. Because in this situation, you need to face more than one enemies at the same time. You need to show your good faith to one of them. After that, they will be divided by mutual suspicion.

In Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127), a general of the Song army named Cao Wei (973-1030) suppressed the rebellion with this tactic. After knowing some soldiers defected to the territory of Tangut, he did nothing but kept playing GO with his guest (Tuotuo, 2000). He just said that he sent these soldiers to Tanguts tribes (Tuotuo, 2000). Before long, these soldiers were killed by the people of Tangut (Tuotuo, 2000).

### **The Analysis of the Battle**

As a matter of fact, general Cao's tactic was really brilliant. He pretended to show his good faith to the soldiers of rebel force, giving up chasing them. His action finally let the rebel force and the people of Tangut be divided by mutual suspicion. With the cooperation of a rumor, he successfully suppressed the rebellion.

### **Conclusion**

Covering the dagger with a smile is a typical psychological tactic of ancient China. It is so common in Chinese war history that we may ignore it sometimes. However, when reading the history book of China, we will find its value as a kind of excellent stratagem in military and politics field. This psychological tactic may appear in many different fields such as military and international relations. It will be quite useful when it is used flexibly. The research of this psychological tactic will offer a good reference to the strategists and the politicians of modern society.

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