

# The Research on the Stratagem of Corrupting the Enemy

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Corrupting the enemy is a kind of stratagem which can be seen in war history. This kind of stratagem can be seen as a kind of psychological tactic, making full use of human's greed to fool the enemy. That's why it is difficult to defend against when facing this type of stratagem. Its process is a little like a kind of hunting. As time went by, this kind of stratagem became more and more complex, developing many different forms. However, these different forms have common elements which means we may find its basic logic through careful analysis. From its characteristics, we can easily see that this kind of stratagem is a type of non-military method. We also need to notice that as time goes by, this kind of stratagem is no longer a simple military strategy which also appears in many other situations such as political struggle and commercial warfare.

*Keywords:* corrupting the enemy, stratagem, non-military method

## Introduction

According to an ancient Chinese military work named *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*, there is a stratagem named using seductive women to corrupt the enemy (Cheng, 1999). Usually, this kind of stratagem has a more famous name: honey trap. In this book, seductive women are just a concept introduced by ancient Chinese people (Xing & Su, 2025). As a matter of fact, everything that can be used to corrupt the enemy can be called seductive women. According to the theory of modern Chinese military scientists, honey trap is a kind of strategic deception whose essence is a fraud (Gao & Zhang, 2015).

When we were writing a paper which was published on May 2025 named "The Research on Beauty Trap and Related Psychological Tactics", we noticed that the stratagem of honey trap or beauty trap totally has two functions: corrupting the enemy and making the enemy unable to be untied. These two functions show the strategic objectives of many different types of stratagems. The relations of these stratagems are as shown in Figure 1.

From Figure 1, we can easily see that the stratagem of honey trap has the function of corrupting the enemy. But it is not the only stratagem that has this function. The aim of this paper is to make a summative research on the stratagem of corrupting the enemy, including its aims, forms, and methods. In this process, the records of war history will be our core materials. Through analyzing the typical examples which happened in war history, we will find out the basic logic of this kind of stratagem.

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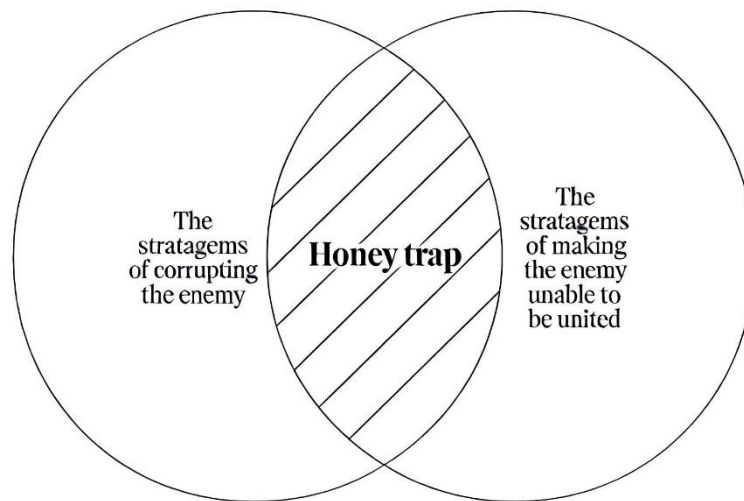


Figure 1. The relations between honey trap and other stratagems.

### The Stratagem of Corrupting the Enemy in Ancient Chinese Military Works

As a matter of fact, in the game between nations, there are many non-military methods to weaken the enemy. Except the stratagem of using seductive women to corrupt the enemy, which was recorded in *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*, there are also many other methods of corrupting the enemy. In a military book named *Six Secret Teachings* written by ancient Chinese strategists, there are totally 12 methods (Cao & An, 2007). Seven of them can be called the stratagem of corrupting the enemy. These seven methods are listed as follows.

1. Secretly bribe the ruler's close attendants to establish deep rapport, redirecting their loyalties and sowing internal discord (Cao & An, 2007).
2. Corrode the ruler's resolve with decadent diversions, lavish gifts, and seductive enticements, dulling his ambition and creating strategic vulnerabilities (Cao & An, 2007).
3. Suborn internal officials and alienate external commanders, compelling capable ministers to collude with foreign powers and precipitating internal chaos (Cao & An, 2007).
4. Bind the ruler's loyalty with rich bribes, and suborn his trusted advisors with covert incentives, leading them to neglect state affairs and deplete the treasury (Cao & An, 2007).
5. Present the ruler with precious treasures to align our interests, fostering his trust until he becomes complicit in our designs, ultimately facilitating the state's collapse (Cao & An, 2007).
6. Neutralize the enemy's intelligence apparatus by bribing elites with offices and treasures, converting them into agents and isolating the ruler from accurate information (Cao & An, 2007).
7. Nurture traitorous officials to confuse the ruler's judgment; distract him with sensual pleasures, hunting, and flattery to foster hubris, and then coordinate with popular sentiment to overthrow his regime (Cao & An, 2007).

From the methods listed above, we can see that the methods of corrupting the enemy are really simple: two kinds of bribery, including sexual bribery (honey trap) and monetary bribes. The aims of these methods of corrupting the enemy are really clear: confusing the judgment of the hostile camp's important people and letting them lose fighting spirit. Though these methods look really simple, they are hard to defend, simply because greed is inherent in human nature. That's why when facing this kind of scheme, the people who can look through it are really few.

### **Honey Trap: The Most Direct Method of Corrupting the Enemy**

We have to admit that honey trap is usually the most direct method of corrupting the enemy. About this kind of stratagem, we have introduced its usages in detail in our previous paper “The Research on Beauty Trap and Related Psychological Tactics” (Xing & Su, 2025). Also in this paper, we detailedly introduced an example of the State of Yue (2032-333 B.C., mainly located in today’s Zhejiang Province China) defeating the State of Wu (?-473 B.C., mainly located in today’s Jiangsu Province, China) by corrupting the king of the latter with honey trap which is one of the most famous examples of this stratagem in ancient Chinese war history (Xing & Su, 2025). In short, during the wars, the weak side would try to corrupt the ruler of the enemy, confusing his judgment and letting him lose fighting spirit. Then, it will be much easier for the weak side to defeat its enemy.

Here, some readers may ask a question. In war history, the rulers and the upper class would easily become the targets of honey traps. Thus, the basic-level personnel would be safe, right? An event happened during the war between the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and the Tibetan Empire (633-877) will answer this question.

In the Tang Dynasty, Weizhou (located in today’s Li County, Sichuan Province, China) was an important military stronghold of the Tang army. In the 750s, because of the An Lushan Rebellion (755-763), the military strength of the Tang Dynasty on the western front gradually weakened. The Tibetan Empire’s forces seized control of Hexi (located in today’s Gansu Province, China) and Longxi (located in today’s Gansu Province, China), taking advantage of the situation. However, because of its strategic terrain, Weizhou was still controlled by the Tang army. The Tibetans regarded Weizhou as strategically vital and advantageous to them. They married a woman to a gatekeeper of Weizhou (Liu, 2000). Twenty years later, the two sons born to this woman grew up to adulthood (Liu, 2000). When the Tibetan army attacked Weizhou, these two sons acted as internal collaborators, and Weizhou consequently fell (Liu, 2000). After that, Wei Gao (745-805), one of the most experienced generals of the early ninth century’s Tang army, tried many methods to retake Weizhou so that he could carry out his strategy of counterattacking the Tibetan Empire. Finally, though the soldiers of Wei captured the prime minister of the Tibetan Empire during the battle, his attempt to retake Weizhou finally failed (Liu, 2000).

From the event of the fall of Weizhou, we can easily see that basic-level personnel also cannot escape from becoming the target of a honey trap. As a matter of fact, many events that happened during the Cold War (1947-1991) also prove this point. For example, during the Cold War, politicians and senior officers were not the only targets of honey traps. The people of some other careers such as engineer would also become the target (Lewis, 2015).

Also from the process of the fall of Weizhou, we can see that as a kind of non-military method, corrupting the enemy with a honey trap requires a long wait to take effect. As a matter of fact, it is the characteristic of all the methods of corrupting the enemy. That’s why this kind of stratagem is hard to discover.

### **Offering Benefits: A Special Method of Corrupting the Enemy**

As mentioned before, the process of corrupting the enemy is a little like the process of hunting. Sometimes, hunters need to use baits to lure their prey.

In the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.) of China, Guan Zhong (?-645 B.C.), a politician of the State of Qi (located in today’s Shandong Province, China), was good at corrupting the enemy by offering benefits.

The king of the State of Qi wanted to defeat the State of Chu (located in the Yangtze River Basin, China). Thus, Guan offered the king a special stratagem. He suggested the king to buy deer from Chu at a high price (Li

& Liang, 2004). Thus, the people of the State of Chu abandoned farming to hunt deer (Li & Liang, 2004). At the same time, the people of the State of Qi hid their grain. In this process, the State of Qi gained a large amount of grain while the State of Chu gained a large deal of money. This phenomenon did not attract the attention of the upper echelons of Chu. The king of the State of Chu even encouraged his people to give up agriculture in order to hunt deer, being unaware of the impending danger (Li & Liang, 2004).

After that, the State of Qi suddenly stopped the grain trade with the State of Chu which caused a sharp rise in grain prices in the State of Chu. Then, the government of Qi sent grain to some areas of Chu. Four out of ten people in the State of Chu chose to surrender to the State of Qi (Li & Liang, 2004). Three years later, the State of Chu submitted to the State of Qi (Li & Liang, 2004).

The similar stratagem was employed a total of four times during the political career of Guan (Li & Liang, 2004). In his era, for a country, grain was the most important resource. Thus, we can see that the basic logic of his stratagem is making the enemy give up their most important resource for short-term benefits. This stratagem is fundamentally a manipulation of human greed. That's why it is really hard to defend.

### **The Analysis of the Stratagem of Corrupting the Enemy**

It is clear that the stratagem of corrupting the enemy is a kind of non-military method. According to *The Art of War* written by Sun Tzu (545-470 B.C.), supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting (Sun, 2009). The stratagem of corrupting fully embodied this kind of war culture.

From the methods recorded in *The Thirty-Six Stratagems* as well as *The Six Secret Teachings*, we can easily summarize the basic logic of the stratagem of corrupting the enemy: corrupting key figures through sexual or monetary bribery, and thus disintegrating the enemy camp. Though its form looks really simple, this kind of stratagem will change because of the evolution of the times. Take the honey trap in the 20th century as an example. During the First World War (1914-1918), officials or key figures might tell some information to their lovers, thereby leaking classified information (Gong, 2018; Hiroshi, 2011). However, during the Cold War, the form of honey trap was totally different. Those indecent photos would be used to blackmail the targeted people (Lewis, 2015). It was because of the development of camera techniques. Both these two situations can be called the stratagem of corrupting the enemy. But the former is more closely to be actively corrupted. We cite these two examples to further illustrate that the honey trap, a stratagem for corrupting the enemy, continues to evolve with the changing times. In history and reality, the honey trap may exist in many other forms, which is a really interesting topic in the field of criminology. About this topic, we will not go into detail here.

As mentioned before, offering benefits is also an important method of corrupting the enemy. The stratagem of Guan Zhong could be successfully adopted four times, showing that human nature is inherently greedy. As a matter of fact, except the field of the game between countries, this stratagem can also be adopted in the field of commercial warfare. In the field of commercial warfare, this stratagem is called price war. In brief, a price war refers to fierce competition in which companies continuously lower prices to seize market share, drive out competitors, or weaken their profitability. In this situation, customers are the targets that need to be corrupted by offering benefits. As a matter of fact, being similar to that of the honey trap, offering benefits may exist in many other forms.

Besides, some attentive educators may notice a situation. Some interest groups will buy off some officials with sexual and monetary bribery, asking them to intervene in university admissions and cut appropriations for higher education. Then, some universities will be sold at a low price after being in crisis. If analyzing it with the

theoretical system of *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*, this business strategy is actually a combination of three different stratagems. Except using seductive women to corrupt the enemy, the stratagems of replacing the beams with rotten timbers and extracting the firewood from under the cauldron are also adopted in this business strategy. These two stratagems are also recorded in *The Thirty-Six Stratagems* (Cheng, 1999). Of course, this business strategy can be explained by some other systems of stratagems. But there is no doubt that the essence of such a business strategy is corrupting the enemy.

In a word, as a kind of stratagem, the forms of corrupting the enemy are diverse. The essence of this stratagem is a kind of strategic deception. Based on it, we can think about an important question. How to counterattack when facing this kind of stratagem? In our previous paper “The Research on Beauty Trap and Related Psychological Tactics”, we introduced a relatively complex psychological tactic composed of a few stratagems recorded in *Thirty-Six Stratagems* (Xing & Su, 2025). But, according to the theories of some modern Chinese military scientists, there is a much more direct method. Sometimes, you just need to uncover the enemy’s conspiracy immediately on the spot when facing a honey trap (Editorial Board of In-Depth Military Studies, 2019). As mentioned before, many times, honey trap can also be seen as a kind of stratagem for corrupting the enemy. Therefore, the tactics adopted to counterattack the honey traps will also be useful when facing the stratagem of corrupting the enemy. Besides, being the same as the people in the beauty traps, the ones who are corrupted by the enemy are psychologically different from ordinary people. They will be really sensitive about some special words or things. For example, some of these people may attack the contents of this paper. In Chinese, this phenomenon is called Zuozei Xinxu (translated as being nervous due to a guilty secret).

### Conclusion

Corrupting the enemy is a kind of stratagem that is easily overlooked. However, it is also an important part of war culture. As a kind of non-military method, it does not produce immediate effects. However, it will continuously and covertly weaken the enemy, ultimately achieving a shift in the balance of offense and defense. You may think this strategy is insidious. But you still need to understand it, so as to prevent yourself from falling into its trap.

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