

# THE 36 STRATAGEMS OF TAN DAOJI

“More success with cunning and deceit” is how one could paraphrase the 36 stratagems of General Tan Daoji, who died in the year 436. These hardly cooperative operational maxims are already playfully instilled in future Chinese managers as small children, who later use them to create advantages for themselves and their companies over competitors through guile and deception.

On one hand, the 36 fabled proverbs are used for individuals to rehearse cunning behavior. Simultaneously, up-and-coming managers are sensitized to see through the tricks and ploys of others – to one’s own advantage of course.

### 1. Deceive the emperor and cross the ocean

Get the emperor to cross the ocean against his will by inviting him into a house on the ocean – that in reality is a ship.

*Example: Present a competitor or negotiating partner with a fait accompli by obscuring one’s own objectives and disguising the path along the way.*

### 2. Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao

By attacking one of the opponent’s important or sensitive targets, pressure is removed from one’s own objective when “under fire.”

*Example: Instead of coming to the direct aid of a subsidiary in a foreign market, a competitor can be forced to withdraw through a market offensive in another country, like his home market, for example.*

### 3. Kill with a borrowed knife

In other words, “place stones in the path of the opponent”: Target the deployment of allies, who are fighting a proxy war or share your objectives, and can be motivated to confront a difficult challenge.

*Example: Instead of impeding a competitor directly, you can do so by using third-parties – for example, regulatory authorities to delay approval procedures for a construction project.*

### 4. Lie in wait for the exhausted enemy

When facing a superior enemy, feign a retreat while gradually leaving ever fewer fires behind. The pursuers will then believe that many soldiers have deserted and will resume the hunt with lightly armed troops. Wait in ambush positions to subsequently annihilate the enemy troops.

*Example: Cradle a competitor in safety, then make a surprise attack.*

### 5. Loot a burning house

Sow chaos and use it for an attack. Exploit the enemy’s difficulties and aim at chaos in his ranks to achieve victory.

*1st Example: Encourage a competitor to withdraw from a market by creating legal uncertainties (buzzword: minimum wage), as Deutsche Post successfully achieved against the Pin Group in the postal delivery sector.*

*2nd Example: Bring difficulties to a customer through unpredictable behavior and use the associated problems to one’s own advantage. Offer to be a supplier to the customer of his customer, thus turning from a supplier into a competitor.*

### 6. Make a sound in the east, then strike in the west

Use a fake attack to force the enemy to reinforce troops at a position and remove resources from where the actual attack is planned.

*Example: Aggressively attack a competitor in a secondary market in order to launch a later offensive in an important market.*

### 7. Create something from nothing

Possible manifestations:

1. Cause decreased vigilance in your opponent through constant false alarms.
2. Institute targeted defamation of the opponent and spread rumors, i.e., “create an elephant out of a mouse.”
3. Lead the opponent to believe in an illusion and use this to achieve an advantage or change in disposition.

### 8. March to Chencang on a hidden path

Disguise the actual marching direction, or carefully conceal criticism behind normal, innocuous behavior.

*Example: Reactivate a slumping product with great effort, accompanied by the media, in order to cradle a competitor in security so as to make him believe that you will be fully occupied with the challenge for a period of time. In the meantime, work with maximum urgency on a new product that will surprise the competitor with its sudden introduction to the market.*

### 9. Watch the fires burning across the river

Forego action until the situation has developed to one’s advantage. Until then, any action of the opponent that could provide an advantage should be skillfully inhibited.

*Example: Wait until the arrival of an advantageous point in time and only then conquer a market, for example by introducing a new product (correct timing!).*



### 10. Hide a dagger behind a smile

Cradle the opponent in security through amiability, then attack him in a moment of weakness.

### 11. Sacrifice the plum to preserve the peach

Possible manifestations:

1. Sacrifice yourself to save others.
2. Sacrifice others to save yourself.
3. Sacrifice someone else to save a third party.
4. Make a small concession to gain something valuable.

### 12. Seize an easy opportunity to pilfer a goat

Seize opportunities to attain the best possible results with little effort.

### 13. Stomp the grass to scare away the snake

Entice the opponent out of reserve position and test his strengths. Possible manifestations:

1. Gain the attention of the opponent.
2. Startle the opponent with something unexpected, for example a fake attack that leads to confusion. If the opponent is alarmed, his defenses will be undercut and his ability to react will be diminished.

### 14. Borrow a corpse to resurrect the soul

Revive something that is feared, loved, or traditional with the objective of intimidating or encouraging.

*Example: Revive a strong brand-name product from earlier times that is still familiar to many consumers, and become the market leader in the briefest amount of time by skillfully adding an innovation to discourage competition in a particular market segment.*

### 15. Entice the tiger to leave its mountain lair

In other words, “lead the opponent to slippery ice.” Possible manifestations:

1. Entice the tiger away from familiar terrain so as to capture it more easily.
2. Entice the tiger away and subsequently occupy the more easily defended mountain.
3. Weaken the tiger by removing its most important allies.



4. Capture the tiger's offspring after it has been drawn away.

*Example: Invite a negotiating partner out of his intimately familiar homeland into one's own country and thus into foreign territory. There he feels insecure, partially because he no longer has direct access to his company departments, is linguistically disadvantaged, and cannot fully play out his strengths – and ultimately is more easily overcome.*

## 調虎離山

15 Stratagem

### 16. First let go, then capture

Infiltrate opposing troops by releasing prisoners of war who have been treated kindly during captivity.

*Example: Hire previous employees of a competitor, treat them well, and later place them with the competitor as an "aggressive bridgehead." (Doesn't work, doesn't exist!)*

### 17. Cast a brick to attract jade

Bait the opponent, for example with a "Trojan horse." One leads the opponent down the wrong path by sacrificing something small. Thereafter, one can occupy something greater behind the back of the opponent.

*Example: Targeted dissemination of information that weakens one's own product on the market induces a competitor to take rash action. Surprise the competitor at his weakest point just at the right time, for example by introducing a new product.*

### 18. Defeat an enemy by capturing the leader

In other words "Cut the head off of the snake": Successful capture of the opposing leader damages the morale of the enemy, and the battle is decided.

### 19. Remove the firewood from beneath the pot

In other words "pull the rug from under the opponent's feet": This can be achieved by depriving the opponent of resources or reason for war, in order to end the conflict earlier or possibly avoid it all together.

### 20. Catch a fish while the water is turbid

In other words, fish for the opponent "in murky waters": Use disorientation to gain followers. Deny the opponent a perspective; he is more easily overcome while "flying blind."

### 21. Shed the cicada's golden shell

Leave behind all false formalities contrived for strategic purposes. Just as the shell of a cicada remains intact while the real activity is taking place elsewhere.

### 22. Bolt the door to catch the thief

Allow the enemy to run into the void, in order to surround him and remove all possible escape routes.

### 23. Befriend a distant state while attacking a neighbor

In other words, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend": When a country feels threatened by several enemies, it can team up with a distant ally to surround a nearby enemy.

### 24. Secure safe passage to conquer Guo

In the past, states granted other states permission to march through their land to attack a third country. After the third country is successfully occupied, the state undertaking the military campaign then occupies the transit state as well, since its troops are already there anyway.

### 25. Steal the beams and switch out the pillars

In other words "present a deceptive package": Steal the pillars and replace the supports of a house without changing the façade.

*Example: Acquire the best sales personnel (including many years' worth of customer contacts) from a competing company.*

### 26. Point at the mulberry tree while cursing the locust tree

In other words, "beat the sack to frighten the donkey": Criticism of management is usually given indirectly by criticizing other people about the same circumstances.

### 27. Feign madness but keep your balance

A field commander leads his enemy to believe that he is incapable, so that the enemy allows enough time to elapse for the commander to improve his situation.

### 28. Remove the ladder when the enemy has climbed onto the roof

Provide the opponent with an easy objective and thus entice him into an area from which there are few escape opportunities. These escape opportunities are subsequently cut off, and the trap closes.

### 29. Decorate the tree with false blossoms

A withered tree can seem healthy and strong with fake decorations. This means deceiving the

opponent about one's own troop strength and armaments, for example through decoys. Make the army appear larger and stronger than it really is.

### 30. Reverse the roles of host and guest

In other words "turn the hunter into the hunted". Seize the opponent's position, and after successfully repelling an attack, initiate a counterattack and force the opponent to defend unfamiliar terrain.

### 31. The ploy of the beautiful woman

Corrupt the opponent by deploying a woman to influence important persons, for example through the prospect of marriage. Thanks to shared interests, a conflict can be avoided and a coalition formed.

### 32. The ploy of open city gates

Purposefully feign an ambush to conceal one's own weakness.

*Example: Officially encourage a potential new competitor to enter the market, so that he believes that something entirely different is planned – with the result that he decides not to enter a market.*

### 33. The ploy of sowing internal discord

In other words, "when two are fighting, the third is pleased": Play two enemy parties off of one another by deploying double-agents to achieve an advantage for oneself.

### 34. Inflict injury on oneself to deceive the enemy

Injure yourself to provoke sympathy and feign your own weaknesses.

### 35. The chain strategy

Combine two, three or more stratagems together.

### 36. When retreat is the best option

When the other 35 stratagems fail, timely retreat from a futile position is usually best. Capitulation means a complete defeat as opposed to a half-defeat. A retreat at least means a chance to return later and seek victory. The retreat then becomes a tactical move. All's well that ends well.

*Conclusion: Instead of fighting against the ancient, sometimes unfair negotiating tactics of Chinese suppliers, associates, and competitors, it is recommended that Western companies also consider a 37th stratagem – the "Westagem," which is as follows:*

### 37. Defeat the enemy with his own weapons