

Traditional Chinese Conceptions and Approaches to Secrecy (秘密), Denial (否定), and Obfuscation (模糊)

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Knowing capability is not as good as knowing intentions.”

—Guanzi,
Fifth century BC

Whatever the disjuncture between theory and practice, warfare’s increasing lethality at the end of China’s Spring and Autumn period (722–481 BCE) made commanders conscious of the need for information about enemy capabilities, intentions, and activities for the purpose of making accurate assessments, balking plans, and formulating strategy. The *Art of War*, traditionally attributed to Sunzi (Sun-tzu) but more likely compiled by his disciples in the fifth century or later, reflects this realization.^a Not only is the 13th and final chapter, “Employing Agents,” the first theoretical treatise on spycraft, the opening section (“Initial Estimations”) constitutes a veritable mandate for intelligence gathering.

Despite its often enigmatic and pastiche nature, the *Art of War* articulates a calculated, unemotional approach to warfare that eschews engaging the enemy unless victory can be foretold. Even then,

attaining a hundred victories in a hundred battles is not the pinnacle of excellence. Subjugating the enemy’s army without

*fighting is the true pinnacle of excellence.*¹

Though not always realized in practice, the book’s pronouncements initiated the Chinese emphasis on achieving victory through wisdom and cleverness, through manipulating the enemy, rather than through the direct application of force, no matter how overwhelming the army’s power:

The highest realization of warfare lies in attacking the enemy’s plans; next is attacking their alliances; next their army; while the lowest is attacking their fortified cities. Thus, one who excels at employing the military subjugates other people’s armies without engaging in battle, captures other people’s fortified cities without attacking them, and destroys other people’s states without prolonged fighting.

As epitomized by the saying, “One who knows the enemy and knows himself will not be endangered in a hundred engagements,”² the key is knowing the enemy. However,

a. Although the *Art of War* has been overexposed and trivialized in the West, with its principles applied to every field of human activity ranging from romance and the stock market through sports (as in *Sun-tzu on Golf*), it not only exerted a formative influence on Chinese military thought and practice, but continues to be highly relevant as part of the contemporary Chinese mindset and the object of conscious study in the PRC’s quest to “formulate military science with unique Chinese characteristics,” as are all the materials presented herein. (All translations of original texts are by the author.)

Rejecting reliance upon spirits and resorting to divination, common approaches in earlier times, Sunzi turned the focus onto human effort.

the requisite knowledge can only be acquired through careful observation and diligent intelligence efforts. The *Art of War* thus identifies some 40 aspects and characteristics centered on topographical features, the comparative state of readiness, command and control, governance, the strength and condition of the army, capability of the commanders, and the army's morale which should be targeted for scrutiny. Though not totally encompassing, seven are deemed crucial:

*Which ruler has the Dao? Whose generals have greater ability? Who has gained the advantages of Heaven and Earth? Whose laws and orders are more thoroughly implemented? Whose forces are stronger? Whose officers and troops are better trained? Whose rewards and punishments are clearer?*³

While this emphasis recurs in all the subsequent military writings, it is particularly visible in the dedicated quest to manipulate the enemy and ferret out information.^a

Rejecting reliance upon spirits and resorting to divination, common approaches in earlier times, Sunzi turned the focus onto human effort:

*The means by which enlightened rulers and sagacious generals moved and conquered others, that their achievements surpassed the masses, was advance knowledge. Advance knowledge cannot be gained from ghosts and spirits, inferred from phenomena, or projected from the measures of Heaven, but must be gained from men for it is the knowledge of the enemy's true situation.*⁴

Since perspicacious commanders at the end of the Spring and Autumn period sought to conceal this information from interlopers and observers, Sunzi advocated resorting to spies, thereby prompting their extensive employment thereafter. Moreover, because horrendous losses were being suffered and enormous expenses incurred in the era's internecine strife, in contrast with self-proclaimed paragons of virtue who eschewed supposedly unrighteous activities or begrudged the expense, he condemned anyone who failed to employ spies by saying "this is the ultimate inhumanity. Such a person is not a general for the people, an assistant for the ruler, or the arbiter of victory."⁵

The *Art of War's* contents thus embrace an underlying conception that might be characterized as the ruthless practice of efficient warfare, which should not be confused with the efficient practice of ruthless warfare.^b "Know the enemy" and "victory without combat" quickly became famous watchwords, as well as constant rejoinders to commanders, radically changing the need for, and nature of, secrecy. No matter how greatly commanders might differ in their approach and emphasis, it quickly became a dominant concern rather than a commonplace, offhand affair. Moreover, insofar as the targets were well articulated, the aspects that required defending were manifest.

Security

In this context it was quickly realized security measures were a prerequisite for thwarting spies and capturing intruders. Apart from employing passive barriers such as palisades and guard posts to ensure impenetrability, common measures included precisely demarking the ground inside camps,^c establishing internal controls, deploying roving patrols in the nearby countryside,⁶ and imposing numerous strictures enforced by an almost bewildering array of punishments. External excursions were barred, visitors excluded, unauthorized movement

a. For example, the *Wujing Zongyao* (*Essentials of the Military Classics*), an encyclopedic Sung dynasty martial compilation that became the basis for the military exams, contains chapters identifying aspects that should be specifically targeted for assessment, including the enemy's generals – such as "Liao Dijiang" 料敵將 ("Assess Enemy Generals") and "Liaodi Zhujiang" 料敵主將 ("Assess the Enemy's Commander-in-chief")—and their disposition, "Liaodi Xingshi" 料敵形勢 ("Assess the Enemy's Disposition of Strategic Power"). (For an overview of the important classic Chinese military writings, see Sawyer, "Military Writings," in *A Military History of China*, David Graff and Robin Higham editors [Westview, 2001].)

b. Even though China had already embarked on an inexorable thrust toward total warfare by the late Spring and Autumn period, in "Planning Offensives" the *Art of War* clearly states the enemy should be preserved to the fullest extent possible, rather than brutalized and destroyed, to increase the profits that might be gained and, no doubt, avoid unnecessarily angering them, thereby increasing their resistance, just like men thrust onto "fatal terrain."

c. The *Wujing Zongyao* and other military compendia preserve intricate schematics for camp layouts.

outside a contingent's designated area prohibited, and the soldiers' natural boisterousness repressed to prevent anyone overhearing loose talk about military activities.⁷

Although premised upon a highly effective command hierarchy that exploited early success in segmenting and maneuvering, the security measures that came to be implemented through the ages relied upon extremely detailed regulations underpinned by a draconian system of mutual responsibility that entangled every member of a unit. Soldiers might be executed for the slightest transgressions, though the heaviest penalty was always reserved for behavior that endangered the army or mission.⁸

As asserted in the extended statement, "people do not have two things they fear equally. If they fear us they will despise the enemy; if they fear the enemy, they will despise us," rewards were expected to provide battlefield incentives, but punishments coerced behavior.^{a,9} For example, according to "Army Orders" (*Junling*) in the Sung Dynasty *Huqian Jing* (*Classic of Tiger Lock*) composed by Xu Dong at the turn of the 11th century, in the realm of secrecy "Anyone who learns the plans or passwords and talks about them outside should be executed." In comparison, the very early *Art of War* only speaks about extreme punishments in conjunction with espionage activities, stating "If the mission is exposed before it has begun, the spy and anyone who was

"In planning, nothing is more important than not being knowable."

informed should be put to death." Out of the fear that hidden scouts or clandestine agents might overhear useful talk about preparations or activities, all discussion of military matters within the camps was not just prohibited, but also rigorously enforced.

At the same time, while this panoply of security measures regulated and physically protected the camp, they couldn't ensure spies wouldn't penetrate or disgruntled or avaricious soldiers wouldn't betray the army's plans. Only the commander's efforts could accomplish the task of keeping secret what should be kept secret. According to a late formulation found in the esoteric *Bingfa Baiyan* (*One Hundred Words of Military Strategy*) dating to just after the Ming's collapse or about 1650 AD,

Something that isn't divulged to the wrong people is termed 'secret' (mi, 秘). One man's affairs are not leaked to a second person, tomorrow's actions are not leaked today. Refine and extend this [idea], being careful not to allow the slightest gap.^b

All the military writings in China's lengthy tradition stress secrecy's importance in terms similar to those first expressed in the *Art of War*. For example, according to the famous Warring States (403–221 BC) text attributed to the great Zhou Dynasty strategist Lu Shang, the *Tai Gong*

Liutao (*Tai Gong's Six Secret Teachings*):

*In employing the army, nothing is more important than obscurity and silence. In planning, nothing is more important than not being knowable. The greatest affairs are not discussed, while the employment of troops is not spoken about. Moreover, words that discuss ultimate affairs are not worth listening to. If your plans are heard about, the enemy will make counter plans. If you are perceived, they will plot against you. If you are known, they will put you in difficulty. If you are fathomed, they will endanger you.*¹⁰

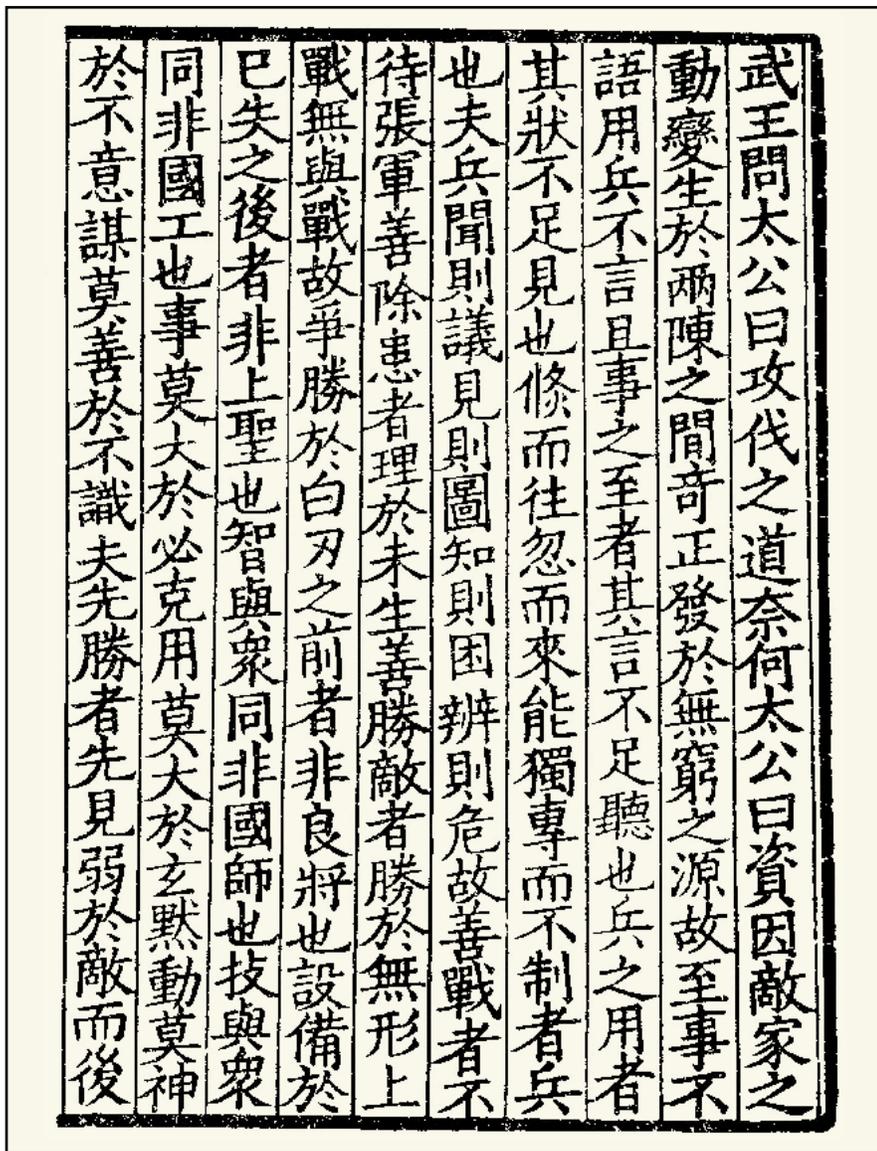
Several strategists asserted that any loss of information or other failure in this regard would entail severe consequences:

*If we maintain secrecy while the enemy has leaks, we will always be victorious. But if the enemy maintains secrecy while we have leaks, the enemy will always be victorious.*¹¹

If the enlightened plans of strategists are leaked, they won't be successful. If they are kept secret, they will be useful. When they become evident, misfortune will be attracted. When they

a. The passage continues: "When the general is able to implement the Dao to awesomeness, his commanders will fear him. When the commanders fear their general, the people will fear their commanders. When the people fear their commanders, then the enemy will fear the people."

b. Literally, "the thickness of a hair." (Jie Xuan, the *Bingfa Baiyan's* author, apparently composed this highly abstract work after unsuccessfully opposing the Manchu conquest that resulted in the Qing Dynasty with a locally raised force and then disappearing.)



A leaf from a woodblock print of *Tai Gong's Six Secret Teachings*. The print is a readily available copy of a Sung Dynasty (960–1279) print.

remain concealed, the army will be preserved.^{a, 12}

Two statements that appear in the *Liutao* regarding the need to be secretive were repeatedly cited thereafter:

The greatest affairs are not discussed, and the employment of troops is not spoken about. Moreover, words that discuss ultimate affairs are not worth listening to, the employment of troops is not so definitive

*as to be visible. Only someone who can exercise sole control, without being governed by other men, is a military weapon.*¹³

*In the Tao of planning, thoroughness and secrecy are treasured.*¹⁴

The late Warring States *Wei Liaozi* (尉繚子) then observed that “control of the army is as secretive as the depths of Earth, as dark and obscure as the heights of Heaven.” The *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong*, dating to the Former Han (206 BC–8 AD), proclaimed, “For the general’s plans one wants secrecy. When the general’s plans are secret, treacherous impulses are thwarted. If the general’s plans leak out, the army will not be able to effect the strategic disposition of power.”¹⁵

The noted early Tang commentator and theorist Li Quan concluded, “Plans are concealed in the mind but affairs are visible in external traces. One whose thoughts and visible expression are identical will be defeated, one whose thoughts and visible expression differ will be victorious. Therefore, the highest plans are not spoken about, great military affairs are not discussed. It is subtle and mysterious.”¹⁶

Commanders sometimes became obsessed with secrecy because it could be betrayed in many ways. According to the *Bingfa Baiyan*: “When it comes to secrecy in meetings, the fear is affairs will leak out in discussions. The fear in discussions is that secrets will be leaked by appearance. The fear for appearance is that they

a. The passage appears under the definition for yin, which generally means dark, passive, or hidden, as opposed to yang which is bright, active, and visible. Yin is defined as “what wisdom cannot perceive.”

will be leaked by emotions. The fear for secrets in emotions is that they will be leaked in dreams and sleep.”¹⁷ Accordingly, Li Quan earlier offered the following advice:

Be profound like the Mysterious Origin free of all images, be an abyss like the unfathomable depths of the sea. When you attain this, yin and yang can no longer be employed to calculate your intentions, ghosts and spirits will be unable to know them, techniques and measures unable to impoverish them, and divinatory methods unable to fathom them, so how much more so enemy generals!¹⁸

While esoteric and difficult to implement, the thrust to absolute secrecy is clearly apparent.

Ignorance and Its Implications

Fearing the usual security measures would always be inadequate, Sunzi advocated the radical approach of concealing the commander’s plans even from his own officers and troops:

It is essential for the general to be tranquil and obscure, upright and self-disciplined, and able to stupefy the eyes and ears of the officers and troops, keeping them ignorant. He alters his management of affairs and changes his strategies to keep other people from recognizing them. He shifts his position and travels indirect routes to keep other people from being able to anticipate him.¹⁹

“What you cast aside in the light may be reaped in the darkness.”

In short, “When you mobilize the army and form strategic plans, you must be unfathomable.”²⁰

Nevertheless, Sunzi obviously assumed the army would be capable of implementing the commander’s plans despite being ignorant of them:^a

At the moment the general has designated, it will be as if they ascended a height and abandoned their ladders. The general advances with them deep into the territory of the feudal lords and then releases the trigger. He commands them as if racing a herd of sheep – they are driven away, driven back, but no one knows where they are going.”²¹

Despite the difficulties entailed by his approach and the infrequency of its implementation, it was a much embraced idealization. According to the Sung dynasty *Wujing Zongyao*, “Whenever about to mount an attack or undertake a siege, only the commanding general knows about it. Even the officers in charge of responding are not informed in advance.”²² Shortly thereafter, Ho Boshi said, “The marvelousness of employing the army lies not just in deceiving the enemy, but in also stupefying the ears and eyes of our own officers and troops.”²³ And someone known as the Taibai Shanren added, “The military values the Tao of deception not just to deceive the enemy, but also to deceive our officers and troops.”

The most complete and sophisticated exposition appears in an anonymous very late Ming dynasty

(1368–1644) compilation known as *Ruminations in a Grass Hut* (*Caolu Jinglue*) under the rubric of “Esteem Secrecy” (尚祕):

Military affairs are a question of subtle strategy. If the commander fails to completely conceal his strategy, it will allow the officers and troops to perceive chinks. Then, when the enemy hears about them, they will prepare. Thus, the army should not know in advance where it is to attack and the commander should be calm and composed. Quickly advancing once your spies learn the enemy is unprepared is the secret to advancing the army.

Beware of leaking clandestine strategies and unorthodox plans even when dreaming and sleeping. Focus upon keeping your deep, dark, far reaching actions from having any discernible traces for then even ghosts and spirits will not be able to ferret them out and the wise will not be able to make plans [against] them. Only thereafter will all your actions accord with your desires.

The author of the *Ruminations* included some specific suggestions for commonly encountered situations in his discussion of the topic:

Sometimes you should be as secretive as a virgin, sometimes as elusive as the wind and thunder. Sometimes what is commonly said will be incorrect, but do

a. In *Strategic Military Power* he speaks about how “strategic power” coerces soldiers to act as desired, irrespective of their inclinations.

“Only those without form cannot be ensnared. . . . For this reason, the Sage . . . moves in the formless so that his deployments cannot be fathomed.”

not seek to correct it. Sometimes you will have to endure rancor and suffer doubt, but do not try to exonerate yourself. When your knowledge precedes others, it is difficult to inform other men about the crux. Even though you question your sub-commanders about your plans, you should still not reveal [anything] because what you cast aside in the light may be reaped in darkness. Confounded and unable to fathom your plans, the army's officers will remain tranquil and pensive. Isn't this what is meant?

However, despite the concept's seductiveness, according to China's own historical records, this sort of absolute secrecy not only proved too extreme for common realization, it invariably engendered insurmountable problems because large operational forces cannot instantaneously implement complex strategies in a real world. Even the most self-reliant commander must allocate assignments and receive assistance in formulating tactical measures, planning logistical and physical activities, disseminating unit orders, and mobilizing and maneuvering the army in accord with his intent. Depending upon the situation, the process might require as little as a few hours or extend over days or weeks.

Actual discussion of the hindrances posed by extreme secrecy didn't arise until the Sung dynasty when incursions and persistent threats from highly mobile steppe peoples severely taxed China's ability to respond militarily. The most incisive appraisal appears in the *Bingfa Baiyan*:²⁴

Generals have stomachs and hearts, thighs and forearms, eyes and ears, claws and teeth, hands and feet, blood and pulse.^a They are all parts of a single body. If secrets are kept from the entire body, how will it differ from keeping a secret from myself? But among them there are the perspicacious and the not perspicacious, those who are circumspect in speech and those who are not, those who are brilliant and those who are not, and those who contend for achievement and those who do not. If I do not select and carefully guard against the others, then those who guard me may, on the contrary, misconstrue (wu 誤) my affairs. How will this differ from me leaking them myself? Thus, the prime technique of secrecy is to keep secret what should be kept secret, but not keep secret what need not be secret.”

In this more realistic approach to maintaining secrecy, one long practiced by default, the solution becomes simply vetting people and trusting

appropriately, as needed: “Commanders not only cannot dwell in isolation, they cannot act alone or formulate plans solely by themselves. For affairs that cannot be undertaken alone, it's just necessary to be careful about whom you entrust them to. If you want to undertake secret affairs, first seek out men who keep secrets.”²⁵

The effects and implications turn out to be surprisingly expansive: “The origins of action should be concealed, the employment [of plans] silenced at the mouth. Nevertheless, it doesn't do any harm to speak about things that can be spoken of in order to show one's credibility. When this sort of sincerity is constantly extended, what isn't secret will become the context for the secret.”²⁶ Albeit with greater and lesser degrees of success, this is the approach that predominated throughout Chinese history.

Formlessness and Nebulosity

Unexpected complexities prompted disagreements about how best to preserve secrecy. The unimaginative, who tended to be in the majority, were usually satisfied with mundane measures such as demanding silence on the part of all the participants and augmenting physical security. Others, still fearful of clandestine agents and the potential actions of the disaffected, advocated two far more sophisticated approaches: being “formless” and adopting a dazzling array of deceptive measures. While the former generally relied upon physical techniques such as obscurity and concealment, the latter well accorded

a. These of course euphemistically refer to his close associates, staff, observers, and so forth, reflecting an analogy that first appears in the *Liutao* chapter, “The King's Wings.” The idea of the mind controlling the four limbs is also prominent in the military writings.

with the assumption that ‘warfare is the Dao of deception’^a to exploit misinformation equally with feints, misdirection, and deceit to become unfathomable.

Within this context debate arose over whether it was better to be formless or deceptive. The latter has the collateral benefit that enemies might be manipulated to good advantage, the former ensures not just being unknowable, but also causes the enemy to disperse their forces in order to prepare against multiple possibilities and simultaneously induces doubt. As many critical military concepts, being “formless” was first discussed in almost incidental fashion in the *Art of War*:

*When someone excels in attacking, the enemy does not know where to mount his defense. When someone excels at defense, the enemy does not know where to attack. Subtle! Subtle! It approaches the formless. Spiritual, spiritual. It attains the soundless.*²⁷

Or, as summarized in the *Liutao*,

*When matters are not discussed and the general preserves their secrecy, he is spirit like.*²⁸

The very image of formlessness (wu xing 無形, “without form”) or being formless prompted esoteric disquisitions:

Only those without form cannot be ensnared. For this reason, the Sage conceals himself in the

“Ever since antiquity commanders have been defeated because of a single misjudgment.”

*originless so that his emotions cannot be perceived. He moves in the formless so that his deployments cannot be fathomed. Without tactics or appearance, he acts appropriately. Without name or shape he changes and creates an image. Even among those with acute vision, who can spy out his nature?*²⁹

Whatever the connotations, in essence it isn’t synonymous with invisibility (as some thinkers misconstrued), but with avoiding any display of identifiable characteristics, with being nebulous and amorphous to external observers.

Divergences apart, the true objectives shouldn’t be overlooked: keeping enemies ignorant, preventing them from discerning reality, inducing doubt, and compelling them to wastefully expend energy. According to the *Art of War*, “If I can determine the enemy’s disposition while I have no perceptible form, I can concentrate my forces while the enemy will be fragmented.”³⁰ The basic principle is simply keeping the enemy ignorant so that “the location where we will engage the enemy must not become known to them. If it is not known, then the positions they must prepare to defend will be numerous . . . and then the forces we will engage will be few.”³¹

Although the emphasis historically fell upon physical means, such as manipulating the army’s disposition

to conceal its actual strength and the presence of incipient formations—“hiding yang in yang”—and basic obscuration techniques, including the use of smoke and dust, deceptive measures often played a crucial role.³² However, their real importance lay in manipulating the enemy and causing doubt and misjudgment, thereby maintaining secrecy through confusion and uncertainty. Early thinkers who believed it is impossible to prevent the loss of vital information therefore advocated the deliberate release of misinformation to not only distract the enemy and structure their perceptions, but also foster sufficient confidence in the certainty of projected events that information and behavior contrary to the orthodox interpretation would be offhandedly dismissed.

Causing doubt and misjudgment remains focal, but the numerous possibilities (“noise”) being fostered renders any real information the enemy might acquire highly problematic, accounting for chapters such as “First Attack their Minds” (先攻其心) and “Use Many Methods to Cause Misjudgments” (多方誤之) in the early Tang dynasty (618–907) *Tongdian*.^b This approach reflects a traditional belief in the importance of causing misjudgments in the enemy. The best expression is found in “Cause Misjudgment in the Enemy” (誤敵), a chapter in the Ming dynasty *Ruminations in a Grass Hut*:

a. First articulated in the *Art of War*’s “Initial Estimations,” it is a belief that underpins Chinese military thought and pervades its military writings.

b. The *Tongdian* was compiled by Du You (735-812), one of the 10 noted commentators to the *Art of War*, to provide a historical retrospective on governing. Not only are 15 seminal chapters devoted to military topics, the book initiates the case study approach in China.

“Of the many harms that can beset an army, vacillation is the greatest. Of disasters that can befall an army, none surpasses doubt.”

Ever since antiquity, commanders have been defeated because of a [single] misjudgment.^a Misjudgment is quickly followed by error; just when victory and defeat hang in the balance. It might be compared with a Wei-ch'i game in which the two opponents confront each other, even recognized heroes. But if their subordinates make mistakes, the enemy will certainly take advantage of them and the entire enterprise will be lost. Surpassing generals have therefore always employed numerous measures to cause misjudgments in the enemy.^b

As usual, the *Bingfa Baiyan* contains a quintessential discussion which defines “doubt” (yi 疑) actively, as “perturbing and confusing the enemy’s mind.” According to the accompanying explication:

Doubt has been a prevalent affliction ever since antiquity, but it is also something that commanders can bring about. People have eyes so their eyes invariably see things. When they see the semblance of shapes (形似) they are doubtful. People have ears so their ears invariably hear things. When

they hear the semblance of things (形似) they are doubtful. People have minds so their minds cannot be without perception. When they perceive the semblance of shapes (形似) they are doubtful.

The conclusion for another term, “make the enemy doubtful” (yidi 疑敵), analyzes the effects:

Armies are victorious through being decisive but defeated by numerous doubts. Therefore, strategists must have methods for making the enemy doubtful. When the enemy is doubtful they will carefully investigate the subtle possibilities and not advance, they will conceive of numerous affairs and be unable to be decisive. We should take advantage of their indecision and, in response to ongoing changes and transformations, decide our strategy and adopt unorthodox measures.

Thus, while both physical and abstract means are employed and concealment and silence maintain ignorance, misinformation and disinformation^c lead people astray and cause doubt, which is corrosive and debilitating:

Of the many harms that can beset an army, vacillation is the greatest. Of disasters that can befall an army, none surpasses doubt. . . One who excels in warfare will not lose an advantage when he perceives it or be doubtful when he meets the moment. One who loses an advantage or lags behind the time for action will, on the contrary, suffer from disaster.³³

While not necessarily the primary objective, secrecy can therefore be preserved through complexity and misdirection. Accordingly, Li Quan asserted:³⁴

When your mind is filled with great plans, display only minor concerns. When your mind is planning to seize something, feign being about to give it away. Obscure the real, cast suspicion upon the doubtful. When the real and doubtful are not distinguishable, strength and weakness will be indeterminate.

Many means and elaborate measures were adopted in the highly theorized quest to effectively create false impressions and spread spurious and deceptive information, including misleading announcements, phony orders, benign and pernicious rumors, disinformation agents, phony defectors, duped prisoners, naive spies,

a. In Book III of *Questions and Replies*, purportedly a dialogue on military affairs between the surpassing Tang general Li Ching and Emperor Taizung, Li says: “In ordinary situations involving the use of the military, if the enemy does not make an error in judgment, how can our army conquer them? It may be compared with a Chinese chess match in which the two enemies begin equal in strength. As soon as someone makes a mistake, truly no one can rescue him. For this reason, in both ancient and modern times, victory and defeat have proceeded from a single error, so how much more would this be the case with many mistakes?”

b. The text continues by enumerating a number of measures and techniques that can cause misjudgment, all intended to “display a form that the enemy must follow.”

c. Disinformation being deliberately fabricated for a specific purpose, in contrast with misinformation which lacks avowed objectives other than causing confusion.

double agents, misplaced documents, and the victims of the “ploy of suffering flesh,” which turned upon physically punishing an individual who then provides the enemy with supposedly vital information. Apart from providing a motivation for defecting, the individual’s highly visible suffering, even mutilation, of course attests to the information’s veracity.^a The effectiveness of such measures was generally ensured by following the principle of misleading people by their own beliefs and by confirming feints and false thrusts with visible, at least minimal, physical activity.

Realm of Communications

Being confined to natural transportation modes based upon horses and rivers, communication wasn’t just slow and difficult in the pre-electronics era, but also highly vulnerable and easily interrupted. Messengers might be slain, preventing delivery, but the real danger lay in them being captured and in written materials being intercepted. Distant relay systems that relied on smoke and fire, while more rapid, were also susceptible to the vagaries of inclement weather, errors arising from the difficulty of managing the fires and smoke, and inattention among the intended recipients.^b More significantly, as the meanings of such signals were gener-

Staff officers were specifically assigned to the task of “creating deceptive signs and seals and issuing false designations and orders” as early as the Warring States period.

ally transparent, astute enemies could easily fabricate false signals.

The most succinct discussion of the need to securely transmit information is found in the *Bingfa Baiyan* under the rubric of chuan (傳), which basically means “transmit” or “pass on.”

Successfully passing on information is termed transmission (chuan).

When an army on maneuver doesn’t have any method of communicating, the divided will not be able to rejoin nor the distant respond. When they are mutually cut off, they will be defeated. On the other hand, if it’s possible to communicate, but the communications aren’t secret, the information will enter the enemy’s calculations.

The authors conclude, “Transmitting information is the most important thing in the army, but every army’s commands differ. The essence is keeping the enemy from becoming aware of them while our own army knows them. It is the most secret of affairs.”

Techniques for clandestine communication began to evolve as early as the Warring states period, including ciphers, physical concealment, multiple messengers, and transmission in parts.^c Accordingly, the *Bingfa Baiyan* states:

When two armies meet, it’s necessary to arrange secret signals. [To communicate] a thousand li away, you should use ordinary appearing letters. Write incomplete characters, send out formless letters, even employ non-paper [bamboo] strips. Those involved in transmitting them won’t be knowledgeable, anyone who manages to obtain them won’t find a trace. It’s spiritual, spiritual!

Authenticity might be ensured by a variety of physical means, not that tokens of confirmation couldn’t be stolen. Elaborate seals, copies of whose impressions were maintained in central locations, confirmed the assignment of authority and the identical, matching halves of small cast bronze figures, especially tigers, validated orders and secret communications. Tallies with similar meaning were also created from bamboo strips

a. These and other often highly complex measures such as making the dubious more dubious and the real deliberately obvious to foster the conviction it couldn’t possibly be real, as well as numerous historical illustrations, are reprised in Sawyer, Lever of Power.

b. A simple, early border warning system is attested as early as the eighth century BC. More elaborate systems from the Han onward that exploited fires, smoke, and even flags atop relay towers were capable of conveying basic information about enemy activities including force size both day and night, providing only heavy weather didn’t thwart efforts. (“Hou Wang” in the *Beizhenglu* notes all the ways in which wind, rain, dust, and fog can interfere with transmission reliability.)

c. Clandestine changes that radically affected the meaning could be affected by codes or special phrases embedded within the document or by simple physical means as the style of calligraphy, size of characters, darkness of ink, type or size of paper or bamboo strip. External cues could also be provided by the messenger’s insignia, physical stature, color of horse, type of weapons he might be carrying, or even the type or color of the dispatch container. For an extensive discussion, see Sawyer, “Clandestine Communication in Historic China,” *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Autumn 2014.

Shadows have shadows within them, but shadows also have reality within them.

split in half in the expectation that the edges, writing, and deliberate incisions would need to match exactly. Coins were also sometimes cleaved for the same purpose.³⁵ Negatively, unless additional verbal checks had been prearranged, anyone who managed to acquire these tallies and challenge coins could readily employ them to authenticate false orders and forged communications.

Conversely, purportedly valid communications that fall into enemy hands can be employed for disinformation purposes. Given that the steppe peoples were thoroughly familiar with the meanings of imperial smoke, fire, and flag signals, they were the most obvious candidates for exploitation despite the limited informational scope. Common techniques included reversing the significance of signals coupled in binary pairs, shifting the entire range of meanings, and transposing the methods of communication so that, for example, outgoing orders signaling a retreat now signified an attack.^a Similarly, drums might be employed to sound a retreat and gongs an attack, reversing the usual significance.

The capture or apparently unwitting loss of written communications similarly provides an opportunity to disseminate disinformation and thus ensure the secrecy of actual plans. Forged documents might be misplaced or “accidentally” left out for spies to view, letters with misleading

contents dispatched to real individuals in the expectation of interception, phony letters intended to implicate or estrange recipients sent to important enemy personnel, and contrived orders and plans allowed to be captured in variants of the famous Haversack Ruse.³⁶ Staff officers were specifically assigned to the task of “creating deceptive signs and seals and issuing false designations and orders” as early as the Warring States period.³⁷ However, just as with physical obscuration measures, these efforts need to be systematic, consistent, and unremitting because singular events might go unnoticed or be too jarring to have dramatic impact.

Final Musings

The systematic implementation of disinformation not only misleads the enemy and muddles their thoughts, preserving secrecy, it often spawns sometimes lethal doubt, as an incident involving Cao Cao and Yuan Shao illustrates. On the verge of being annihilated in 200 AD, Cao Cao unexpectedly defeated Yuan Shao’s vastly superior force and embarked on the trajectory that would eventually see his descendants usurp the emperorship.

While Yuan Shao’s army was encamped at Guandu across the river from Cao Cao, one night a reconnaissance patrol under Xun Yu managed to slay a messenger racing

away from Cao’s encampment. As a result, they captured an order calling for the urgent dispatch of provisions. Concluding the enemy was growing weak from hunger, Xun advised Yuan Shao to quickly strike. However, Yuan Shao rejected the suggestion even though his forces outnumbered the enemy three to one because another adviser claimed it had to be a ruse, that the crafty Cao Cao had anticipated the messenger’s capture and concocted this false information to lure them into attacking.

Fearing his advice would continue to be rebuffed by an indecisive leader, Xun defected to Cao Cao and betrayed the location of Shao’s food depot. Cao Cao immediately exploited the newly acquired information to lead a famous nighttime cavalry raid that resulted in seizing desperately needed provisions and incinerating the rest, causing severe consternation in Yuan Shao’s own camp. When Cao Cao subsequently decimated Yuan’s famished and dispirited army, Yuan reportedly became so enraged that he suffered a stroke and died, ending the danger to Cao Cao’s small force.³⁸ Even though a vital secret had been divulged, Cao Cao’s reputation for exploiting unorthodox and deceptive tactics engendered the doubt needed to moot the loss.

Shadows have shadows within them, but shadows also have reality within them. Within the real there are shadows, within the real there is reality. Reality and shadow thus inexhaustibly complete each other.³⁹



a. Other physical means included disguise, first advocated in the Warring States period but primarily used along the border, and changing army insignia, flags, and designations. (A number of such measure are discussed in “Countering Leaks,” *Cuiwei Beizhenglu*.)

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Endnotes

1. Sun Zi, *Art of War (Sunzi Bingfa)*, “Planning Offensives” (Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* (Basic Books, 1993, reprinted in 2007).
2. Ibid. Conversely, “One who knows neither the enemy nor himself will invariably be defeated in every engagement.”
3. *Art of War*, “Initial Estimations.” The chapter’s title, “Shi Ji” (始計), may also be translated as “Initial Assessments.”
4. *Art of War*, “Employing Spies.”
5. Ibid.
6. For examples, see “Military Instructions, II” in the *Wei Liaozi* and “Li Ying” (“Establishing Camps”) in the *Caolu Jinglue (Ruminations in a Grass Hut)*.
7. “Orders for Segmenting and Blocking Off Terrain” in the *Wei Liaozi* preserves an example of the strict controls imposed upon random movement within camps.
8. For an example of Qin military regulations, see “Orders for Severe Punishments” in the *Wei Liaozi*. The *Wei Liaozi* contains several chapters on responsibilities, regulations, and punishments.
9. *Wei Liaozi*, “Tactical Balance of Power in Attacks.”
10. *Tai Gong Liutao (Tai Gong’s Six Secret Teachings)*, “The Army’s Strategic Power.” (Translation in *Seven Military Classics*)
11. “Fan Xie,” *Cuiwei Beizhenglu (Cuiwei’s Record of Northern Punitive Expeditions)*. (The book was written by Hua Yue [Hua Cuiwei], who served as a border commander around the turn of the 13th century.)
12. *Bingfa Baiyan (One Hundred Words of Military Strategy)*, “Yin.”
13. *Tai Gong Liutao*, “The Army’s Strategic Power.”
14. “Three Doubts.” “Junhao” (“Army Orders”) in the *Caolu Jinglue* similarly insists upon preserving the secrecy of all orders until they are issued.
15. *Huang Shigong Sanlue (Three Strategies of Huang Shigong)*, “Middle Strategy.” (See translation in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics*).
16. *Taibai Yinjing* (“Submerged Plans”). Apparently an experienced mid-level military commander, Li Quan was probably active from about 745 to 765 CE. The book’s title is somewhat awkward to render in English because taibai, meaning “great white,” refers to the planet Venus which was as prominently associated with warfare in China as Mars was in the West. Yinjing is generally taken as “hidden” or “esoteric” classic.
17. *Art of War*, “Secrecy.”
18. *Taibai Yinjing*.
19. *Art of War*, “Nine Terrains.”
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. *Wujing Zongyao (Essentials of the Military Classics)*, “Xingjun Yuesu” (“Constraints for Maneuvering the Army”).
23. *He Boshi Luelun, “Wei-lun, xia”* (“Discussion of Wei, part II”). A national professor of military science late in the 11th century, Dr. He was one of the editors of the vastly important compilation of classic military writings known as the *Wujing Qishu (Seven Military Classics)* consisting of the *Art of War*, *Wuzi*, *Sima Fa*, *Liutao (Six Secret Teachings)*, *Huangshi Gong Sanlue (Three Strategies of the Duke of Yellow Rock)*, *Wei Liaozi*, and *Tang Taizung Li Weigong Wendui (Questions and Replies between Tang Taizung and Li Weigong)* that became a basis of the imperial military exams. (Translations of all seven may be found in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*.)
24. *Bingfa Baiyan*, found under the definition for “secrecy,” mi.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. *Art of War*, “Vacuity and Substance.”
28. Ibid., “Army’s Strategic Power.”
29. *Huainanzi*, “Bingluxun.” A heavily Daoist but eclectic book purportedly intended as a guide for governing, the *Huainanzi* was compiled under the patronage of the king of Huainan, Liu An, and presented to the throne in 139 BCE. (Liu An was eventually executed for planning a revolt in 122 BCE.)
30. *Art of War*, “Vacuity and Substance.”
31. Ibid.
32. For a discussion of manipulating overt and hidden aspects, *yang* and *yin* respectively, as well as “vacuity” and “substance,” to mesmerize and mislead the enemy, see Ralph Sawyer, *Lever of Power: Military Deception in China and the West*.
33. *Tai Gong Liutao*, “The Army’s Strategic Power.”

34. *Taibai Yinjing*.
35. A number of these are discussed in the *Wujing Zongyao* chapter “Chuanxin Pai.”
36. For a discussion and examples see Sawyer, “Disinformation, I,” *Lever of Power*.
37. Cited from “The King’s Wings,” *Liutao*.
38. For further discussion of various aspects of this clash, see Sawyer, *Tao of Deception of Fire and Water*.
39. *Bingfa Baiyan*, “Shadows.”

