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Safeguarding Victory for Both Educators and Scholars: A Diary Study Based on the 36 Stratagems

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Abstract *This teacher diary study is a first attempt at applying the ancient Chinese military text, the 36 Stratagems, to contemporary education. China is one of the world's most ancient civilizations. Its classics are timeless and universal in that they embody a philosophy that is both multidimensional and holistic. For this reason, it is possible to apply ancient Chinese military texts to modern-day competitive situations that, whilst not necessarily on a battlefield, are highly competitive, such as the field of education. In examining the 36 Stratagems through this diary study, it is shown how they can inspire educators and students to use their tactical essence in a nurturing manner to achieve mutual victory against all the obstacles that stand in their way to scholarly success.*

Keywords 36 Stratagems, Chinese philosophy, educational strategy, teacher diary studies

Introduction

It may seem surprising that a military text on tactics such as the *36 Stratagems* is applied to education in this diary study. Yet, contemporary education is highly competitive, and educators and their students have to be highly innovative in order to survive and thrive. The *36 Stratagems* is thus helpful to educators and their students who seek the application of its unconventional tactical wisdom in the promotion of “scholarly success.”

“Scholarly success” in this study implies the transcendence from the mere accumulation of “top-down” knowledge and facts towards becoming autonomous and critical thinkers. It is about detaching from short-term objectives on grades to becoming more focused on longer-term goals such as life skills. Perhaps the Chinese proverb that best describes this is: *The teacher opens the door, but the student walks through it.* It therefore implies going beyond the mere teaching and acquisition of practical skills by rote for later regurgitation to where students become curious, self-reliant and inquisitive, and where life itself becomes their teacher. It requires turning around the tactics of the *36 Stratagems* so that they do

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not fulfill their originally intended destructive battlefield roles, but rather promote nurturing classroom roles, yet at the same time maintaining their tactical essence at the core.

The inspiration for using a teacher diary approach to apply the *36 Stratagems* to education came from two sources: first, an earlier research project of applying Sun Tzu's *Art of War* to education with a teacher diary study (Jeffrey, 2010), and the benefits gained from that; second, the realization that the strategic philosophy embedded within ancient Chinese philosophy is still relevant to the contemporary world, and has a universal and perpetually fresh quality.

This diary study helped bridge the gap between an aesthetic understanding of this classic and its practical day-to-day applications, and took place over a period of three years (between 2010 and 2013) at the Academic Bridge Program of Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. The students were local females between the ages of 18 and 21. However, it must be stressed that the thought that shaped the contents of the diary entries began over 15 years ago at the outset of my career as an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teacher and embraces cumulative experience of teaching English in South Africa, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Admittedly, a diary study is not the only way of doing this type of introspective research to find insights. Joining forums on the Internet or study groups comprised of those with similar interests can serve a similar function. But a diary study was chosen because it was decided to take a thorough approach.

The author is not Chinese, but has had a life-long interest in Chinese philosophy and believes that contemporary educators in the West can successfully apply it. Therefore, it is quite possible that errors may have been made especially with regard to the interpretations and applications of the stratagems. Such are purely that of the author and they are merely presented as "food for thought." Ways in which other educators see such applications and apply them is ultimately shaped by the uniquely prevailing circumstances in which they and their students find themselves.

A Brief History of the *36 Stratagems*

The *36 Stratagems* is a collection of short unconventional proverbs that capture the essence of Chinese philosophy on military tactics. Its origins are unknown and, given that it is a distillation of a wide body of written and oral thought over a substantial time, it is assumed to have no single author.

Each of the *36 Stratagems* is three to four Chinese characters in length, and it is a very short book that refines an extensive range of thought to the core. Whilst originally intended for military purposes, the *36 Stratagems* is equally applicable to non-military situations of a competitive nature such as business, politics and diplomacy given its succinct, holistic and strategic nature.

It is not known exactly when it was written but its stratagems date back to the Spring and Autumn and Three Kingdoms periods of China's history (from around 722 BC to 280). This was a turbulent time beginning about approximately 2,500 years ago and spanning over 1000 years in duration. Yet, despite its turbulence, it was also a time of great philosophical awakening and The Hundred Schools of Thought flourished at this time as well.

According to Tung and Tung (2005, p. 4) the only early historical reference to a possible original *36 Stratagems* is to be found in the *Biography of Wang Jingze*, the seventh volume of the *Book of Qi*, written by Xiao Zixian in the Liang Dynasty (502 – 557) where the 36th stratagem “run away today and live to fight another day” is briefly mentioned regarding a general who had no other option but to retreat during a battle in order to survive. The original text containing the *36 Stratagems*, if indeed there had been one, was probably lost in the sands of time forever.

All the stratagems that are used today are from an annotated copy dating back to the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644) that appeared unexpectedly at a roadside stall in China's Shaanxi province in 1941 titled *The Secret Art of War: The 36 Stratagems*. In 1971, all *36 Stratagems* from this annotated copy were made available to the public by the Chinese government. Whilst it is not known who the author of this annotated copy was, it has become a well-known text in China today, and is rapidly becoming popular in the West.

Modern Literature Review

Numerous books based on the *36 Stratagems* have been written in Chinese and published in China which are unknown to the West. However, Von Senger and Gubitzi (1991), Verstappen (1999), Koiang and Yi (1992) and Haichan (1991) are among those who introduced the *36 Stratagems* to the West. They showed western readers how the counter-intuitive nature of the *36 Stratagems* could supplement the practical modes of western thinking and make it more efficient, as well as to avoid and resolve conflicts. Their works have also led to an increased awareness of the Chinese way of thinking among westerners, and have served to minimize potential cultural misunderstandings.

The wide applicability of the *36 Stratagems* beyond the battlefield is most evident in its adaptations to general strategy by Yuan (1991), to negotiation by Brahm (1995), to the contemporary business world by Krippendorff (2003) and Von Senger (2006), as well as to the Japanese board game “Go” by Xiaochun (1996). Tung and Tung (2005, 2010) researched the *36 Stratagems* and identified 28 basic behaviors within them, and added 6 extra stratagems to complement and supplement them further.

All these applications of the *36 Stratagems* to the contemporary western world have also shown that they can be applied to maximize benefits, whilst minimizing costs and side effects in strongly competitive situations. They have illustrated with

practical day-to-day examples the clear benefits to practitioners across a wide spectrum of competitive endeavors.

Prior to this present study, it would seem that the *36 Stratagems* had not yet been applied to the field of education. Therefore this study is a first attempt at applying the *36 Stratagems*, based on the author's interpretations on how the stratagems might be helpful to educators in forming their own tactical approaches to scholastic matters.

Philosophical Context of the 36 Stratagems

The *36 Stratagems* relate not to one, but to many schools of Chinese traditional thought given its embrace of a wide array of fact and folklore over a space exceeding a millennium. Therefore, there are elements of Confucianism, Legalism, Mohism, Hedonism, and Taoism, as well as others that flourished during the Hundred Schools of Thought era which existed within the Spring and Autumn and the Three Kingdoms periods. Of all these philosophical contributories, some require specific mention and some elaboration at this juncture. These are the classics known as the *I-Ching*, *The Art of War*, and *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

The I-Ching

The *36 Stratagems* draws noticeably on the *I-Ching* (also known as *The Book of Changes*), a 29th century B.C. divination guide based on hexagrams written by Fu Xi, and which is one of the Five Confucian Classics (Tung and Tung, 2005). The *I-Ching* is one of the most ancient of China's historical texts, and perhaps the world's oldest book, based on a divination method that is still used today, including in the West. Although it was based on divination, it was essentially a wise book that gave advice on how to act judiciously in the face of fluctuating situations. The *I-Ching* has 64 hexagrams comprised of six-lined broken (*yin*) and unbroken (*yang*) lines arranged in a circular fashion. There is a situational description for each hexagram in the oracular text that determines the outcomes of enquiries based on the changing *yin* and *yang* compositions of the hexagrams.

The relationship with the *I-Ching* is hinted at in this brief prologue at the outset of the *36 Stratagems*:

Six multiplied by six equals thirty-six. Calculations produce tactics which in turn produce calculations. Each side depends on the other. Based on this correlative relationship, ploys against the enemy are devised. Rigid application of military theory will only result in death on the battlefield.

However, one should be careful not to draw too close an association between the *36 Stratagems* with the *I-Ching* given that, as Tung and Tung noted: "Probably, the

elements of I-Ching numerology were added merely to create an aura of mystery and antiquity” (2005, p. 6).

Thus, while the link between the *36 Stratagems* and the *I-Ching* may not be strong in a “hexagrammatical” sense, both texts do focus on the interplay of *yin* and *yang* elements, and both deal with such relationships to discover insights that more clearly understand the underlying dynamics of changing conditions and how best to deal with them.

*The Art of War*¹

The *36 Stratagems* also has philosophical approaches that are similar with *The Art of War*, the 2,500 year-old classic on military strategy by Sun Tzu.

The Art of War advocates judicious strategic planning and positioning for the resolution of conflict. Sun Tzu stressed that reaching strategic objectives without fighting was superior to direct battle, and that battles should ideally be won off the battlefield given that it is considerably more important to out-think, than to out-fight the opponent. Sun Tzu said: “The skillful strategist defeats the enemy without doing battle, captures the enemy without laying siege, and overthrows the enemy state without protracted war” (p. 16).

Deception—and formlessness—was the essence of strategy for Sun Tzu. He warned about repeating past successful strategies. Sun Tzu said: “Water has no constant form; war has no constant dynamic” (p. 38). Thus forcing the opponent to manoeuvre and react reveals its strengths and weaknesses, and the more one knows these strengths and weaknesses, the more one can evade the strengths and assail the weaknesses.

It is possible that the philosophy of *The Art of War* served as inspiration for several of the *36 Stratagems*. For example, Sun Tzu said: “First on the battlefield waits for the enemy fresh. Last on the battlefield charges into the fray exhausted” (p. 31), which may have inspired the 4th stratagem: *Wait at ease for the enemy*. Sun Tzu also said: “Engage directly, secure victory indirectly” (p. 26), which may have inspired the 6th stratagem: *Make a feint to the East while attacking to the West*. And Sun Tzu said: “If men are tired, morale low, strength exhausted, treasure spent. Then the feudal lords will exploit the disarray and attack. This even the wisest will be powerless to defend” (p. 10), which may have inspired the 5th stratagem: *Loot a burning house*. These are but a few of the many correlations between *The Art of War* and the *36 Stratagems*. It should also be noted, however, that whilst the philosophy of *The Art of War* is on a broad strategic level, the philosophy of the *36 Stratagems* is focused more at a tactical level.

¹ All Sun Tzu quotations are from the Minford (2003) annotated translation of *The Art of War*.

The Romance of the Three Kingdoms

The *36 Stratagems* also draws quite strongly on the thoughts and actions of Zhuge Liang, the chancellor of the Kingdom of Shu Han (221 – 263), and a great military strategist of the Three Kingdoms Period (who lived from around 220 to 280). The Ming dynasty historical novel (written, circa 1360) titled *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong (2002) outlines fictional battles of this time that feature Zhuge Liang, and other heroes of that time such as Liu Bei (a warlord who later became ruler of Shu Han), as well as Guan Yu and Zhang Fei (two generals who served Liu Bei) relates to many of the *36 Stratagems*. One example among several is the 32nd stratagem: *Empty City Ploy* which could have been inspired by Zhuge Liang. He saved a strategic city called Chang'an, by creating the appearance that it was deserted (solitarily playing a zither at the city gate). The suspicion this created among the invaders that they were about to be ambushed unnerved them to the point that they turned around and left hastily.

It should also be mentioned that the philosophy of Taoism is important as well to the *36 Stratagems*, although this will be discussed towards the end of this paper, given that it adds an extra dimension to the standard chronological manner of examining the stratagems that was used for the diary study.

What Teacher Diary Studies Are

Teacher diaries are written accounts of experiences that teachers encounter, not only with students in the classroom, but also within the broader context of their work, such as the administration, colleagues and the wider professional, even personal, environment.

The entries are examined for recurring patterns leading to insights that can offer advances in professional development. In addition, these studies are an effective and thorough means of attaining a balanced self-perspective, giving teachers the courage to challenge previously held opinions that, due to their rigidity, limit the deployment of appropriate strategy to cope with adversity.

Diary studies make teachers acutely aware of their circumstances, in a similar way to what psychologists refer to as “attentional bias.” Baron (2000) described this phenomenon as the drawing of our attention to circumstances and concepts that we may not have consciously realized. For example, one hears a new word, or an idea, for the first time and thereafter one hears it regularly within a short time causing one to wonder why one had not heard of it before. The reality is that it had been heard before, but only when heard at a time that was highly relevant did it become significant. A teacher diary works in the same way by creating highly relevant stimuli that sharpen and focus awareness, for the revelation of insights.

Hundleby and Breet (1988), Bailey (1990), Nunan (1992), Jarvis (1992), Bell (1993) and Henderson, Morris and Fitz-Gibbon (1987) are notable linguists who acknowledged the practical benefits of teacher diary studies, as well as their wide-

ranging applications for the professional development of teachers.

Both students and teachers can use diaries. According to Bailey, a diary is:

[A] first-person account of a language learning or teaching experience documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns or salient events [...and] an attractive way of gathering information about the way individuals spend their time [...which] provide valuable information about work patterns and activities. (Bailey, 1990, p. 215)

Hundleby and Breet (1988) wrote about the use of notebooks on in-service teacher training courses, and noted that they provided a structure and a motivation for developing self-awareness and for overcoming a resistance to new techniques in teaching.

Jarvis (1992) explored the practical use of teacher diaries with teachers on a short methodology course and highlighted their value as self-reflection, from which new ideas arose based on experiences. She summarized this by mentioning: "Those who succeeded in reflecting on practice seem also to reveal a heightened sense of their own responsibility for their learning and for changing their teaching. They seem to have more confidence in their own ability to act" (1992, p. 142).

Nunan stated that teacher diaries "have been used in investigations of second language acquisition, teacher-learner interaction, teacher education, and other aspects of language learning and use" (1992, pp. 118-119).

In order to maximize their benefits, Bailey (1990) pointed out that, when writing a diary, it is important to substantiate assertions and to: "...support reflective comments with examples from class sessions or actual language data [and be] systematic, thorough and honest" (1990, p. 221).

Teacher diary studies require much dedication because they are time consuming. Bailey pointed out that: "The procedures for keeping a diary are relatively simple, technologically speaking, but the process does require discipline and patience." (1990, p. 218), and Bell noted that those who undertake teacher diary studies:

...come from a self-selected profile: people who choose to conduct diary studies probably have different psychological profiles from those who dislike the idea [and] simply writing diary entries does not yield the maximum potential benefit of the process. In order to really learn from the record, the diarist should re-read the journal entries and try to find the patterns therein (Bell, 1993, p. 224).

In addition to being thorough, teacher diary studies should also be unbiased and frank. Henderson et al. (1987) researched the measurement of attitudes and

underlined the importance of recognizing the innate tendency to be biased, and to guard against it:

The bias is not intentional; it is just a natural outcome of the fact that people have mindsets that result in selective recall. Most people are not naturally good observers. Unless they are instructed in advance to look for specific behaviors, people remember only behaviors that fit into their view of the world. (Henderson et al., 1987, p. 31)

Teacher diaries are indeed protracted and challenging exercises on many levels, and the approach will not necessarily benefit everyone. However, they do offer a thorough route to a deeper self-understanding, together with deeper insights towards the environment. As such, they are a catalyst of positive personal change in professional development.

We now turn to this diary study to apply the *36 Stratagems* to education.

The Teacher Diary Study to Apply the *36 Stratagems* to Education

One of the greatest challenges of this diary study was to explain the *36 Stratagems* in conventional academic terms, and to provide a theoretical framework to satisfy the rigor and preciseness expected of mainstream academia. This is because a working understanding of the stratagems relies on an appreciation of formlessness, through the interplay of paradoxical features. This does not mean that conventional academic approaches would be invalid as a tool to examine the stratagems, but it needs to be balanced with the mystical characteristics that are also very much a part of the stratagems themselves.

Theoretical Framework

The *36 Stratagems* does however have a conventional structure in that it consists of six chapters with each in turn comprised of six stratagems. It is divided into two halves: the first 18 stratagems are for when conditions are favorable, and the last 18 stratagems are for when conditions are unfavorable. Each half of the *36 Stratagems* is further divided into 3 sections of 6 stratagems each as follows:

For favorable conditions:

To gain the advantage: stratagems 1 to 6

To challenge: stratagems 7 to 12

To attack (or “for taking bold initiatives”): stratagems 13 to 18

For unfavorable conditions:

To bewilder: stratagems 19 to 24

To defend: stratagems 25 to 30

To survive: stratagems 31 to 36

Before typing the diary entries into my laptop computer, it was considered, first of all, if a situation being experienced was one that related to “favourable” or and “unfavourable” conditions. If it related to a favorable condition, it would be further decided whether it was situation conducive for “gaining an advantage,” for “challenging” or for “attacking” (or for “taking bold initiatives”). Likewise, if it related to an unfavourable condition, it would be further decided whether it was a situation necessary for “bewildering,” for “defending” or for “surviving” (the most dire situation of all). Then the entries would be entered accordingly.

Later, the entries were read again and contemplated more deeply, and summarized further. The WordSmith Tools program (Scott, 1997), a program normally utilized in creating concordances as an aid to studying corpora, was used to find key words within concordances. This was especially helpful in alerting my attention to underlying and related thought patterns throughout long texts. Looking at these concordances of sentences and paragraphs and regrouping them paved the way for several insights and highlighted the interrelationship of perspectives. This part of the diary study, the sifting, shifting and rewriting part, was the most demanding and time consuming component of the work. Finally, another Chinese proverb for each stratagem was chosen that carried a similar meaning to it in order to express its tactical message in another way, for the purpose of further clarifications and possible applications.

The Teacher Diary Study

The results are presented below within the same structure and in chronological order (each stratagem is listed with its original battlefield intention, followed by a summary of its application and a related Chinese proverb):

For Favorable Conditions (stratagems 1 to 18)

These stratagems are to be used when conditions are favorable, and where time and resources are satisfactory in that they allow for certain latitudes for maneuvering where one has the strength and fortitude to do so. In an educational setting, this would be where the environment is happy and conducive to teaching and learning in that educators and their students feel valued and trust one another. This allows for the useful deployment of tactics based on “gaining an advantage” (stratagems 1 to 6), “challenging” (stratagems 7 to 13) and “attacking (euphemistically implying taking bold initiatives in an educational setting)” (stratagems 13 to 18):

To gain the advantage (stratagems 1 to 6)

Stratagem 1: Fool the emperor to cross the sea

Original battlefield intention: Use ordinary behavior to hide true intentions, given that unusual behavior draws excessive unsolicited attention.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: The intention of this strategy is to make one thing seem like another. It is wise to pay attention to everyday happenings that may appear common on the surface, but which may conceal undisclosed procedures. Camouflage plays an important role in war, but educators can adapt this to play a nurturing role by “sugar coating” activities to make them more enjoyable and less stressful to students. This can be done by disguising daunting fact-feeding goals and objectives by making classes more interactive and focusing more on games, role-plays, puzzles, singing and chanting. The objective is to have students focus less on the chore and more consciously on the treat part of learning, whilst assimilating the mundane rule-based patterns less consciously. For example, reading to learn new words and to gain an understanding of sentence structures, as opposed to studying stagnant word lists and learning grammar explicitly. This can also be enhanced by playing down one’s formal appearance as an educator somewhat by dressing less formally and avoiding the over-correction of minor mistakes. How this is done depends on the situation at hand and adapting to it: every class has its own culture and mood that should be tapped into. Stepping back and letting the students find their way of discovery and curiosity, and then to facilitate them in the inspirational environment that they create is best.

Related Chinese proverb: *The mind is the emperor of the body.*

Stratagem 2: Besiege Wei to rescue

Original battlefield intention: An adversary can never be invincible on all fronts so that its weaknesses can always be assailed.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: Direct approaches are less effective, and more costly, than indirect approaches in battle. Similarly, linear thinking is less effective, and more burdensome, in academia. Impatient educators who hastily jump to conclusions and tackle problems in a head-on manner achieve less than those who bide their time to assess the situation carefully. It is better to focus on timing and to wait until circumstances are more in one’s favor before taking action, to minimize the propensity for long and drawn out confrontations with students and colleagues. Put things across in an interesting way, such as telling a story within which the message is embedded, and then encourage them to wholeheartedly ask questions. When students have difficulty in understanding something, focus on it from a new perspective that they enjoy, can identify with and

can assimilate more easily. Use a combination of the “direct” and the “indirect.” That is, use the direct to engage, and the indirect to convey the essence (the main message). The direct could be educator-centered “chalk and talk” to explain basic concepts, while the indirect is the student-centered “show but don’t tell” (by standing back and giving them a chance to figure it out for themselves).

Related Chinese proverb: *Whoever asks a question is a fool for five minutes, but whoever does not ask a question remains a fool forever.*

Stratagem 3: Kill with a borrowed knife

Original battlefield intention: Borrow the strength of another when unable to assail an adversary directly.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem’s central message is about leverage and saving energy. It should not be used literally in an educational setting, as “killing” and “knives” should have no place in the classroom. Instead, these ancient terms should be used euphemistically where kill could refer to “overcoming a difficult challenge” and knife could refer to the means by which the challenge is carried out. It implies borrowing someone’s help or having someone else do something for you (similar to a division of labor). Rather than battling things out singlehandedly in fear of appearing incapable, allowing the help of others paradoxically enhances efficiency through sharing ideas and tasks. Co-teaching can be effective in they borrow from each other’s strength which contributes to effective instruction together with the preservation of their strength (in the sense that they borrow from each other’s resources). Pairing strong and weak students together whereby the weaker students can learn from the stronger, can be another way of applying this stratagem.

Related Chinese proverb: *If you don’t speculate, you can’t accumulate.*

Stratagem 4: Wait at ease for the enemy

Original battlefield intention: Choose the time and the place for battle, causing the adversary to expend its focus and energy excessively.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: Appropriate timing to save energy and resources is the essence of this strategy. Be organized and well prepared, to “wait at ease for the enemy,” which means to be prepared for the challenges ahead, and by starting lessons in a timely and orderly manner. Here “the enemy” is all that prevents students from achieving success. It is also the work to do and the challenges to be overcome during the lesson. It also means to encourage the students to study for the exams early so that they too can “wait at ease for the enemy” which, in this case, are the exams. It is also important to be realistic beforehand about the capacity to fulfill obligations. A few carefully timed and

indirectly fulfilled obligations are likely to achieve more than an immediate, direct and full-scale onslaught to achieve all that needs to be. The objective is to judiciously use time and resources to avoid fatigue and afford our students and ourselves the upper hand in overcoming all the hindrances to success. This requires an acute understanding of circumstances through monitoring even the subtlest changes to exploit them in favor of the students. Testimony of the success of this stratagem is when the students do not have to study a day before an important exam, whereas its failure is evident when students need to study up to midnight.

Related Chinese proverb: *If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow.*

Stratagem 5: Loot a burning house

Original battlefield intention: Assail the adversary when it is beset with internal troubles.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: Unlike most stratagems that rely on the indirect, this stratagem relies on the direct in that it relies on the “strong” defeating the “weak” by proactively utilizing an opportunity for a quick victory. It is similar to stratagem 12: “*Steal any passing goat*” which also relies on taking the initiative to exploit an opportunity. On the battleground, “*loot a burning house*” implies capitalizing on the misfortune of the adversary such that the “winner takes all.” Misfortune can be “internal” (such as corruption) and/or “external” (such as a natural disaster). However in education a “*burning house*” could refer to a student who becomes vulnerable to being “looted”: one who has fallen short of the requirements and is in danger of failing the course. A “*burning house*” can also refer to an educator who falls short of fulfilling his or her obligations to students, and becoming looted in terms of becoming ineffective and disrespected. Educators should listen carefully to the issues of students, to be both sympathetic and helpful in encouraging them to focus on their work and avoid falling back, which instills self-confidence. In this way, students become fortified against many pitfalls.

Related Chinese proverb: *Better do it than wish it done.*

Stratagem 6: Make a feint to the East while attacking to the West

Original battlefield intention: Create the expectation that one will assail from one side, but then assail from the other side.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: The intention of this stratagem is to confuse an adversary and render it unprepared for an assault and, given that it is based on “feints,” it deploys the indirect strongly. It relies on the element of surprise to provide an overwhelming gain by assailing where it is least anticipated. It is similar to stratagem 8: “*Use a well known path to advance by a*

hidden path” and stratagem 26: “*Point to the mulberry tree only to curse the locust.*” In education, where both educators and their students must be on the same side and share the same goals, its essence is to keep students focused through surprise tests that can be held at any time. This encourages students to maintain vigilance in their studies, that they are actively engaged with the content and keeping up to date. It could be used by administrators in the form of surprise inspections, and class observations, which would encourage educators to be conscientious at all times. It should be used sparingly in education where defeat is not the intention but rather encouragement, and not to dampen morale. Lesser “severe” applications can be in using a “deck of cards” method (shuffled deck with student names on each card) to call upon students to respond to questions in class so that they remain alert and engaged with the learning process.

Related Chinese proverb: *Take a second look it costs you nothing.*

To challenge (stratagems 7 to 12)

Stratagem 7: Create something out of nothing

Original battlefield intention: Lower the adversary’s guard by approaching something in the same way twice, then assailing on the least expected third approach.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem advises the mixture of reality and illusion to create the impression that something exists when it doesn’t: like a scarecrow. It is based on proactive fabrication in its original battleground role, as well as exaggeration, and is similar to stratagem 20: “*Fish in troubled waters*” and stratagem 29: “*Put fake blossoms on the tree.*” An application of this to education can be in role plays that simulate the real world outside the classroom. It can also be applied in making a little go a long way. In addition, it can be in the teaching of life skills that will accompany students throughout their lives. It is important to go over concepts with students until they understand them and then to let them work with the concept themselves, by taking it further and discovering their wider applications. Metaphorically speaking, this is like showing students three sides of a page, and letting them figure out for themselves where the remaining side is. Also, when students have reached a plateau in their learning, and feel despondent, it is useful to show them earlier examples of their work when they really struggled with something that tangibly emphasizes that they can do it much better now. This stratagem also refers to the power behind a praise, the inspiration of a smile, both of which cost nothing, come from nowhere, and not part of job descriptions, but they go a long, long way. All come from nothing, and yet they can mean everything to students.

Related Chinese proverb: *A bit of fragrance always clings to the hand that gives you roses.*

Stratagem 8: *Use a well-known path to advance by a hidden path*

Original battlefield intention: Use two simultaneous approaches - the first being the direct and the obvious approach for which the adversary prepares its defense, while the second is the unexpected indirect approach that divides the adversary's attention leading to its defeat.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem seeks to distract the adversary's attentiveness by the simultaneous use of initiatives such that those which are true are concealed by those which are imitation: like the Trojan horse. In education this stratagem refers to the importance of balance between what the "eyes" see, and what the "heart feels." The "*well-known*" path would be teaching as is expected and meeting all the objectives of the syllabus, whereas the "*hidden path*" refers to our ability to turn students into scholars that take learning initiatives on their own. It requires walking the balanced "*middle-path*," which is the highest ideal for an educator.

Related Chinese proverb: *To know the road ahead, ask those coming back.*

Stratagem 9: *Watch the fires burning from across the river*

Original battlefield intention: Delay entering the battle in order to allow adversaries to exhaust themselves against each other—then enter with full energy to claim victory.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: On the battlefield, this stratagem advocated delaying entering the battle until the adversary has tired itself out, and then to enter and secure decisive victory. It is all about patience, and similar to the saying: "Two dogs fight over a bone while a third runs away with it." In an educational setting "fire" can also refer to the burning aspirations and ideals of students, and of educators. Like real fires, these fires can be both allies and enemies. With care, and mutual respect, these fires can be nurtured for growth and development, but with neglect they can become all consuming and destructive. Positive fires can be the motivators behind success such as passion, motivation, ambition, inspiration, commitment, dedication and so on, but negative fires that destroy are egoism, aggression, impulsiveness, inflexibility, and all other forms of small-mindedness. When the fires are under control educators and students can walk a peaceful middle-path between adversities, and "*watch the fires burning from across the river.*" Educators can also use this strategy in terms of watching possible confrontations where they are about to occur, and only becoming involved when the situation is clear.

Related Chinese proverb: *Patience is power because, with time and patience, even the mulberry leaf becomes silk.*

Stratagem 10: Conceal a dagger behind the smile

Original battlefield intention: Flatter the adversary to gain its trust, and to lower its guard, while advancing covertly against it.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem urges the concealment of an intention to destroy behind a charming façade in combat. In education, that which is to be destroyed is the barrier to learning, and where a “dagger” does not mean a weapon, but rather a means to fulfill a learning objective, and the best way to use this tool is with a smile. Studying is not intrinsically considered pleasant by most students, but rather as a slog, and the moral duty of educators is to make them fall in love with studying. Thus, getting students to study is like the dagger and the best way to present their tasks is with a smile. The students see the smile, and learning follows more naturally, even unconsciously, and their retention is longer and stronger. On the other hand, the presentation of tasks with a sour and stern face is an instant motivational killer. Humor is important, as students admire educators who have the courage to laugh at themselves, and while this may appear “silly,” it is quite the opposite because, in doing so, it helps students see the situation in an unbiased perspective, to the point where students too can laugh at themselves. Such educators nurture their students and have better results in terms of behavior and in meeting mutual goals. This is the personification of unconditional love, and is one of the most essential elements in astute educational leadership.

Related Chinese proverb: *Many a good face is under a ragged hat.*

Stratagem 11: Cut down the plum tree to save the peach tree

Original battlefield intention: Sacrifice immediate objectives in order to fulfill longer-term goals.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: With this stratagem comes the asymmetrical realization that there are situations where short-term objectives must be sacrificed in favor of longer-term goals, in a similar way to going one step backwards in order to make two steps forward. Educators do not have unlimited resources to achieve all objectives, so we have to know what we must sacrifice in order to fulfill what we consider to be the most important goals. Students can be encouraged to think likewise, as they too do not have unlimited resources. It is better to do a few things really well, than to accomplish everything in a sloppy manner. We cannot be effective on all fronts at all times, and it is undesirable to swing from one extreme to another by adopting an “all or nothing” mentality. Thus, certain teaching objectives must be sacrificed, so that others can

flourish. In education, less can mean more. Knowing when enough is enough is truly wise. Adding more units of study complements the learning process up to a point when assimilation begins to decrease. Skillful educators know when to stop adding more units. In so doing, the “overkill” that smothers all enjoyment and success in learning is averted.

Related Chinese proverb: *Reshape one’s foot to fit it into a new shoe.*

Stratagem 12: *Steal any passing goat*

Original battlefield intention: Maintain vigilance while on the move in order to take advantage of any opportunity that arises, however small.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem promotes flexibility so that one can transcend conventional thinking in order to recognize, adapt to and exploit the opportunities that come with unplanned circumstances arising quickly and unexpectedly. This is similar to the way that some breakthroughs in medicine have come about purely by accident, such as penicillin by Dr. Alexander Fleming, when he forgot to replace a cap on a medicine bottle overnight. In education “stealing” should actually mean “borrowing” whatever opportunity occurs, no matter how trivial, to teach students valuable insights. For example, yesterday, as I arrived at my classroom, all my students were standing outside in a frantic state. “Sir,” they said, “there’s a huge brute of a cockroach inside there, please go in and squash it for us.” So, I entered the classroom, and, sure enough, there it was, a nasty looking cockroach. But, instead of killing it, I called for a clean tissue from the students, and with this tissue, gently wrapped it around the cockroach, and called for another student to open the window. And there, in the full view of all my students, I let the cockroach go. Then I called out to the cockroach as it scuttled away “Off you go my friend, and enjoy your life!” I do this with flies and spiders that come into my classroom too, even ants. I think it’s a great way to impress upon our youth, that all life, in no matter what form, is to be held in the highest esteem. We may have lost out on time that we could have spent on correcting homework, but it made an impression upon the students about compassion and mercy that will hopefully last throughout their lifetimes. This may have seemed rather trivial, but yet was worthwhile in that many significant lessons that last a lifetime are made up of a string of seemingly trivial examples leaving a lasting impression.

Related Chinese proverb: *One who waits for roast duck to fly into the mouth must wait a very, very long time.*

To attack, or in education meaning: “to take bold initiatives.”(stratagems 13 to 18)

Stratagem 13: *Beat the grass to startle the snake*

Original battlefield intention: Assail directly yet briefly, in order to observe the response that discloses the adversary’s strategic intentions.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem advocates taking some form of brief initial action in order to provoke some action on the part of the adversary so as to gauge its response, in which it reveals its strategy. In education, this can mean doing pilot-studies for a new course or curriculum. It also means to do something that is unexpected in the classroom. Sometimes it is necessary for an educator to be severe, as no matter how compassionate an educator may be, if a sense of respectful discipline cannot be instilled in the classroom, the students will become spoilt and useless. It is not possible for an educator never to punish, as punishment does have a role in education. But too many harsh punishments are a sign of desperation, and counterproductive, and lead to resentment. Thus punishments, where appropriate, should be swift, yet fair, and of short duration, and not excessive so that grudges are not held thereafter. It is important that students are not reprimanded in front of the others. It is almost like a brief and unexpected “warning shot” that can quell an issue in order to avert a costly confrontation. In this way, educators make the disruptive students feel susceptible without resorting to open threats and retributions. A composed, clear-cut demeanor, without a raised voice or a raised finger, but nevertheless potent in its significance, makes their words believable to the students, in a similar way that a quick bolt of lightning draws attention to an approaching storm to be avoided.

Related Chinese proverb: *Be just before you are generous.*

Stratagem 14: *Raise a corpse from the dead*

Original battlefield intention: Revive a method that has been discarded or forgotten about in the past, and use it for a new purpose.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This is similar to stratagem 25: “*Replace the beams and pillars with rotten timber*” which is based on the substitution of one thing with another. But “raising a corpse” refers more to reviving a discarded approach and recreating it for a new purpose, in a similar way that businesses reuse old brand names to revive customer interest and sales. “*To raise a corpse from the dead*” euphemistically means that educators must be innovative and use multiple approaches, and play numerous roles, even ones that may be considered redundant, in order to captivate the students’ attention and keep them focused. Whilst it is important for educators to have consistent temperaments, and display consistency, students also need a certain amount of variation in their activities. It is important to use a multitude of approaches, even ones that have been

used in the past and are revived again to play a specific function when needed. Teaching is a multifaceted activity, and educators play many roles simultaneously such as being administrators, councilors, psychologists, regulators, philosophers and even policemen at times (especially when invigilating examinations). However, it is also important not to innovate too much at one time, and to maintain a humble respect for the old ways of doing things as well. Too much transformation will result in dissatisfaction from the students. It is all a matter of balance.

Related Chinese proverb: *The one who plants the tree is not the one who enjoys the shade.*

Stratagem 15: *Lure the tiger down from the mountain*

Original battlefield intention: Entice an adversary away from its well-fortified basis of supremacy to where it is less secure and more vulnerable.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem suggests that indirectness in battle is less costly than direct approaches. It is better to entice an adversary to come onto one's turf, rather than to follow it onto its own turf, which it knows intimately. It also means that one should never confront a well-entrenched opponent directly but rather isolate it from its basis of effectiveness. In education, one needs to lure students away from their “comfort zones,” of doing the same thing over and over and over again, in an unthreatening way, to where they are challenged in a nurturing manner to excel. When someone respects an educator they are more likely to follow their instructions. Through creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, educators can lure their students on towards success like enticing tigers down from the mountain. Let us assume there is a student in the class who does not interact much with the others. Instead of telling the student something like “it's time to snap out of it or else” the student can be given two stars and a wish in the following way: First Star - complement the student on something positive. For example, one could say: “I notice that you are a most intelligent young person.” Second Star - complement the student again on something else that is positive. For example, one could say: “I was very impressed with your writing assignment last week. I gave you an A and you deserved it. See, you really are a very smart student!” Then present your Wish - after two positive reflections (the stars), one could say: “It would make me so happy if you interact more with the other students - we would benefit so much from all that we could learn from you.” It is a simple formula that really works, and it works because it builds respect.

Related Chinese proverb: *Sit safely a-top the mountain and watch the tigers fight.*

Stratagem 16: *Let the enemy off in order to snare him*

Original battlefield intention: A defeated adversary that is set free will surrender on its own terms, but will fight to death if captured.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem advises against cornering a desperate adversary which is bound to fight fiercely, but rather to let it go so that it loosens its determination to fight at all costs. This is similar to the free samples that are given away at food counters enticing customers to purchase the product. Instead of consciously trying to directly dictate the learning process to students, and keeping them under constant pressure to succeed, it is better to “let them go,” by setting them free to succeed on their own (while standing by to help them should they falter). If educators can inspire students to become active and creative learners independent of their formal teaching roles, so that the students say: “We did it ourselves,” then they will be truly great educators. I did an experiment with my students the other day. I had them study for a vocabulary test in a conventional way (look at 35 new words for 30 minutes with a dictionary) and then write a test. While they were doing this, I had someone visit our class, and answer the question: Are they learning? The answer given was “Yes.” Yet when they wrote the test, half failed. A few days later I gave them another set of 35 words and told them that for 30 minutes they could learn them in whichever way they chose. They decided to play a game. They divided themselves into two teams, and they had a competition. They really got excited about it, and there was a lot of screaming and shouting, and passionate exchanges of opinions between the teams. Someone even threw something across the classroom at an opposite team member! I sat at the back of the classroom, and didn't intervene. While they were doing this, I had someone else visit our class, and answer the question: are they learning? The answer given was “No way.” Yet when they wrote the test, all passed and many got A grades. If educators give students their freedom, their students will “find their feet” and their own way back, with more success than if they were held with a tight fist and as a captive and fearful audience.

Related Chinese proverb: *Even a cornered rabbit will bite.*

Stratagem 17: *Toss out a brick to attract jade*

Original battlefield intention: Create an illusion of gainful opportunity to trap the adversary.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: In this stratagem “brick” refers to something of no significance, as opposed to “jade” which is extremely significant, but where the brick acts as bait for the jade. Educators can “toss out a brick” (share a simple truth) with students to “attract jade” (to help them bring out the best in themselves). Simplicity is the essence of this stratagem, as excessive complexity is stifling and will only keep the jade (the internal creative qualities of

students) away. There is also no single set strategy for educational success, and educators can succeed in all aspects (such as in our personal lives and at work) by not judging too harshly, and by just allowing their students to be themselves. Students, being young people, are impressionistic, and look for guidelines in glossy magazines, and try to emulate those who have achieved “success” in the material terms of big houses, sports cars, and so on. They often try to be anyone else but who they really are. It is the educator’s responsibility to convince them to be true to themselves. Success can come to anyone, even to those who do not fit society’s stereotypes of success, and students should be encouraged to find within them the source of their own success, and to become successful by their own standards and not what society dictates as successful. Such simple and seemingly insignificant wisdom is the brick, while the student who uses it through guidance reaps the significant jade, from which magnificent creativity can be garnered.

Related Chinese proverb: *Give someone a fish and it will be food for a day, but teach someone to fish and it will provide sustenance for a lifetime.*

Stratagem 18: *To catch rebels, bring down their leader first*

Original battlefield intention: The elimination of the commander ensures the adversary’s confusion and capture.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem recommends attacking the core of the problem, which is more judicious than attacking its symptoms, saving many lives in battle. In education, this relates primarily to bullying. When there is disruption and bullying behavior, it is usually instigated by a single aggressor. In being able to identify, and to isolate the aggressor, educators are able to end such behavior speedily and effectively, and without a trail of destruction. Bullies recruit others (their lieutenants) to support them in their efforts to coerce their innocent targets. One does not have to deal with the entire group of bullies (no matter how sophisticated their network), nor to appeal for the intervention of the bystanders, but only to deal with the leader. The best way to deal with the leader is not to negotiate (bullies are incurable), nor to launch a direct confrontational approach (by having a run-in with the bully and by bullying back), nor completely withdraw (as this make one even more conspicuous). Instead, through an attitude of self-confidence that confirms the futility of bullying, and associating oneself with those who are positive and successful (and powerful), the bully’s power will rapidly diminish.

Related Chinese proverb: *Beat a demon to death or it will cause endless calamity.*

For Unfavorable Conditions (Stratagems 19 to 36)

Unfavorable conditions are where the situation becomes critical in that a scarcity of time and resources limit options for maneuvering, and the setting becomes desperate. In an educational setting, this is where a “toxic culture” prevails and educators and students are fearful of each other, and of the institution, and where gossip and rumors abound. Despite that, it is better for educators to endeavor to be constructive and to seek the best possible solutions to save situations intact. Thus, the tactics of stratagems based on “bewildering” (stratagems 19 to 24), “defending” (stratagems 25 to 30) and “surviving” (stratagems 13 to 18) are worthwhile considerations for educators in disparaging situations.

To bewilder (stratagems 19 to 24)

Stratagem 19: *Take away the fire from under the cauldron*

Original battlefield intention: If the adversary is in a strongly entrenched position and cannot be assailed directly, it must be weakened first by removing the source of its power.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: Here is where “yin” and “yang” eclipse, and where yin as used to defeat yang is perhaps most apparent in all of the stratagems. Wood is a yin element that drives fire, which is a yang element. Water is also a yin element but given that it is boiling adding more cold water to the pot will only offer a temporary solution. Not adding more wood that drives the fire from under the pot offers a more judicious solution, in that it acts as an embargo that removes the source of power. It also implies removing the core of a problem rather than attempting to remove the whole problem itself by out-thinking rather than out-fighting adversaries. In so doing educators can diffuse potentially explosive situations long before they emerge. Educators sometimes set tasks and then have to leave the classroom for a while (especially to go back and fetch a forgotten book or a file to the lesson). When they return and the students are still well behaved and focused on their work, it is an indication that they are doing something right. But when they return—and the classroom is in chaos—it is an indication that the students are merely behaving themselves because of the educator’s presence; the educator is doing something wrong. It is like a pot of water that is boiling over, and the more we educators try to cool the water, the more it boils over the moment they turn their backs on the situation. In this situation educators should not try to cool the water, but remove the wood from under the fire. One way to remove the wood from under the fire is to encourage the students in a positive way, by saying something like “...if you do it this way, you will surely pass” and “I trust you.” Then they get good behavior when they re-enter the

classroom, but when they discourage their students in a negative way, by saying "...if you don't do it this way, you will surely fail" and "If I hear a peep from anyone of you while I'm away..." they get chaos when they re-enter the classroom, like a steaming pot of water boiling over.

Related Chinese proverb: *Govern a family as you would a small fish—very gently.*

Stratagem 20: *Fish in troubled waters*

Original battlefield intention: Do not assail a strong adversary but wait until unanticipated issues disturb and distract it, making it vulnerable.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem suggests taking advantage of an adversary that has lost situational awareness and has become disorientated within a setting that has turned murky. Troubled environments make students and educators vulnerable like "*fish in troubled waters.*" Students find it extremely challenging, if not entirely impossible, to learn in troubled and stressful classrooms, or when they have troubles in their private lives. Educators also have difficulty teaching when their environments are thus challenged. In warfare this stratagem is used to make others vulnerable (for example, like smoke screening and spreading false intelligence), but when applied to education one uses this stratagem in the paradoxically opposite way around - by removing the vulnerability of students and thereby removing their stress and anxiety, and in turn empowering them to empower themselves. The only certainty about the classroom, and the wider educational environment, is that there will always be varying elements of uncertainty, and it is sometimes hard to tell if students are having issues that are undermining their learning process. An efficient educator will realize that something is wrong and will make every effort to speak with—and listen to—the students. If there is established mutual rapport and trust the students will tell the educator what the issues are, and the "troubled waters" can be avoided. Educators too should avoid getting into their own troubled waters, because when educators are in troubled waters, then so are their students: if the educator is stressed and full of anxiety, it will be passed directly on to the students. Instead of "fishing in troubled waters" the smart educator becomes: "a bridge over troubled waters." This ensures that both educators and their students win. But neglecting the troubled waters means both educators and their students lose "hook, line and sinker."

Related Chinese proverb: *Those in the game are blind to what those from outside who look on clearly see.*

Stratagem 21: *The cicada sheds its skin*

Original battlefield intention: When the adversary is about to defeat you, create an illusion of your presence behind which one can flee and recover.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem gains its segmental inspiration from the cicada which, when reaching the age of an adult, sheds its skin and moves on. The shed skin looks like a cicada but in reality it is no longer there. In strategic terms this implies that one can create an illusion of being present, whilst unbeknown to the adversary one is in another place. In being like the “cicada that sheds its skin” and leaves an image of itself behind and survives, educators can do the same thing. By accepting, adapting, enduring adversities and that which cannot be changed in the short-term, they can position themselves to reap success when more favorable circumstances prevail. The best foundation for an educator is to have a strong and impeccable reputation that will outlive short-term shortfalls. Remaining true to promises, and fulfilling all obligations to students, colleagues, parents and superiors can guard reputations. In this way a reputation can outlive an adversity, and can ensure survival.

Related Chinese proverb: *Of a dead leopard we keep its skin; of a person we keep its reputation.*

Stratagem 22: Bolt the door to catch the thief

Original battlefield intention: If there is an opportunity to capture the adversary it should be done quickly in order to resolve hostilities affirmatively.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: The success of this stratagem relies on a manageable adversary in a weakened situation that can be captured by blocking off all potential escape routes. This stratagem requires an ability to wait for the right time for securing the exit and then striking with extreme force. In education “bolting doors” can refer metaphorically to resolving issues amicably to “catch thieves,” which in turn, can metaphorically refer to saving situations from further deteriorating. Composure and patience, and awaiting the appropriate time: so that the impacts of limited actions carry further. Often problems have ways of resolving themselves. Most often, the more one tries to fix a problem, the more uncontrollable it becomes, and the more energy is needed to get back to where one began. In such circumstances, it is better to take no action at all, and to observe all situations surrounding the problem carefully so that when the time is right, one can solve it with a minimum of fuss. When the opportunity arises to do so, it should be done quickly and without delay.

Related Chinese proverb: *The one who knows when enough is enough will always have enough.*

Stratagem 23: *Befriend a distant state while attacking a neighbour*

Original battlefield intention: If one is the strongest in an area, one is most vulnerable to the second strongest in the same area, but not to the one who is even stronger than you in another area.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem advises tackling the opponents that are easier first, in order to score a succession of smaller victories, and then form transitory truces with them, in order to accumulate strength for the larger, more decisive and extensively challenging battles later. It is similar to the saying: “Choose your battles,” insofar as it is wise to not take on all one’s battles at once. In education “*attacking a neighbour*” would euphemistically imply avoiding insurmountable situations that are close at hand whilst soliciting advice and assistance from a distance because such advice and assistance tends to be unbiased and unattached (this is similar to the way spectators have a better picture of the game than the players). It is thus always useful to solicit the advice of another educator who is not in the immediate environment, who has no personal agendas, and who also has an unclouded perspective of the issues at hand. Those in our immediate environment may have ulterior motives, especially with regard to office politics. It is far easier to give constructive advice to another, than to give constructive advice to oneself. We tend to be very attached to our own issues, and we also see our circumstances in a great degree of unnecessary detail, whereas others have an unclouded perspective due to their emotional detachment.

Related Chinese proverb: *To meet an old friend in a distant country is like the delight of rain after a long drought.*

Stratagem 24: *Borrow a route to conquer Guo*

Original battlefield intention: Use the resources of an external collaborator to assail a common adversary.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem works on the principle of borrowing one approach for another, and works well where an appearance of doing something minor in favor of one intention actually serves to fulfill another, larger and more important end. An example of this in business is offering special discounts to special customers in order to build customer loyalty. In education, though “*borrow a route*” can mean finding an alternative means to “*conquer*,” which in turn means to overcome an obstacle. Wise educators conserve their energy wherever possible by overcoming obstacles indirectly. Unwise educators expend their energy in attempting to overcome obstacles in a headlong manner. The best way to conserve energy is to recruit supporters who are outside and personally detached from immediate issues, and who can both shield one and promote a cause. It is common for educators to be employed on short-term contracts. In Japan, I was employed on short-term contracts that were also capped—

meaning that they would not be renewed no matter how well one had served. Whilst this was unsettling, both the Japanese employer and myself were borrowing the temporary services of each other to achieve our own specific intentions. The short-term contract gave me enough time to get valuable teaching experience, meet colleagues that I could learn from, and to do research and publish my work. For the Japanese employer, the short term contract offered the opportunity of having a foreign educator teach for a while and then to move on so that they could meet new foreign educators, and thereby benefit from a variety of educators from different backgrounds. In all employment relationships that do not offer lifetime employment (and this is abundant in education) there is a sense in “*borrow a route to conquer Guo*,” where each party benefits for a restricted time from the other, but both achieve their intended goals as an outcome of having done so.

Related Chinese proverb: *The journey is the reward.*

To defend (stratagems 25 to 30)

Stratagem 25: Replace the beams and pillars with rotten timber

Original battlefield intention: Disrupt the adversary’s alliances, formations and methods to weaken its effectiveness.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem’s message is that, in war and in most other competitive endeavors, leadership is the pillar of fortitude. Strong leadership is the essence of a strong institution whereas weak leadership causes it to deteriorate. Thus, the disruption of such “pillars” of leadership, especially through interference of their modes of operation by manipulation of their procedures, can place an adversary in jeopardy. In a sense, this can be compared with “built in obsolescence” where products are deliberately built with inferior parts so that customers will, after a certain time, need to buy spare parts, or newer models, supplied by the same producer. In its most extreme form, this stratagem is akin to a subtle form of sabotage. In education, however, this stratagem should work the other way around – as it is better to “replace the rotten timber with solid beams and pillars,” unless one seeks to replace the strength of an adversary with a weakness, such as a classroom bully, or a troublesome colleague, by seizing the initiative speedily. The central focus in education should be a positive and creative one. One way of replacing the rotten timber with solid beams and pillars is never to give up on struggling students and to be enduring. I had an experience where I had a student in Japan who, despite all efforts, was extremely weak and failed all her grades. She was, to all intents and purposes, like rotten timber that could not be carved in any way. But she had great inner-strength and determination. On my recommendation, she went on an American home stay program for six months. When she came back she was almost fluent in English and

became the star of the class. Now she is a professional English/Japanese translator. Something about the home stay just did the trick for her, but what it was not even she knows. Thus, in having patience and supporting the students that are underachieving we can indeed “replace the rotten timber with solid beams and pillars.”

Related Chinese proverb: *Rotten wood cannot be carved.*

Stratagem 26: Point at the mulberry only to curse the locust

Original battlefield intention: Make use of indirect allusions and analogies so that the adversary will not be offended and strike back in revenge.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem is about issuing a warning, or criticizing, in an indirect way so that the message is taken. Otherwise there is need to take costly direct action, laying seeds for destruction for a long time to come. In an educational setting, this can mean criticizing the problem rather than the person. It is a great strategic blunder to cause offense to the wrong person, whether it is a student or a colleague, and especially if it is the employer where the consequences can mean losing one’s job. It is often not so much what is said—but how it is said—that damages relationships. It is often not so much the content of what is being related, but it is in the wrapping, and the way in which it is delivered, that determines ultimately the success or failure of the relationship. Thus, when an educator indeed knows better than another, but relates this in a rash, haughty or belligerent manner (usually in a bid to impress), the result is that others will come to build up a dislike and a disrespect over time, and cause them to adopt a defensive stance, and to get the “big guns” ready on every occasion. It is important to think pending actions through to their potential consequences, and not to attempt to impress with words when there is a difference of opinion. Using a relationship of mutual respect and trust with students and colleagues, patiently built up over a long time, educators can become influential and even powerful, because they acquire moral influence. Others will thus solicit their advice on many issues.

Related Chinese proverb: *Before you beat a dog find out who its master is.*

Stratagem 27: Feign foolishness

Original battlefield intention: Before assailing, lure the adversary into complacency through feigning foolishness and even madness.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: Appearing to know too much, and to be too clever, can draw unwanted attention from an adversary. Therefore, this stratagem advocates pretending to be ignorant in order to lower the adversary’s guard. It may be humiliating for an educator to be thought of as harmlessly stupid, but it is safer than being considered astutely dangerous. Life

presents many dichotomies, where what seems to be the case is not and vice versa. Wherever there are paradoxes, deception plays a critically strategic role. Deception is often frowned upon in the West, given that it is associated with treachery and dishonesty. However, the perspectives of deception utilized in the 36 Stratagems are related more to concealment, and to camouflage, primarily to keep information and positions undisclosed: to prevent plans being thwarted, and reduce the vulnerability to being attacked. Thus, it is better to blend in with situations and become invisible to potential adversaries, even if that means behaving and looking stupid so as to appear harmless. It is unsuitable for an educator to display an air of superiority and arrogance, as this negates their role of serving the needs of their students and colleagues with humility. Do not outperform influential peers, and instead create the impression that they are smarter than you are (even if you are convinced that you are actually smarter), and have the endurance to tolerate whatever humiliation it takes because your survival depends on it. It is better to play dumb and lose a battle, than to play too smart and lose the war.

Related Chinese proverb: *Be prepared to be a pig if you wish to eat the tiger.*

Stratagem 28: Remove the ladder after the ascent

Original battlefield intention: Lure the adversary onto dangerous terrain, then, in order to survive, cut off all exits to divide its attention between the battle and the terrain.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem encourages the understanding that, in battle, it is advantageous to avoid terrain that is devoid of escape routes, whilst luring the adversary through deceptive bait into such terrain. An example of this was Napoleon's defeat in Russia due to the onset of the severely cold winter weather. In education, this stratagem would be used in a nurturing role. For example, when educators have helped their students in every way, there comes a time where they must impress upon them that only they can write their final exams, and only they ultimately decide whether they pass or fail. It is not the educator that determines whether students ultimately pass or fail, but the students themselves. Educators should emphasize that they have every confidence in their students succeeding. In this way educators encourage their students to take full ownership of, and responsibility for their destiny. After they have nurtured their students along the path of learning there comes the time for them to walk alone, like little birds we have taught to fly which must leave the nest, and make their own way in life. If students know that their future lies entirely in their own hands, they will be totally committed to securing their own success, and will succeed admirably.

Related Chinese proverb: *One can't expect both sides of a sugar cane to be equally sweet.*

Stratagem 29: Put fake blossoms on the tree

Original Battlefield intention: Use disguise to make something of no value appear valuable, something harmless look dangerous, and something useless seem useful.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: If fake flowers are placed on a dead tree, it appears to be alive. In nature, certain animals make their fur and feathers stand up in order to look larger and/or more fearsome than they actually are. It is similar to window-dressing or stage props that can look like the real thing but are in fact cardboard outlines. “Fake blossoms” can be used euphemistically in education to mean it is important to follow our dreams and to act them out, so they eventually become the reality. To become successful educators, we have to imagine now that we are great educators, and we have to behave as if we are great educators, and we will become great educators like a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” Likewise, if we want our students to be successful scholars, we must convince them to dream that they are successful scholars, and to behave as if they are successful until they do become successful. They should have a daily image in the back of their minds of stepping up onto the stage in front of their proud parents and receiving their degrees from the beaming Chancellor. Everything starts with a dream, and we all have to “fake it until we make it,” by thinking and behaving positively, but in a spirit of humility, so that we ultimately realize our full potential.

Related Chinese proverb: *A cloth is not woven from a single thread.*

Stratagem 30: Host and guest reversed

Original battlefield intention: Infiltrate an adversary under the veneer of collaboration, capitulation, or complementation to make it lower its guard and to ascertain its vulnerability, so that the source of its true strength can be assailed.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem suggests that a guest can first get a “foot in the door” (or some kind of foothold) from which an advance can be made towards eventually becoming the host. It is similar to an apprentice who eventually becomes a CEO for the same company. In another way, it can be like the saying: “If you can’t beat them, join them.” For in joining them one can partake and share, make truces, and acquire knowhow from them whilst simultaneously observing their weaknesses, and then when strong enough take control. Wise educators both know, and welcome the fact, that education is a two-way process by which they and their students learn from each other in equal measure. Students teach educators also. Their young minds take notice of things and they teach their educators a great deal. When educators consider student perspectives deeply they can really be startling. Students can often see a clear-cut solution to a debilitating issue in absolute clarity. For example, we may spend ages deliberating over an important decision and merely perplex ourselves. Then we ask our students what they think, and they say, “Do this” or “Do that”: It takes our

breath away. So simple, yet so true. Some students really have an ability to take a complex issue and give one a blindingly simple answer in a flash. Perhaps it is because their young minds have a detached and uncluttered perspective of issues that we adults are personally extremely attached to, and we restrict our ability to see through it as it is clouded with our own analysis (and ego, and indeed fear).

Related Chinese proverb: *Politics makes strange bedfellows*

To survive (stratagems 31 to 36)

It should be noted that stratagems 31 to 35 are for the reversal of critical situations, whereas stratagem 36 is for fleeing a critical situation to survive.

Stratagem 31: *Beauty trap*

Original battlefield intention: Send a beautiful woman to an adversary's camp to cause discord.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem is about “fatal attraction” and advocates placing temptation in the way of an adversary to distract it emotionally. An example of this in ancient war is where beautiful women were sent to (male) commanders as a sex-trap, in order to cause them to make mistakes and to spread discord. It is unacceptable to send beautiful women or men to educators in this way, but educators must nevertheless beware of expensive gifts from students and colleagues, and must not accept them. Educators should be extremely careful of accepting gifts from students and colleagues. When in doubt, it is best to ask a supervisor's opinion on the matter. Some gifts are harmless, like a box of chocolates, but others, such as a cell phone, can do considerable harm and should not be accepted. What is offered at no cost is often a ploy or a concealed obligation in disguise, costing dearly.

Related Chinese proverb: *Fools judge people by the presents they give them.*

Stratagem 32: *Empty city ploy*

Original battlefield intention: Stop all appearances of vigilance and behave casually when on the brink of being invaded.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: The purpose of this stratagem is to bluff an opponent into retreat by unusual behavior that makes the opponent think that the unusual behavior is a cover for an ambush. It is about appearing resilient when one is fragile, and appearing fragile when one is resilient. However, in education “the empty cities” may metaphorically be students who are shy and reserved, and who seem withdrawn. Yet, there is much thought going on in their minds. Their educators should find ways to help them bring out the best in themselves. It is important to acknowledge that there are students who

unintentionally come across as “empty cities.” They do this without malicious intention, and many educators unfortunately overlook their talents. These are especially highly sensitive students who are very aware and sensitive to activities around them, especially to noise which easily distracts them. They are also quite sensitive to bright colors and strong lights. They are somewhat shy and socialize a lot less than average, and prefer to process experiences quietly by themselves. They usually do not contribute much within group discussions, preferring instead to process things quietly in their own heads. When they speak, they say little, and only what is necessary. Their educators often cannot quite figure them out, because they tend to severely underperform when being observed - but when they hand in written assignments they often score high grades. They are good with details, and can focus strongly on something for hours on end. Unusual tactics may work well with such students.

Related Chinese proverb: *Easy to keep the castle that was never besieged.*

Stratagem 33: Use the enemy’s spies to sow discord in the enemy’s camp

Original battlefield intention: Send spies to dampen the adversary’s will to fight by foiling its allied partnerships.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem’s wartime intention is to spread suspicion and mistrust among adversaries, so they become preoccupied with settling their internal discord and thus become vulnerable to defeat. Educators have adversaries, and the more they know about their adversaries the more advantageous their positions, because timely and accurate information is a very powerful resource in competitive situations. Listen well to all that people say, especially troublesome co-workers engaging in office politics. Their words reveal much about themselves. In addition to listening, it is important to probe by politely asking indirect questions. They reveal what they are thinking and will subtly divulge any intrigues, including their methods of deception. When students and colleagues disappoint by what they say, it is unwise to retaliate or show anger and resentment. Instead create the impression of blissful unawareness. The chances are that they have said such things as a result of their own internal disputes. By keeping cordial relations with them, despite their weaknesses, they can become useful allies at some point in the future. Do not burn bridges with others. Our worst enemies today can be our best friends tomorrow.

Related Chinese proverb: *The wise make their own decisions while the ignorant follow public opinion.*

Stratagem 34: *Inflict injury on oneself to win the enemy's trust*

Original battlefield intention: A self-inflicted injury lowers your potential threat to the adversary and its guard.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: The intention of this stratagem is to play the victim to win an adversary's trust. Sometimes it pays to play the role of victim, especially in an educational setting where it is most inappropriate to display aggressive behavior even if it is in self-defense. We all experience someone who flies off the handle and screams abuse at us, or even assaults us. When this type of aggression happens, and especially if others witness the incident, it can be advantageous to play the role of victim. Playing the role of victim is a way of demonstrating that the aggressor is wrong without making a direct accusation that could further enrage the aggressor, whilst recruiting sympathetic supporters to our cause. This plays on the conscience of the aggressor, instilling feelings of guilt and responsibility for their action. This approach also works in cases of covert interpersonal aggression. This is more subtle and manipulative, and not as obvious, although the more habitual it becomes, the more one can also play the role of victim to free oneself from manipulation.

Related Chinese proverb: *An injury is sooner forgotten than an insult.*

Stratagem 35: *Interlocking stratagems*

Original battlefield intention: Use several strategies simultaneously so that alternative strategies may succeed where others fail.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem realizes that a single stratagem that may have worked well in the past is unlikely to reap the same success given that circumstances change, and that it is therefore better to interconnect schemes in a chain of events to alter predominant circumstances towards one's favor. A strategy that worked well in the past will not automatically work again in the same way. What may seem to be the case could be quite the opposite, and a "one size fits all" approach is inappropriate for education. Instead, new approaches, based objectively on assessing unique emerging perspectives of changing realities are more likely to succeed. Thus, it is important for educators to be flexible and not fall into the trap of repeating past successful strategies through an innate fear of making mistakes. If change is not embraced, but is rather averted, the result is that educators become stagnant within their own comfort niche. Consistency can be a virtue in certain situations, but strategic rigidity is often perilous. Educators should also be less judgmental towards others, and more accountable towards making a genuine and positive contribution to the well-being of their students and colleagues through deploying a wide range of approaches to suit a broad variety of unfolding issues.

Related Chinese proverb: *If a string has one end, then it has another end.*

Stratagem 36: *He who runs away today lives to fight another day*

Original battlefield intention: When it becomes clear that all actions cannot prevent being assailed by the adversary, withdraw and regroup to ensure survival.

Application to education—summary of journal entries: This stratagem is based on abandoning an insurmountable situation in order to survive. It is similar to stratagem 21: “*The cicada sheds its skin*” which advocates a carefully disguised retreat, but is for more desperate situations where escape is the only option left and the only recourse is to abandon ship. To avoid a fight to the bitter end, and instead retreat, even if one firmly believes that one is right, is the honorable course of action for an educator. This is because when an educator dogmatically refuses to withdraw, it places not only the educator’s career in danger but it also places the students and their educational future in jeopardy. Avoid hostilities, and give others undivided loyalty. Yet, keep credentials up to date, so that, if the worst comes to the worst, one can keep a reputation intact, quit with dignity, and survive.

Related Chinese proverb: *A bending reed before the gale lives on while mighty oaks fall.*

Further Assessment Procedure Based on Taoism

The ultimate success of applying the *36 Stratagems* in practice depends on right timing and right circumstances. Thus, it is essential to mention another indirect influence on the *36 Stratagems* and that is the *Tao Te Ching*, as well as the philosophy of Taoism, because flexible approaches whereby tactics are varied are preferable to mechanical approaches. Thus, in addition to the way the stratagems are presented in numerical order above, it is also helpful to consider them more holistically in accordance with their *yin and yang* characteristics.

In the definitive Taoist classic known as the *Tao Te Ching* (meaning *The Way and its Virtue*), believed to have been written by the scholar Lao Tzu around the 6th century BC, the concepts of paradox and *wu-wei* are important elements. Their notions are filtered through to the *36 Stratagems* in a tactical sense. In Verses 36 and 37 of the Mitchell (1992) translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu said the following with regard to paradox and *wu-wei*:

If you want to shrink something, you must first allow it to expand. If you want to get rid of something, you must first allow it to flourish. If you want to take something, you must first allow it to be given. This is called the subtle perception of the way things are. The soft overcomes the hard. The slow overcomes the fast. Let your workings remain a

mystery. Just show people the results. The Tao never does anything, yet through it all things are done. (Mitchell, 1992, p. 34)

With regard to paradox, it is important to recognize that yin and yang are not opposites in the western sense of being diametrically opposed such as “black” and “white” but rather as being “two sides of the same coin.” Taoism regards black and white as being complementary to each other in that each defines its existence in relation to the other, such that without black there can be no white and vice versa. And given that they are not distinctly opposite to each other, there is no clear dividing line between them, and in this “grey area” in between black and white lie an infinite number of shades of grey. With this concept of yin and yang, come the paradoxical notions of the weak overcoming the strong in the sense that the bamboo yields to the gale and survives while the mighty oak faces it head on and is uprooted, and the water that patiently flows around the rock eventually erodes it. In the same way that Taoism does not judge one from the other, as in black or white, or in right or wrong, or in good or bad, can the *36 Stratagems* become powerful tactics in not judging the polarities of situations and instead conceive their essence by virtue of taking a nonjudgmental stance.

Wu-wei literally means “taking action without taking any action.” Contrary to the western interpretation of “doing nothing” and thereby being indecisive, it infers that “going with the flow” through being in harmony with the natural rhythms of changing situations is more desirable. An example of this is when one consciously takes action to achieve a goal only to find later that one has to stop and unravel everything, whereas having done nothing hastily to begin with may have rendered more positive results.

The combination of paradox and wu-wei, together with simplicity and naturalness that are embedded within Taoism, give rise to tactics in the *36 Stratagems* that favor the indirect as opposed to the direct, concealment as opposed to openness, capture as opposed to destruction, detachment as opposed to attachments and spontaneity as opposed to impulsiveness.

The stratagems for favorable conditions are yang in nature, whilst the stratagems for unfavorable characteristics are yin in nature. As such, they are not polar opposites, but rather complementary to each other. Thus, yang stratagems 1 to 6 (to gain the advantage) can be paired with their yin counterpart stratagems 31 to 36 (to survive), and yang stratagems 7 to 12 (to challenge) can be paired with yin stratagems 25 to 30 (to defend), and yang stratagems 13 to 18 (to attack) can be paired with yin stratagems 19 to 24 (to bewilder). This is presented in the table below:

For Favorable Conditions (Yang)	For Unfavorable Conditions (Yin)
To gain the advantage (stratagems 1 to 6)	To survive (stratagems 31 to 36)
To challenge (stratagems 7 to 12)	To defend (stratagems 25 to 30)
To attack (stratagems 13 to 18)	To bewilder (stratagems 19 to 24)

The above configurations can be used as a framework within which to find deeper tactical insights. Whenever an experience or a thought about a competitive scenario is reached, it can be followed with the question: Would this relate to a favorable yang condition or to an unfavorable yin condition?

If it relates to a favorable yang condition, then one would consider whether it is a situation whereby most benefit is in seeking the yang approaches: to gain the advantage, or to challenge, or to attack. Then one would look at the associated yang stratagems, and decide accordingly.

Conversely, if it relates to an unfavorable yin condition, then one would consider whether it is a situation whereby one could save the situation best in seeking the yin approaches: to survive, or to defend, or to bewilder. Then one would look at the associated yin stratagems, and decide accordingly.

Before taking any action, it is of utmost importance to consider the complementary yin and yang relationships, given that the respective essences of each are found within the other. They are closely related even though they may seem different. Outcomes can never be exclusively yin or yang in nature. Thus, given that both favorable yang situations and unfavorable yin situations share elements of each other, there emerge paradoxical permutations that are vital to holistic considerations of tactics. Sun Tzu, whose thoughts influenced the *36 Stratagems*, according to Minford, said:

There are but five notes, and yet their permutations are more than can ever be heard. There are but five colors, and yet their permutations are more than can ever be seen. There are but five flavors, and yet their permutations are more than can ever be tasted. In the dynamics of war, there are but these two—direct and indirect—and their permutations are inexhaustible. They give rise to each other in a never-ending, inexhaustible circle.... Disorder is founded on order, fear on courage, and weakness on strength. (Minford, 2003, pp. 26 - 28)

Therefore, it would be useful to consider if an unfavorable yin condition in which, for example, the desperate need to survive pertains, could be turned towards a more favorable yang condition by which one can take the advantage (like turning the situation into a “mixed blessing”). Or, on the other hand, considering if a favorable yang condition affording advantage could ultimately become a desperate yin condition as a result of some oversight (like a “hidden curse” or a situation that “backfires” upon itself unexpectedly).

These are important considerations beyond the scope of this diary study, and form another framework around which the entries above might be considered.

Conclusion: Main Insights Gained From the Diary Study

Some key insights were gained from the diary study, which are as follows:

1. Educators and students are on the same side and should use the *36 Stratagems* to overcome obstacles to scholarly success, rather than to deceive or outwit one another.
2. The *36 Stratagems* are suggestive “signposts” along a path to finding solutions, and are not definitive instructions.
3. Educators should look beyond the outward appearances of the stratagems, and instead consider their tactical essence.
4. The *36 Stratagems* can, and should, be interpreted differently from one educator to the next.
5. It is important to embrace change when using the *36 Stratagems*, and not to deploy stratagems that worked in the past merely because they worked at that time.
6. Accept the yin and the yang elements of circumstances, but use the “grey areas” in between them to discover their endless tactical potential.
7. Trust yourself, and do not excessively analyse the *36 Stratagems* to the point of confusion.
8. Choose the simple path.

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Note: Whilst it is not known who was the Ming Dynasty author of *The Secret Art of War: The 36 Stratagems* found in 1941, the English translations of the text in this study was derived from an amalgamation of online texts (namely [Warrior-Scholar, Wikipedia](#) and [China-Stratagegies](#)) as well as the books written by the authors listed in the bibliography.

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