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Book of Spies

by

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Bibliography

Traditional Chinese Chronology

Legendary Sage Emperors	2852 – 2255 BC
Xia	2205 – 1766 BC
Shang	1766 – 1045 BC
Zhou	
Western Zhou	1045 – 770 BC
Eastern Zhou	770 – 256 BC
Spring and Autumn	722 – 481 BC
Warring States	481 – 221 BC
Qin	221 – 207 BC
Former Han (Western Han)	206 – 008 AD
Later Han (Eastern Han)	023 – 220 AD
Six Dynasties*	220 – 589 AD
Three Kingdoms	220 – 280
Sui	581 – 618 AD
Tang	618 – 907 AD
Five Dynasties**	907 – 959 AD
Northern Song	960 – 1126 AD
Southern Song	1127 – 1279 AD
Yüan (Mongol)	1279 – 1368 AD
Ming	1368 – 1644 AD
Qing	1644 – 1911 AD

* The short lived dynasties that roughly succeeded each other after the overthrow of the Three Kingdoms were the Western Jin, Sixteen States, Northern Wei, Western Wei, Northern Zhou, Eastern Wei, Northern Qi, Easter Jin, Liu-Song, Southern Qi, Liang, and Chen

** The Five Dynasties include the Later Liang, Later Tang, Later Jin, Later Han, and Later Zhou

Foreword

Prompted by inimical events, including the devastating Taiping rebellion and a Miao uprising that he was tasked to eradicate, Zhu Fengjia turned to ancient military texts like the *Art of War* for strategic solutions and became mesmerized by spycraft, especially the activist aspect of disrupting the enemy through estrangement measures. His success in employing intelligence measures and revitalized techniques on the local level as he struggled to suppress local bandit movements confirmed the validity of his quest. The volume at hand thus sprang from necessity, both experienced and perceived, rather than idle curiosity.

Although *Jian Shu – Book of Spies* – was written by a government official, however lowly, its origins are not without controversy. In seeking to repress uprisings against the purportedly legitimate Qing, Zhu definitely felt his motives were righteous.¹ But because the Qing was a conquest dynasty, one that had been forcefully imposed despite the Jurchen's comparatively insignificant power (with perfidious Chinese cooperation), over the years so-called Ming loyalists, outright patriots, and contemporary Chinese analysts have condemned his willingness to sustain an oppressive regime that nevertheless proved too effete to counter foreign coercion. While some might claim Qing domination wasn't a great shame for China, it can't be denied that concerted action by a fraction of the populace could have easily overwhelmed their Manchu conquerors at any time. Unfortunately, cowered into submission and covetous of official position, innumerable scholars and officials unabashedly sanctified the government's legitimacy and cooperated willingly.

¹ It was even claimed by hypocritical literati that the Qing had inherited the mandate of Heaven.

Little is known about the author other than he was an erstwhile scholar who never succeeded in passing the traditional exams requisite to beginning a career as an imperial official. Therefore, despite his locally acknowledged erudition, he never held a significant administrative position. However, whether because of disinclination or incapability, many men marked by enormous talent never properly mastered the pedantic curriculum essential to surviving the examination process. Zhu was simply one of them.

History of the Text

The book itself has an unusual history. Even though Zhu personally circulated copies among the powerful and notable after completing it in 1855, *Jian Shu* never attracted the patronage necessary for publication. During his lifetime it thus remained unknown other than to a few acquaintances, yet it somehow survived as handwritten copies in private libraries for more than a half century until finally receiving exposure as a single, lengthy piece in the *Zhonghe Zazhi*, a limited circulation Shanghai journal, immediately after the Qing's collapse in 1911. Appearing in the highly uncertain era initiated by the last dynasty's recent dissolution, a time when foreign powers were exerting divisive influences, Zhu's discussion of how spycraft could be used to thwart external threats must have seemed highly germane.

Little is known about the article's reception or whether any of Zhu's ideas were adopted in the decades of fragmentation and foreign occupation that preceded World War II. However, Qunjun finally published *Jian Shu* as a standalone volume in 1979, three decades after the People's Republic of China was founded, presumably in response to the initiation of a concerted effort to revive indigenous cultural values and abstract the wisdom embedded in China's heritage that would allow the nation to

successfully confront the West. In the succeeding decades, PRC military and political thinktanks reexamined China's immense historical writings and numerous martial texts for strategic concepts and tactical principles that would allow China to be unexpected and unorthodox, to surpass their enemies by implementing tactics integral to an evolving "military science with unique Chinese characteristics." Accordingly, long neglected works such as the *Seven Military Classics*, the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*, and *Ruminations in a Grass Hut* became the focus of focal discussions and other, previously unknown works, including the *Thirty-six Stratagems*, gained prominence.

This quest for the military wisdom prompted several inexpensive typeset editions of Zhu's *Jian Shu* that are marked by varying fidelity and accuracy. A scholarly, annotated edition by Dr. Chen Hu was finally published by Minzu in 1999 but quickly disappeared. However, no matter in what form, *Jian Shu* wasn't included among the texts incorporated in the great fifty volume People's Liberation Army Press printing of traditional military works, the *Zhongguo Bingshu Jicheng* (*Collected Chinese Military Books* 中國兵書集成) initiated in the late 1980s, though it does exist in Korean and Japanese versions, including one by the highly experienced translator Moriya Hiroshi that appeared in 1982.

Nature of the book

Having appeared as a continuous article rather than a conventional book, *Jian Shu* originally lacked the usual demarcation of sections and chapters. Nevertheless, it's clearly divisible into an initial theoretical portion and a second, far longer collection of incidents that show different techniques and principles of spycraft in historical application. However, this deliberate segregation isn't particularly rigid because the theoretical discussion includes a

number of examples and the fifty-three “exemplifications” (as they are termed here) are loosely organized in terms of agent categories, as well as marked by considerable theoretical expansion and redundancy.

Although many of the illustrations are found in earlier military works such as the *Wujing Zongyao* (*Quintessentials of the Military Canon*), *Baizhan Qilue* (*One Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*) and *Caolu Jinglue* (*Ruminations in a Grass Hut*), others are unique. The latter are generally drawn from one of the twenty-five dynastic histories, but also reach back to the Spring and Autumn *Zuozhuan* and may stem from more obscure works, including the *Zhinang* and accounts of China’s two highly fragmented periods, the Sixteen Kingdoms and the immediate post Tang era. Zhu’s erudition is also visible in unexpected quotes from the *Yi Jing*, China’s great divination text, and the *Heguanzi*, a little known and even less read esoteric writing. (At the same time, it might be noted that the Ming dynasty *Caolu Jinglue* (*Ruminations in a Grass Hut*), which contains over six hundred examples from China’s military history, was published in 1850, to considerable interest, just a few years before he completed *Book of Spies*. Although Zhu never cites it as a source, many of its historical illustrations appear in *Ruminations*, suggesting he may have drawn inspiration or identified incidents for possible research from it.)

Throughout the book Zhu adopts the method previously seen only in the late Ming dynasty work known as the *Bingfa Baiyan* (*One Hundred Military Sayings*) of making an assertion, then citing supporting passages from other texts before adding what he terms “comments.” As commonly happens in scholarship of this type, errors in remembrance or copying tend to occur and important aspects, as well as all historical context, lost in the abridgement process. In the absence of variant texts other than hastily produced,

modern editions, the only recourse has been examining the original works wherever possible in order to correct the most egregious errors.

Even though the examples can be understood as abstractions in which one actor manipulates another through a particular method, a certain amount of commentary has been added in an immediately recognizable smaller typeface under the heading of “explication” to facilitate the recognition of historical context and expand on certain theoretical points. Dates intended to provide orientation have also been inserted in the text itself, and tangential matters relevant to issues raised in the passages, especially historical expansions and useful references, expanded in the footnotes. Square brackets are employed for all additions not original to the text.

Content

Jian Shu was written at the end of the Qing when Western military writings by Jomini, Frederick the Great, and even Clausewitz were beginning to flood China and military officials were increasingly inclined to adopt Western practices and doctrine despite an ever present, zealous nationalistic countercurrent. Nevertheless, the book doesn’t just represent the final formulation of traditional Chinese military thought on spies and the need for intelligence gathering, it’s also the only premodern, dedicated contemplation of spycraft ever written.

Although Zhu had dozens of Chinese military works and thousands of pages of military discussion at his command, he focused upon just two historical formulations, Sunzi’s “Employing Agents” and Li Jing’s brief consideration of agent categories found in fragments identified with his long lost *Bingfa*. He also paid close attention to the commentaries found in various editions of *Art of War*, including the *Sunzi Shijiazhu* (*Ten Commentaries* edition of

Sunzi), *Shiyijiazhu* (Eleven Commentaries edition), and *Shierhjazhu* (Twelve Commentaries edition), integrating parts into his analysis and adopting numerous historical illustrations in the examples section.

Sunzi's much extolled but somewhat infamous analysis, "Employing Agents," remains the first known focal examination of intelligence work. Its preservation as the *Art of War's* very last chapter has prompted doubts about its authorship, as well as suggestions it's a later accretion, but the discussion's underlying vision – *the ruthless practice of efficient warfare* – well accords with the thrust of the book and it has been an integral part of all known editions.

In contrast, despite Li Jing's contribution to founding the Tang, after his death his *Li Weigong Bingfa* disappeared apart from discrete passages preserved in military compendia such as the Song dynasty *Wujing Zongyao* and later encyclopedia, including the *Tongdian* and *Taiping Yulan*. (*Li Weigong*, the *Duke of Wei*, was Li Jing's title.) Despite citing the book by its title, Zhu isn't quoting from the original text or the well-known Qing dynasty synthetic work compiled by Wang Zongyi from remnants because it wasn't finished until 1895, a full forty years after the *Book of Spies*, but instead fragments embedded in other works.

Surprisingly, Zhu doesn't ever cite the prominent work associated with this great commander, the *Tang Taizong Li Weigong Wendui* (*Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong*), similarly thought to be a later compilation completed within a century of their deaths, possibly from notes or records. This is somewhat puzzling because the *Questions and Replies* is one of the well-known *Seven Military Classics* (*Wujing Qishu* 武經七書), seven martial writings that were conjoined under imperial auspices in the Song to preserve China's military knowledge and make it

accessible. Together with the *Wujing Zongyao*, the contents became the basis for the imperial military exams and all seven books – *Sima Fa*, *Wuzi*, *Liutao*, *Sunzi Bingfa*, *Wei Liaozi*, and *Sanlue* — should have been known to Zhu since he cites the *Wuzi* and *Liutao*.

Zhu was also somewhat selective in appropriating Li Jing's fragmented discussion of spies and spycraft. He ignores the pointed dialogue apparently preserved in the *Questions and Replies* on the morality of employing expendable agents even though it's a topic he broaches in the first exemplification where he bemoans the inhumanity of slaying an innocent person and again immediately thereafter, when he raises the examples of Tang Jian and Li Shiqi. More importantly, he also neglects Jing's oft quoted remark on the inherent liabilities entailed by employing spies found in both the *Questions and Replies* and *Bingfa* fragments. According to Li Jing, "Water can float a boat, but it can also overturn the boat. Some used spies to be successful; others, relying on spies, were overturned and defeated." Whether this stemmed from supreme confidence in the effectiveness of spies or a desire to avoid raising doubts and causing qualms about their use is uncertain.

Unlike Li Jing's material, which consists of a few scattered passages, Sunzi's "Employing Agents" purports to be a systematic discussion of the need for military intelligence, and thus agents, both in turn justified by the fiscal and human expenses incurred in warfare. Again, in contrast, perhaps because he was conscious of the government's impotence and its inadequate support for military action,² Zhu ignores the issues of crippling expenditures except when lamenting the dearth of intelligence activities on the border. He instead prefers to cite the need for knowledge to survive confrontations with steppe peoples and repress the large bandit

² And probably the foolish diversion of defense funds to build lake bound marble warships for the empress's amusement instead of ironclads.

groups (who often styled themselves “righteous armies”) then arising.

While laconic, Sunzi’s description of five basic agents, categorized in terms of their functions and prospects for survival, would come to anchor all subsequent thinking on spies apart from Li Jing’s five agent formulation. Although he bases his discussion on them, Zhu differs in the way in which he understands the term *fan jian* (反間), “turned” or “doubled” agent. As discussed in the theoretical portion, from Sunzi onward turned agents were defined as *enemy agents* who had been turned, whether willingly, for gain, or unwittingly, by being played. They thus ended up working for their original targets by providing information about their employers or conveying disinformation back to them. Their conversion, essentially a form of betrayal, effectively balked the enemy’s intelligence gathering and assessment measures.

But, as will be evident from his discussion and, more importantly, the examples he chooses, in Zhu’s expanded conception a *fan jian* can be anyone who conveys disinformation to the enemy, whether knowingly or not, and returns. He thus apparently understands *fan* (反) as return, as in Sunzi’s definition of living spies who “return (*fan* 反) to report.” As a result, prisoners employed to disseminate accurate information that will undermine the enemy are considered *fan jian*, just as are “persuaders” whose identity is clearly known and who basically act as lobbyists to somehow get the authorities in another state to accept a desired course of action. Yet, according to Sunzi’s characterizations and later writers, some of them would be considered disinformation agents, expendable or not, others living or internal spies simply acting in a foreign land.

Naturally Sunzi’s definitions didn’t prove immutable or remain all encompassing. For example, *fan jian* came to include

inanimate objects such as the forged letters used to undermine the credibility of commanders and confidants. Though they have an early history, *li jian* (離間 “separation agents”) thus grew in importance, their estrangement efforts dooming many capable generals. (*Jian* in itself also has the original meaning of “space” or “gap,” so by extension, to *jian* someone would be to create space between them.)

Readers may also feel Zhu’s categories are sometimes employed with less than theoretical precision. But his discussions and examples reflect views that were formed through actual experience, however limited, in the dark moments when the Taiping challenge threatened to overthrow the Qing. Theory and practice have diverged at such times because vast forces, opaque leadership, and even the enemy’s obtuseness (in failing to fall for well-crafted deception measures) often force unanticipated compromises and inescapable transformations. Although China had long had a continuous literate military tradition at the end of the Qing, with the latest realizations generally drawing upon earlier theoretical formulations and examples being used and reused in the sort of case study approach *Jian Shu* essentially adopts, perspectives varied and judgments differed. Our task is understanding rather than criticizing, even when critiquing may seem merited.

A Note on the Translation

As this translation is intended for the widest possible audience rather than the handful of Sinologists who might have an interest, textual emendations and other annotations that would encumber the text to little purpose have been omitted. Historical and contextual remarks, including those on intelligence matters, have also been kept brief, though amplified discussions of much of the theory found here, as well as many of the examples, may be found

in my previous works, especially the *Tao of Spycraft: Intelligence Theory and Practice in Traditional China*, but also in the *Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China* and *Lever of Power: Military Deception in China and the West*, as well as my translations of the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies* and *Ruminations in a Grass Hut*. As always, while I am responsible for the primary research and the translation, in tracking down and studying the original passages that Zhu incorporates into his work I have been immeasurably aided by Mei-chün Sawyer. Hopefully our efforts have made accessible a work that definitively caps China's contemplation of spies and intelligence.

Spring, 2020

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I

THEORY

**Agents were first employed by Shao Kang
who had Nu Ai spy on Jiao.**

According to the *Zuozhuan* account for Duke Ai's first year (495 BC),⁴ "Shao Kang had Nu Ai spy on Jiao and had Ji Zhu mislead Yi.⁵ He subsequently extinguished the states of Guo and Ge.

Explication: This laconic entry, which projects the use of spies well back into China's semi-legendary period or roughly the twentieth century BC, is best understood from the original *Zuozhuan* passage which is itself embedded in an account of events that unfolded in the first two decades of the fifth century BC:

King Fuchai of Wu defeated Yue at Fujiao in
revenge for [killing his father] at the battle of Zuili

³ Titles that approximate the section's thrust have been added for the reader's convenience.

⁴ Although purportedly a commentary on the *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn*) which chronicles the important events that unfolded during the Spring and Autumn period (722-481) as Zhou rule disintegrated and internecine warfare began to plague the land, the *Zuozhuan* (*Zuo's Commentary*) was probably compiled in the fourth century BC during the subsequent Warring States period (481-221 BC). It incorporates materials from several traditions, not just Lu's (where Confucius himself supposedly edited the *Chunqiu*) and remains the major source for Spring and Autumn historical events despite being affected by later concepts and concerns. (For characterizations of these and the other classic works mentioned herein, see Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographic Guide* [Berkeley: University of California, 1993]. The classic translation by James Legge – *The Ch'un Ts'ew with The Tso Chuen* [Shanghai: Oxford University Press, 1872] – remains the only complete translation of the *Zuozhuan* in English. However, selected portions, including the five most important battles, may also be found in Burton Watson, *The Tso Chuan: Selections from China's Oldest Narrative History*.)

⁵ Zhu uses two terms (discussed further below) to indicate "spying," *jian* (間) and *die* (諜), with the former being far more comprehensive. To distinguish them, *jian* will always be translated as "agent" except where the term actively means "spying" or "separating / estranging," in which case "*jian*" will be noted in parentheses, and *die* as "spy," with "*die*" similarly added in parentheses for verbal use.

and entered Yue. Goujian, king of Yue, ensconced himself at Kuaiji with five thousand well armored soldiers and had the *Dafu* (Grand Master) Zhong seek a peace accord through the auspices of Wu's prime minister Pi.⁶ King Fuchai was about to accept it when Wu Yun (Wu Zixu) said, "You mustn't. I've heard that when establishing virtue there is nothing better than nurturing it and when extirpating illness, nothing better than doing so completely.

In antiquity, Chiao of Guo (Yuguo) killed Zhen Guan and Zhen Xun, and then extinguished the Xia by slaying King Hou Xiang. [Xiang's consort] Hou Min, who was pregnant, escaped by creating a hole and returned to her state of Zheng where she gave birth to Shao Kang. Shao Kang eventually became the head of the shepherds and made preparations against Jiao's villainy.

When Jiao indeed had Jiao⁷ look for him, Shao Kang fled to Yu where he became the head chef in order to escape harm.⁸ [The leader], Yu Si, then wed his two daughters to Kang and gave him the town of Lun, as well as one *cheng* [ten acres] of land and [a force of] one *zu* of men.⁹ He was then able to

⁶ Translations and functional equivalents for China's complex web of everchanging titles generally follow Charles A. Hucker's *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*.

⁷ Although Romanized the same way, the surnames for the two Jiao are written with different characters.

⁸ Shao Kang no doubt assumed they would be looking for shepherds, so adopted a different identity as a cook.

⁹ Traditionally said by commentators to be 500 men but that's based on military organizations in the Zhou dynasty. Given the low population density of ancient times, the total was more likely a 100 or less and not even necessarily

manifest his virtue and initiate plans to gather the Xia populace and restore its administration. He had [his official] Nu Ai spy upon Jiao and had [his son] Ji Zhu mislead Yi. He subsequently exterminated [Chiao's state of] Guo and [Yi's state of] Ge and restored [the Xia founder] Yu's heritage. He sacrificed to his Xia ancestors and Heaven, thereby not neglecting the old.

Now Wu is unlike Guo, while Yue is larger than Shao Kang's [domain]. If it happens to flourish because you didn't destroy it, won't we have difficulty? Furthermore, Goujian is good at attracting people and is focused on measures that don't neglect their welfare. He doesn't shun labor and Yue shares this region with us. We have been enemies for generations. So now that we have conquered them, if we don't seize them but instead preserve them, thereby contravening Heaven and strengthening an aggressive enemy, we won't be able to negate our words later even if we regret it. The decline of the Ji clan state of Wu will just be a matter of time. It certainly won't be possible to seek hegemony over the states while sharing borders with the Rong and Yi [barbarian peoples] and strengthening an aggressive enemy."

After Wu Zixu withdrew, he told others, "Yue will accumulate its resources for ten years and instruct and train its people for another ten. Somewhat after twenty years Wu will become a marsh."

The second entry below, which continues the story of Wu and Yue's

military forces, just the village's male population.

fateful struggle, shows the accuracy of Wu Zixu's prediction.

**Yi Yin once acted as a spy for the Shang,
but the impractical Confucians doubt it.**

In [the *Art of War*'s] "Employing Agents,"¹⁰ Sunzi states: "When the Yin (Shang) arose, Yi Zhi was in the Xia. When the Zhou arose, Lü Ya was in the Shang. Enlightened rulers and sagacious generals are able to employ the wise as agents, so they are certain to be successful. This is the essence of warfare, what the Three Armies rely upon to move."¹¹

The *Kunxue Jiwen* states: "Yi and Lü were the companions of sages. This [is a case of] a Warring States philosopher [Sunzi] slandering sages and worthies."¹² However, Yi Yin was employed

¹⁰ Sunzi, to whom the *Art of War* is traditionally attributed, was reportedly a contemporary of Confucius, both of them having been active around 500 BCE. Whether Sunzi composed the *Sunzi Bingfa* or it's a composite work of the early Warring States period created by his followers or others, the *Art of War* became the foundation of military thought and practice by the late Warring States period, many important concepts and tactical principles having received their first formulation therein. (*Bingfa* 兵法, commonly translated as the "art of war," basically means "army methods," so "strategy" (for which there are other terms as well), "tactics," or "military methods.") The chapter titled "Employing Agents" – which may be a later accretion but well coheres with Sunzi's emphasis upon efficient warfare – is the first historically known, dedicated contemplation of spycraft despite its brevity. (*Art of War* translations abound, but the two that best preserve the text as a martial, rather than philosophical or esoteric work, are Samuel Griffith, *The Art of War* and Ralph D. Sawyer, *Sun-tzu Art of War*.)

¹¹ The term "three armies," which recurs throughout China's military writings, reflects the early segmentation of military strength into three distinct contingents or "armies" generally termed left, right, and center. (Increasing force size and battlefield lethality soon prompted further segmentation into six operational forces, purportedly a prerogative reserved only to the king of the Zhou, once acknowledged as ruler of the entire realm by sanction of Heaven, but merely a nominal entity in the Spring and Autumn and beyond.)

¹² Written by the avowed (and highly pedantic) Confucian Wang Yinglin in the Southern Song, the *Kunxue Jiwen* is basically a commentary on historical matters.

by a Sage (ruler) to save the people from [a disaster comparable to] water and fire, so what harm was there if he served as an agent? Duke Hou (Wang Yinglin) was hobbled by Confucianism, his highly constricted views never changed.

Sunzi's words have their own basis, mere opinion can't refute them. Sunzi called Yi "Yin Zhi" because Yin was actually named "savior" (*zhi*). Cai Yong states in his *Shihai*, "Yi Zhi boasted he could manage a cauldron."¹³ The commentary states that "*zhi* was Yi Yin's name." This verifies it. Other books call Yin "A Heng" and "Bao Heng," or claim *yin* wasn't a name [but a position].

Explication: Two decidedly historic persons of immense accomplishment, Yi Yin and the Tai Gong have traditionally been venerated for their roles in helping overthrow the perverse and tyrannical rulers of the preceding dynasties, the Xia and Shang respectively.¹⁴ Both reputedly gained their positions as sage advisers after being recognized by wise leaders despite the inferiority of their positions, Yi Yin through his purported culinary expertise and the Tai Gong while fishing. However, they differ in that Yi Yin was a false defector, a living spy dispatched to gather information about the enemy while the Tai Gong was a Shang defector who had supposedly served as a local official and had personal knowledge of the government's inner workings.¹⁵ Apart

¹³ In other words, he symbolically proclaimed himself to be a great chef, able to undertake responsibility for the cauldrons used in the kitchen for cooking, but also by implication the great cauldrons symbolic of state authority.

¹⁴ Oracle bone inscriptions indicate the late Shang kings were still sacrificing to Yi Yin while the Tai Gong's contributions are confirmed at least in part by bronze inscriptions and traditional historical accounts, though the latter are not invariably reliable. (For an overview of the Shang and Zhou's rise, see *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*; for a more extensive discussion of Yi Yin and Shang military history see Sawyer, *Ancient Chinese Warfare*; and for the Tai Gong's role in the Zhou's ascension, see Sawyer, *Conquest and Domination in Early China: Rise and Demise of the Western Chou*.)

¹⁵ Further analysis of the nature of their intelligence activities and Yi Yin's

from providing strategic advice, he reputedly developed numerous measures to subvert the Shang, though they are unattested since the programs described in the *Liutao* (*Six Secret Teachings*), the book historically attributed to him, stem from the Warring States period.

The highly accomplished disciples of sages such as Zi Gong were employed as agents in order to achieve success.

The *Li Weigong Bingfa* (*Duke Li of Wei's Art of War*) states: "Zi Gong, Shi Miu, Chen Zhen, Su Qin, Zhang Yi, Fan Sui, and others all relied on this technique to achieve success."¹⁶

For an account of how Zi Gong employed spycraft, see the *Jiayu* (*Family Sayings [of Confucius]*).¹⁷ In "Qujie Jie,"¹⁸ the *Jiayu* states: "When Confucius was in Wei, he heard that [Qi's powerful minister] Tian Chang was about to revolt and feared [the powerful ministerial families] Gao, Guo, Bao, and Yan would take advantage

covert legend may be found in Sawyer, *The Tao of Spycraft, Intelligence Theory and Practice in Traditional China*, pp. 7-20.

¹⁶ As noted in the foreword, despite being attributed to Li Jing, also known as the duke of Wei (*Wei Gong*), the *Li Weigong Bingfa* is a late, Qing dynasty synthetic compilation of statements attributed to Li Jing that were preserved in the Tang dynastic histories, post Tang military writings, and subsequent encyclopedic works such as the *Taiping Yulan*. Since it postdates Zhu's death, he is throughout quoting from the remnants preserved in these writings but identifies them as coming from Li Jing's *Bingfa*.

¹⁷ For a slightly different analysis, see Sawyer, *Tao of Spycraft: Intelligence Theory and Practice in Traditional China*, pp. 20-26.

¹⁸ "Explanations of Compromise." The *Jiayu* is a compilation with an uncertain but probably Han dynasty date that assembles sayings and stories associated with Confucius, often illustrating them with anecdotes or other material from disparate sources. The episode is found in section 37, as well as in the *Shiji*'s chapter on Confucius' disciples, with only slight differences. (The chapter's title refers to compromising one's values or integrity, here out of necessity, because Tian Chang's behavior would never have merited Confucius' approbation. However, the powerful Tian family had long been influential even though being but one of several ministerial families.)

of the revolt to shift their armies to attack Lu.¹⁹ Having learned about it, Confucius assembled his disciples and announced, “Lu is where our graves lie, it’s the state of our ancestors. We must save it. If today I want to compromise my integrity by asking Tian Chang to rescue it, who among you will act as my emissary?”

Zi Gong asked to go, and Confucius consented.²⁰ After reaching Qi, Zi Gong spoke with Tian Chang. “Lu is a difficult state to attack, so it would be a mistake for my lord to attack it.”

Tian Chang asked, “What difficulty is there in attacking Lu?”

Zi Gong replied, “Their walls are thin and low, the land narrow and infertile, the ruler stupid and inhumane, the chief ministers crafty and useless, and the officers and people hate warfare. That is why you can’t engage them in battle. It would be better for you to attack Wu. Wu’s walls are high and thick, their moats broad and deep, their armor solid and new, their fighters selected and well fed, and all their heavy equipment and superlative weapons kept inside [the state]. In addition, they have intelligent high officials to defend it. This is why they are easy to attack.”

Flushing angrily, Tian Chang said, “What you consider hard, others consider easy. What you consider easy, others consider hard. Why do you instruct me in this way?”

Zi Gong replied: “I’ve heard it said that when trouble lies within, attack the strong. But when trouble lies without, attack the weak. Today your problems lie within. I’ve further heard that the ruler tried to enfeoff you three times but failed in all three because

¹⁹ By this time the many states, both large and small, that emerged with the collapse of central Zhou authority had been preying upon and brutally annexing each other for two centuries, leaving only a dozen or so survivors, including Lu, reputedly the repository of Zhou culture, and larger states such as Qi and Chu.

²⁰ According to the *Jiayu*, Confucius rejected Zi Lu, Zi Zhang, and Zi Shi before settling on Zi Gong, no doubt because of his verbal skills. (In the *Analects*, the vaunted compilation of Confucius’ sayings, he and Cai Wo are singled out for their speaking ability.)

the high ministers don't heed you. Now, in addition, you want to destroy Lu in order to expand Qi. Victory will make the ruler arrogant, while destroying it will result in the ministers being honored without your merit ever being noted. Then, in the coming days you will be even more distant from the ruler. Once the ruler becomes arrogant and the ministers dissolute, seeking to accomplish great affairs will be difficult. Moreover, being arrogant, the ruler will throw off all restraint and his debauched subordinates will fight with each other. This will result in disagreeing with the ruler even as you have to contend with the great ministers below. In this situation your position in Qi will be endangered! Thus, I said it would be better to attack Wu. If the attack on Wu fails, people will have died outside the state and the great ministerial positions will be empty. Since you won't have any strong enemies in the court nor any discord with the people, a solitary ruler will then govern Qi. That will be you."

Tian Chang said, "Excellent. However, the army is already approaching Lu, so if I divert it to Wu, the high ministers will suspect me. What then?"

Zi Gong replied, "If you slow the army down, I'll go see the king of Wu and have him attack Qi in order to rescue Lu, giving you cause to confront them."

Tian Chang assented, and Zi Gong went south to see the king of Wu where he said: "The king of Zhou no longer rules the realm, while you as hegemon don't have any powerful enemies. A weight of a thousand catties can shift when a fraction is added,²¹ yet you

²¹ Although weights varied over China's lengthy history, a catty (*jin*) was roughly 250 grams and a *zhu*, translated here as "a fraction" for clarity, slightly over a half gram, with a *liang* (in the term *zu liang* used here) about 15.5 grams, giving a comparison of 250,000 grams to at most 15 or so. However, no one using this comparison would be thinking so exactly, but simply an incredibly small amount – something like a heavy feather – added to a great mass, with a ton and

with ten thousand chariots and we in Lu with a thousand are now battling with Qi to see who is strongest. This makes me truly worry on your behalf. Moreover, rescuing Lu will make your name illustrious and attacking Qi will be immensely advantageous. There can be no greater profit than will be achieved by sustaining the feudal lords along the Si river [Lu], overawing brutal Qi, and subjugating strong Jin. You will gain fame for preserving the soon to be vanquished state of Lu and substantially putting strong Qi into difficulty. I truly hope you don't doubt this."

The king of Wu replied, "Excellent. Nevertheless, I fought with Yue, reducing them to a foothold at Kuaiji. At this moment the king of Yue is striving to hone his warriors and is bent on taking revenge on Wu. Wait until I attack Yue, then it will be possible."

Zi Gong replied: "Yue's strength doesn't exceed Lu's while Wu's strength doesn't exceed Qi's. If you set Qi aside to attack Yue, Qi will definitely make Lu theirs. Moreover, you've recently acquired a name for preserving the lost and continuing the severed but attacking insignificant Yue while fearing strong Qi wouldn't be courageous. The courageous don't shun difficulty, the benevolent don't enforce every detail of an agreement, the wise don't lose the time, and the righteous don't sever future generations.

"If you now preserve Yue, it will show the feudal lords your benevolence. If you rescue Lu and attack Qi, you will overawe Jin. The feudal lords will have to fall over each other in paying court and your hegemony will be complete. If you insist on treating Yue as an enemy, I'd like to go east to see the ruler and have him follow on with their troops. This will actually empty Yue in the guise of accompanying the feudal lords for an attack."

Being greatly pleased, the king of Wu sent Zi Gong on to Yue. The king of Yue cleared the road, met him in the suburbs, and

an ounce being comparable.

personally drove him to his quarters where he questioned him. Zi Gong said, "I recently persuaded the king of Wu to attack Qi in order to rescue Lu. He wants to do it but fearing Yue in his mind said, "Wait until I attack Yue, then it will be possible." In this case Yue's destruction is certain. Moreover, if someone who doesn't intend to take revenge causes people to suspect him, it's stupid. If he intends to take revenge and lets people know about it, it's disastrous. And if the matter is heard about before it can be initiated, it's dangerous. These three are great worries when initiating affairs."

The king of Yue nodded his head and bowed toward him. "When I was young, I lost my parents and failed to properly assess our internal strength before engaging Wu in warfare. The pain of being put into difficulty here at Kuaiji penetrates my bones. My lips burn and my tongue is parched from wanting to die together with the king of Wu. That's my wish."

After that he queried Zi Gong. Zi Gong replied, "The king of Wu is brutal and fierce, his ministers aren't reliable, the state is exhausted from frequent battles, and the officers and troops can't endure it. The common people are annoyed with their superiors, the ministers are in revolt, and Wu Zixu has perished as a result of remonstrating with him. Prime minister Pi, who controls the government's affairs, accords with the king's errors in order to ensure his own position.²² This then is the time to take revenge on the king of Wu. If you now sincerely send forth your officers and soldiers in order to accommodate his ambition, give him precious jewels to please his heart, speak humbly and ritually honor him, he will certainly attack Qi. If he fights but isn't victorious, it will be your good fortune. But if he is victorious, he will certainly redirect his troops to Jin. I'd like to go north to see the king of Jin and have him mount a conjoined attack. When Wu's elite soldiers are fully

²²

Pi had long been acting on behalf of Yue as it was heavily bribing him.

deployed in Qi and his heavy forces run into difficulty in Jin, Wu's extinction will be inevitable if you take advantage of their enervation. This is what the sages refer to as compromising oneself to seek further gains."

Elated, the king of Yue assented. He then sent Zi a hundred *yi* of gold, a sword, and two excellent spears, but Zi Gong didn't accept them. He then went off to report to Wu.

Five days later, when the king of Wu mobilized all the soldiers within the state, Zi Gong had the high Yue official Zhong bow before him and say, "I, an emissary of your servant in Donghai, Goujian, have dared to meet with your subordinates and query your assistants. As a result, I've learned that you, honored king, are about to undertake the great and righteous affair of executing the perverse and rescuing the weak by putting brutal Qi in difficulty and sustaining the house of Zhou. I ask that we be allowed to raise all our officers and troops, some 3,000 men, and act as the vanguard, being the first to encounter the arrows and stones under your mandate. Through his humble minister Zhong the king would like to offer the preserved treasures of our ancestors, twenty sets of armor, the iron *Qulu* spear, and the *Buguang* sword to honor your officers."

Greatly pleased, the king of Wu informed Zi Gong: "The king of Yue wants to accompany me when we attack Qi. Should I allow it?"

Zi Gong replied, "You cannot. Emptying someone's state by [taking] all their troops and having the ruler follow on isn't righteous. You should accept their money, allow their army [to participate], but decline their ruler."

The king of Wu agreed and declined the king of Yue's offer. Then he mobilized the troops from nine districts to attack Qi. Meanwhile, Zi Gong departed and went to Jin where he said to the

ruler, "I've heard that when one's thoughts aren't settled, it's not possible to respond to exigencies and that when the army isn't prepared in advance, it's not possible to defeat the enemy. Right now, Qi and Wu are about to engage in battle. If they fight and there's no winner, the situation will be increasingly chaotic. If Wu is victorious, their forces will certainly approach Jin."

Terrified, the king of Jin asked, "What should we do?"

Zi Gong replied, "Repair your weapons, rest your troops, and await them." The king of Jin agreed. Zi Gong then went on to Lu.

When the king of Wu fought with Qi at Ailing, Wu inflicted a severe defeat on Qi's armies. Then, gathering the soldiers from the seven contingents,²³ they didn't return home but instead shifted their forces to Jin where the armies collided just above Yellow Lake. When Wu and Jin were battling to see who was strongest, Jin launched a sudden strike that badly defeated Wu's army. Accordingly, the king of Yue crossed the river and launched a surprise attack on Wu that carried them to within seven *li* of the capital before they encamped.

When the king of Wu learned of it, he departed from Jin and returned to Wu where he engaged Yue's forces in battle at Five Lakes but failed to be victorious in three clashes and was unable to protect the city gate. Yue then surrounded the king's palace, killed King Fuchai, and executed his prime minister. Three years after it destroyed Wu, Yue faced east and became hegemon. Thus, with one

²³ In the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and to a lesser extent thereafter, victorious armies tended to absorb the defeated forces and thereby increase their strength. (This is one reason the *Art of War* emphasizes fighting "with the aim of preservation," stating in "Planning Offensives," "Preserving their army is best, destroying their army second best." "Waging War" then advises, "Treat captured soldiers well in order to nurture them for our use." This is referred to as "conquering the enemy and growing stronger.") Constraints had, of course, to be imposed to adequately control and prevent them from becoming an internal threat.

journey Zi Gong preserved Lu, threw Qi into chaos, destroyed Wu, strengthened Jin, and made Yue hegemon.”

Zi Gong's use of spycraft is recorded in the *Guoyu* (*Discourses of the States*), *Yue Jueshu* (*Book of Yue's Severing*), *WuYue Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn of Wu and Yue*), and *Shiji* (*Historical Records*).²⁴ The accounts are essentially the same as found in the *Jiayu*. In terms of Sunzi's five-fold category of agents, Zi Gong was a “living agent.” His spying on Qi, Wu, Yue, and Jin employed the methods of “*jian lin*” (“estranging allies”) in the *Li Weigong Bingfa*. But his technique was particularly marvelous, his management especially perspicacious.

Explication: Zhu no doubt consciously choose Zi Gong, someone with the closest possible connection with the master himself, in his quest to refute the criticism constantly levelled by hypocritical Confucian officials and other pedantic members of the literati against the use of spies and the possibility that great historical achievements were based upon their accomplishments. There is an

²⁴ The *Guoyu* consists of numerous discrete conversations loosely anchored to Spring and Autumn incidents and events. Probably compiled from fragmentary historical records around the turn of the fourth century BC, its authenticity continues to be a matter of scrutiny. The *Yue Jueshu* and *WuYue Chunqiu*, two books ostensibly centered on the dramatic conflict between Wu and Yue, are probably works of the Later Han. They interweave historical events, fanciful enhancements, and contemplations of various phenomena to create semi-fiction. In contrast, while subject to criticism and not without errors in dating and events, the *Shiji*, written, as well as compiled, from historical materials extant in the imperial library by Sima Tan and his son, Sima Qian who was responsible for the bulk of the effort, is China's first synthetic history and a masterpiece of literature. In his attempt to create a comprehensive history, Sima Qian ventured into legendary and even mythical realms, but the book still preserves essential material on the Xia, Shang, and Western Zhou. The *Shiji's* extensive biographies encompass diverse personalities and include military figures, spies and persuaders, and even assassins. (Selected *Shiji* chapters have been translated by Burton Watson under the title of *Records of the Grand Historian of China* and the entire work is being systematically made available under the general editorship of William Nienhauser as *The Grand Scribe's Records*.)

undeniable ruthlessness in the approach and Wu perishes in consequence of their efforts to save Lu. However, Wu and Yue's titanic rivalry stretched back thirty years and the political situation had been evolving for nearly two decades during which Yue systematically employed every possible means to enervate and subvert Wu, just as formulated in the early chapters of the Tai Gong's *Liutao*, especially the chapters titled "Civil Offensive" and "Three Doubts" which follow several disquisitions on how to practice good government.²⁵

Our dynasty's *Taizong*, Emperor Wen, once also employed an agent to slay Ming's *Jinglue* (Military Commissioner) Yuan Chonghuan and achieve suzerainty over the realm.

According to Yuan Chonghuan's biography in the *Mingshi*: "In the middle of the eighth month of the sixth year of the *Chongzhen* era (1633 AD), when our Great Qing²⁶ *Taizu*, Emperor Gao, died, Chonghuan dispatched an emissary to offer condolences though he actually wanted to discover our vacuity and substance through him.²⁷ Our Great Qing *Taizong*, Emperor Wen, sent an emissary in reply. Chonghuan wanted to initiate peace discussions, so he gave the emissary a letter to take back.

²⁵ For a study of these measures and their impact, see "King Kou-chien and the State of Yüeh" in Sawyer, *The Tao of Spycraft*, 232-42.

²⁶ Note that Zhu is writing from the perspective of a Qing official and therefore feels compelled to constantly say "great" Qing even though it strikes the reader as somewhat awkward for a Chinese native to be praising what should be a blatant enemy.

²⁷ "Vacuity and Substance" (*xu* 虛, "empty" or "vacuous", and *shi* 實, "substance" / "substantial") is not only a critical term in Chinese military thought, but also the basis for formulating deceptive and unorthodox measures, such as by making the vacuous look substantial or the substantial look vacuous. In addition to referring to the nature of the enemy's forces, including their strength and disposition, the term also encompasses the idea of knowing their exploitable gaps and fissures, together with their strongpoints.

In the eleventh month of the seventh year, a Qing army crossed the river at Suzhou and went west. Chonghuan entered [the area] to defend the capital (of Chang'an) and engaged in a fierce battle with our great [Qing] army that inflicted extensive casualties on both sides. Meanwhile, having suddenly been forced to suffer the presence of soldiers, the angry inhabitants became unruly and claimed Chonghuan had allowed the enemy to employ its army [in this fashion]. Because he had previously sought peace negotiations, several court officials also slandered him, saying he brought the Qing army in so as to coerce the (Ming) court into concluding a peace agreement. Thus, even the Ming emperor heard about it.

It happened that our great Qing employed an agent at that time who claimed Chonghuan had secretly reached an agreement (with the Qing) and brought it about that a captured eunuch learned of it before he was clandestinely allowed to depart. The man raced back and reported it to the emperor, who believed it. On the first day of the twelfth month Chonghuan was summoned for questioning and subsequently remanded to prison.

Explication: Although this was fundamentally an estrangement ploy, it succeeded by disseminating false accusations that were created by perverting reports of actual events. The agent merely had to ensure the false conclusions reached the Ming emperor's ears.

{Necessity and Measures}

Ancient military books such as *Sunzi Art of War* and the *Wuzi* all stress [the need to] employ agents. Only by employing agents can you know the enemy's situation in advance, only through employing agents can you separate and disperse the enemy's troops.

Sunzi's "Employing Agents" states: "The means by which enlightened rulers and sagacious generals moved and conquered

others, that their achievements surpassed the masses, was advance knowledge. Advance knowledge cannot be gained from ghosts and spirits, inferred from phenomena, or projected from the measures of Heaven, but must be gained from men, for it is the knowledge of the enemy's true situation. Unless someone has the wisdom of a Sage, he cannot use spies; unless he is benevolent and righteous, he cannot employ spies; unless he is subtle and perspicacious, he cannot perceive the substance in intelligence reports."

Explication: In articulating the need for military intelligence, this classic passage put warfare on a knowledgeable basis. As evident from the *Art of War's* first chapter, "Initial Estimations," Sunzi's underlying vision – the efficient practice of warfare²⁸ – requires acquiring reliable information about the Dao, Heaven, Earth, generals, and laws. More specifically, it's necessary to make comparative assessments as to "Which ruler has the Dao? Which general has greater ability? Who has gained the advantages of Heaven and Earth? Whose laws and orders are more thoroughly implemented? Whose forces are stronger? Whose officer and troops are better trained? Whose rewards and punishments are clearer?" A careful reading of the entire *Art of War* reveals numerous, additional pairs of important factors that should contribute to the ultimate objective of making a net assessment preliminary to deciding whether or not to engage in battle, as well as determining the strategy to be employed.

The *Wuzi* states: "Excelling at using spies (*jian die*), harassing the enemy with a few light troops, causing them to scatter, and forcing the higher and lower ranks to reproach each other is termed the "vital point (*ji*) of affairs."

Explication: Certain aspects were considered critical to the

²⁸ "Employing Agents" actually begins with a lengthy passage that economically justifies the need to employ spies.

prosecution of warfare including *ji* (機), the vital point or “subtle moment” when it isn’t just victory and defeat that hang in the balance, but the army’s, and thus the state’s, very fate. The early military thinkers emphasized any failure to act appropriately, at the exact moment, would inevitably spawn disaster. It was also believed that failing to take advantage of certain “vital points” during a battle would similarly result in defeat. The classic definition appears in the *Wuzi*, attributed to the great general Wu Qi:

In general, warfare has four vital points: *qi*, terrain, affairs, and strength. When one man strategically deploys the masses of the Three Armies, the million soldiers of the forces, in appropriate formations according to varying degrees of strength, it’s termed the “vital point [*ji*] of *qi*.” When the road is narrow and the way perilous; when famous mountains present great obstacles; and if ten men defend a place a thousand cannot pass, it’s termed a “vital point of earth.” Excelling at using spies, harassing the enemy with a few light troops, causing them to scatter, and forcing rulers and ministers to feel mutual annoyance, the higher and lower ranks to reproach each other, is termed the “vital point of affairs.” When the chariots have solid axles and secure pins; the boats well-suited rudders and oars; the officers are thoroughly familiar with the fighting formations; and the horses practiced in pursuit and maneuvers, it’s termed the “vital point of strength.”²⁹

²⁹ “The Tao of the General.” (A full translation of the *Wuzi* may be found in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics of Ancient China* or Samuel Griffin, *The Art of War*.)

The *Taigong Liutao* also emphasizes using agents.

The *Taigong Liutao* states: “[The general’s staff includes] eight roving officers responsible for ferreting out villainy and observing changes, manipulating human emotions, and discovering the enemy’s intent who serve as spies (*jian die*).”³⁰

Explication: This passage comes from “The King’s Wings” in the *Liutao* (*Six Secret Teachings*), a chapter in which the Tai Gong describes the members of the army’s general staff and a number of important, highly specialized personnel such as the “roving officers” noted here. In addition to strategists, supply officers, and other core functionaries including topographers, a number of men are assigned to what qualify as intelligence activities. These include Secret Signals Officers who “create deceptive signs and seals and issue false designations and orders”; Officers of Authority who “implement the unorthodox and deceptive”; Ears and Eyes who “go about everywhere, listening to what people are saying”; and Officers of Techniques who “spread slander and falsehoods and call on ghosts and spirits in order to confuse the minds of the populace.”

{Esteem Forerunners}

**Famous ancient generals such as Li Mu, Xinling,
Han Xin, and Li Guangbi similarly
all stressed employing agents.**

According to Lian Po’s biography in the *Shiji*, “Li Mu was a superlative Zhao general who long dwelled in Dai’s Yingmen region

³⁰ The *Liutao* (*Six Secret Teachings*) attributed to Lü Ya, otherwise known as the Tai Gong, is an extensive Warring States work of some sixty chapters that not only propounds a program for revolution – the Zhou’s overthrow of the Shang – but also prescribes the essential principles of good government and discusses a wide array of military concepts and tactical measures, including the importance of unorthodox techniques and the structure of military forces. (A complete translation of the *Liutao* may be found in Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*.)

where he undertook defensive preparations against the Xiongnu.³¹ He was especially careful about the fire warning system and multiplied the number of agents.”

According to the Lord of Xinling’s biography in the *Shiji*: “One day when the prince of Wei (Lord of Xinling) and the king [of Wei] were gambling at Bo, it was reported that signal fires marking a border invasion in the north had been seen. This was understood as indicating Zhao’s forces had appeared at the border and were making an incursion. Putting the game aside, the king wanted to summon his high officials to formulate their tactics. The prince stopped him, saying: “The king of Zhao is merely out hunting, it’s not an invasion.” He then returned to the game as before.

Being fearful, the king couldn’t concentrate on their game. After a while word again came from the border reporting that “the king of Zhao is merely out hunting, he’s not invading.” Startled, the king of Wei asked, “How did you know that?”

The prince replied: “Among my retainers are those who can ferret out the king of Zhao’s secrets. My retainers immediately report whatever the king is about to do to your servant. Thus, I knew about it.”³²

Zhu comments: In employing the army, “knowing yourself and knowing them” is esteemed.³³ If you want to know them, you

³¹ As the incident dates to late in the Warring States period, the term Xiongnu is anachronistic and should be understood as referring to one their antecedents. (A confederation of nomadic pastoralists who dwelled in the northern steppe (or Northern Zone) rather than a single people, the Xiongnu emerged as a formidable enemy about 209 BC under the charismatic leader Mao Dun who is mentioned in the exemplifications.

³² Ironically, “Thereafter, fearing the prince’s ability and sagacity, King An-li did not dare entrust him with government affairs.”

³³ The well recognized, vital need to know your enemy and yourself, while most famously articulated in the *Art of War*, is a watchword for China’s traditional wisdom based approach to warfare, as well as being a major impetus to intelligence gathering.

can only obtain the necessary knowledge by employing agents. Moreover, when it comes to knowledge, knowing things in advance is esteemed. Preparations can be made if it's known the enemy is about to arrive, while if it's known they aren't coming, it's unnecessary to be afraid.

In "Employing Agents," Sunzi says, "The means by which sagacious generals conquered others and achieved success was advance knowledge." By employing retainers as agents, the Lord of Xinling was able to know the king of Zhao was out hunting rather than mounting an invasion. If Zhao had been invading rather than hunting, the Lord of Xinling would have similarly known it in advance. The Lord of Xinling excelled at employing agents, just what Sunzi meant by true heroes being perspicacious.³⁴

Based upon the *Shiji*, the Lord of Xinling wrote a work called *Wei Gongzi Bingfa* (*Prince of Wei's Art of War*). His discussion of employing agents must have been insightful. It's regrettable that Sunzi's thirteen chapters have been transmitted but the *Wei Gongzi Bingfa* hasn't. Furthermore, while the Lord of Xinling adroitly employed agents, later on the king of Wei succumbed to Qin's agents.³⁵ That the Lord of Xinling was set aside because of [his knowledge of spying] is also likely.

According to the biography of the Lord of Huaiyin (Han Xin) in the *Shihji*: "Han Xin wanted to move down through Jingxing to attack the state of Zhao. The Lord of Cheng'an assembled a force said to number about 200,000 men at Jingxing's mouth. The Lord of Guangwu, Li Zuojun, advised the Lord of Cheng'an: "Han Xin is coming to fight from afar. I have heard that when provisions are

³⁴ As Zhu concludes from the previously cited passage, "Unless someone is subtle and perspicacious, he cannot perceive the substance in intelligence reports."

³⁵ As reprised in "The king of Qin estranged the Lord of Xinling" in the exemplifications.

transported a thousand *li* the soldiers have a famished look. The road through Jingxing cannot accommodate chariots arrayed in square formation nor can cavalry properly deploy in ranks. Their supplies and provisions must be behind them. Therefore, I would like your majesty to let me personally lead thirty thousand unorthodox soldiers and proceed by a side road to sever their supply route. Meanwhile, your majesty should fortify the bastion but not engage in battle. When they are unable to fight at the front and can't retreat because our unorthodox forces have cut off their rear, within ten days you will be able to suspend the heads of these two generals beneath your pennants.”³⁶

The Lord of Ch'eng'an didn't heed him and the Lord of Guangwu's plan went unused. Han Xin employed agents to spy upon them and was elated when he learned Guangwu's plan wasn't going to be used after they returned. He then led the troops down to destroy Zhao's army, kill the lord of Cheng'an, and capture Zhao's king Xie.”

Zhu comments: Han Xin had agents go and spy upon Zhao, so he knew that the Lord of Guangwu's plan wasn't going to be used before he advanced. That was critical. By employing them and advancing he captured the king. If he hadn't employed them and hadn't advanced, he would have lost a critical moment. The appropriateness of advancing or retreating all lay in having agents clandestinely learn it. How can the army's advancing and halting today not use agents to ferret out the situation?

³⁶ Referring to the two Han commanders, Han Xin and Zhang Erh. His advice concludes by prophetically stating, “I would like your majesty to pay heed; otherwise, you will be captured.” (A fuller version of this heavily abridged incident may be found in Han Xin's biography in the *Shiji*, and an analysis Han Xin's unorthodox tactics in Sawyer, *The Tao of Deception*, pp. 114-119. A slightly longer version also serves as the historical illustration for “The Guest” in the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*.)

Li Guangbi's biography in the *Tangshu* states, "Before five thousand Raoyang bandits reached Jiumen, Li Guangbi's spy (*die*) knew about it. He therefore mobilized light troops who furled their flags and silenced their drums. When they observed (*si*) the enemy eating, they suddenly attacked and destroyed them all."³⁷

Zhu comments: The Lord of Xinling kept the army at rest based upon an agent, whereas Guangbi had an elite contingent advance based upon knowing the enemy's "vacuity and substance." If you want to determine someone's vacuity and substance, you must first employ agents.

Explication: Having spent ten years in Zhao after rescuing it by filching the military tally necessary to command the army with the connivance of one of the king's concubines, the Lord of Xinling no doubt still had numerous confidants there who could easily provide him with detailed information.

In antiquity, whenever famous generals encountered other famous generals, whomever employed agents won, as in the example of Bai Qi of Qin encountering Lian Po of Zhao. Both of them were famous generals, but when Qin employed agents, Qin won.
When Wang Jian of Qin met Li Mu in battle, both were famous generals. Qin again employed agents and emerged victorious.

According to Lian Po's biography in the *Shihji*: "When Qin and Zhao opposed each other at Changping, once Zhao had Lian Po assume command he solidified their fortifications and refused to fight. Qin tried to provoke Zhao into fighting several times, but Lien

³⁷ A Qidan who served as a Tang commander in the middle of the eighth century, Li Guangbi (708-764) distinguished himself in the struggle to repress An Lushan's highly destructive rebellion beginning in 755 AD.

Po was unwilling to engage in battle. The king of Zhao believed Qin agents who said, "The only thing Qin fears would be the appointment of Zhao Kuo, Zhao She's son, as commanding general."³⁸ The king then designated Zhao Kuo as Lian Po's replacement.

Once Zhao Kuo replaced Lian Po, he altered all the regulations and constraints and changed the officers' assignments. When General Bai Qi of Qin heard about it, he released unorthodox troops that feigned being defeated and retreated and also severed Zhao's supply lines, cutting Zhao's army in two. Zhao's officers and troops became disaffected. After forty days the army was starving so Zhao Kuo personally led their elite forces forth to pummel Qin. However, Qin's archers killed Kuo and defeated his force. Several hundred thousand Zhao troops subsequently surrendered to Qin, only to all be buried alive."

The *Shihji* also states: "When Qin had Wang Jian attack Zhao, Zhao had Li Mu and Sima Shang undertake Zhao's defense."³⁹ Qin gave generous amounts of gold to the highly favored minister Guo Kai to have him act as a turned agent (*fan jian*) for Qin by saying that Li Mu and Sima Shang wanted to revolt. In response, the king had Zhao Cong and the Qi general Yan Ju replace Li Mu. Li Mu refused to accept the order, so the king sent officers to arrest him and subsequently execute him. Sima Shang was dismissed. Wang Jian then fervently attacked, killing Zhao's commander Zhao Cong and capturing King Qian of Zhao and General Yan Ju before going on to extinguish Zhao.

³⁸ Bai Qi's *Shiji* biography states, "Qin's prime minister, the Marquis of Ying, dispatched men to distribute a thousand catties of gold around Zhao to have turned agents spread the rumor that the only thing Qin feared was that Zhao Kuo would become commander."

³⁹ Unmentioned is that Li Mu had previously repelled several Qin assaults, which prompted Wang to try to eliminate him.

Zhu comments: Lian Po and Li Mu, two Zhao generals, were both estranged (*jian*) by Qin and died because Guo Kai acted as Qin's agent. Po's successor was also exiled through Kai's agency. The *Shiji* states:

The king of Zhao thought to again employ Lian Po, so he sent someone to evaluate his fitness. However, Lian Po's enemy Guo Kai gave the emissary a lot of money to denigrate him. When the emissary interviewed Lian Po, Lian ate a large bowl containing a *dou* of corn and ten *jin* of meat, then put on his armor and got on his horse to show he could still be employed. The emissary returned and reported to the king, "Although general Lian is old, he still enjoys his food. But while he was sitting with me, he had diarrhea three times." Feeling Po was too old, the king of Zhao didn't summon him.

For a single Guo Kai to have been able to estrange (*jian*) two excellent generals [teaches] those who would direct the Three Armies not to readily listen to the words of menials.⁴⁰

Explication: Zhao's defeat was a major step in Qin finally gaining mastery of the entire realm in 221 BC. However, once again the agents, termed *fan jian* here, don't fall into the traditional conception of a foreign agent who is turned and used against his employer, but rather an official who turns (*fan*) traitor in place – Sunzi's internal agent – showing Zhu's expanded conception of the term *fan jian*.

According to the *Shiji*, Zhao Kuo's appointment was less than universally welcomed in Zhao:

⁴⁰ The term employed to denigrate them, "menials" (*xi ren* 細人), is tinged with "spy" implications because *xi zuo* (細作) came to mean "spies" somewhat after the Tang.

Lin Xiangru objected, saying "You are employing Kuo solely because of his father's name, just like someone gluing the tuning stops but trying to play the lute. Kuo only knows how to read his father's books, he doesn't have any idea how to effect battlefield segmentations and changes."

Even Kuo's father felt he posed a danger:

From his youth Chao Kuo had studied military theory and discussed military affairs and felt that no one in the world could oppose him. Once, when he argued tactics with his father, even he was unable to stump him. However, when Zhao She didn't acclaim his son's excellence and his wife asked why, he replied: 'The army is a field of death, yet Kuo carelessly speaks about it. If our state never appoints him as a general that will be the end of it. Otherwise, if they insist on him serving as a commander, Kuo will certainly be responsible for destroying Zhao's forces.'

As a result, when the king was about to appoint him as commander-in-chief, Kuo's mother condemned him as incompetent and mentally unfit for the role of command. When the king ignored her protestations, she begged to be spared from the usual punishment that befalls the families of defeated generals, which was granted.

The battle of Changping in 260 BC resulted in the worst loss recorded for any early Chinese clash, some 400,000 starving Zhao prisoners reportedly being slain when they were buried alive. (Even allowing for significant exaggeration, recent archaeological discoveries tend to confirm an astonishing toll.) According to his

biography, Bai Qi apparently felt Zhao's massive forces posed a great threat and therefore decided to exterminate them. Thereafter, Bai Qi was vilified by the Confucians for his unrighteous behavior and Zhao Kuo's name became synonymous with "armchair general."⁴¹

{Historical Terminology}⁴²

In the *Zhouli* (*Rites of Zhou*) compiled by the Duke of Zhou,⁴³ what it terms "bang zhuo" (邦 汧 region / investigate) are agents (*jian*).

The "Qiu Guan" ("Autumnal Offices") in the *Zhouli* states: "The chief (judicial) official is concerned with eight offenses. The first is called *bang zhuo*." The commentary states "*zhuo* is read like *zhuo* (酌)," ⁴⁴ so it means working out and filching secret

⁴¹ A similar account of these events with additional details of the battles themselves, told from Qin's point of view, appears in the combined biographies of Bai Qi and Wang Qian, *juan* 73 of the *Shiji*. (Also see *Shihji*, *juan* 79, the biography of Fan Zhu.)

⁴² In this chapter Zhu presents an overview of many of the terms historically employed to name spies and describe spy activities. While seemingly extensive, his study is neither comprehensive nor totally satisfactory, if only because the terms weren't used with any great precision and varied across China's semi-isolated geographic regions. (Additional terms may be found in Sawyer, *Tao of Spycraft*, 30-37.) All the renderings should be considered tentative, as well as mutually defining to some degree. To facilitate comprehension and keep terms as distinct as possible, both characters and pronunciation are included.

⁴³ Although normally identified with the duke of Zhou, a key official in the Zhou's ascension and early preservation late in the eleventh century BC, the *Zhouli* is clearly a composite work produced between the end of the Spring and Autumn and perhaps middle of the Warring States period that didn't receive serious recognition until the second century BC. It depicts a highly systematized, idealized Western Zhou administrative structure that largely lacks historical confirmation. (For an extensive study of the Zhou's rise and the Duke of Zhou's role, see Sawyer, *Conquest and Domination in Early China: Rise and Demise of the Western Chou*.)

⁴⁴ *Zhuo* (酌) basically means "to pour," especially wine, but also to

(government) affairs in something like our present consultative process.

Explication: This judicial official was responsible for targeting eight types of offenders, the third of which are spies (*die*) from outside the state, though Zhu oddly fails to mention them. The eight comprise people who filch state secrets, thieves, spies, criminals (“those who contravene the laws”), those who forge state laws, robbers who steal from the state, cliques (who pervert the laws), and those who make false accusations.

The *Erh Ya* terms them *si*.⁴⁵ The *Erh Ya*’s “*Shi Yen*” (“Explanations of Words”) states: “An agent (間 *jian*) is a *si*.” The commentary states, “one name for *fan jian* (returned agents) is sometimes *si*.”⁴⁶

The *Zuozhuan* terms them “*die*” (諜 “spies”).⁴⁷ As recorded for Duke Huan’s twelfth year (700 BC) in the *Zuozhuan*, “When Chu’s army attacked Jiao, they divided and crossed over at Peng. The men of Luo wanted to assault them, so they dispatched Bo Jia to spy on them. He made three circles to count them.” And for his eighteenth year⁴⁸ the *Zuozhuan* states “Jin’s officers captured a Qin spy and executed him in the market at Feng. Six days later he revived.”⁴⁹ It also says, “A spy reported there were birds in Chu’s

“ponder.”

⁴⁵ This character, which doesn’t appear in Microsoft Word’s library (and thus can’t be printed), conjoins the radical or signifier for person, 人 *ren*, with “see” or “perceive,” 見 *jian*, and thus would seem to mean someone who is looking. (The *Erh Ya*, China’s first lexical work, was probably compiled in the third century BC. However, it’s a collection of glosses rather than a dictionary in the usual sense.)

⁴⁶ *Fan jian* normally refers to “turned agents,” but as already noted, in some cases *fan* has the meaning of “turn about” or “return,” as probably here.

⁴⁷ Just a reminder that here and throughout the book *jian* is translated as “agent” and *die* as “spy.”

⁴⁸ “Eighteenth” year is an error for “eighth” year, 704 BC.

⁴⁹ Even the most daring and effusive commentators offer no explanation

tents, so the men of Chu have withdrawn.”⁵⁰ And, “the marquis of Jin besieged Yuan. A spy came out and said, ‘Yuan is about to surrender.’”⁵¹

Zhu comments: A *die* (“spy”) is a *jian* (“agent”). The *Shuowen* states, “A spy (*die*) is an agent who returns from amid the [enemy’s] army.”⁵² This refers to pretending to be an enemy soldier and entering the army where the person “spies out” (*si hou* 伺 候) fissures (*jian xi* 間 隙) and then returns to report to his master.⁵³ Furthermore, Zheng Kangcheng’s commentary to the *Zhou Li*’s “Zhang Miu” says, “*Die* (spy) refers to an agent who returns after deceiving aggressors.”⁵⁴ Du Yu’s *Zuozhuan* commentary also says, “*Die* is to *si* (伺 look at). The military books refer to them as returned agents (*fan jian*).” And Guo Pu in his *Erh Ya* commentary also says “*jian* are termed *die* by the *Zuozhuan*.”

The *Liji* terms them “clandestine observers” (*zhan* 覘).⁵⁵ In the “Tan Gong” section, the *Liji* states: “A man of Jin who had been clandestinely observing (*zhan*) Sung returned and reported to the marquis of Jin, ‘When the chief] guard at the *yang* (main city) gate

for his astonishing revival.

⁵⁰ Xuan Gong, 8th year, 601 BC.

⁵¹ Xi Gong, 25th year, 635 BC.

⁵² The *Shuowen Jiezi*, commonly known as the *Shuowen*, compiled by Xu Shen about 100 AD is the first dictionary of Chinese characters.

⁵³ *Si* 伺 means “to wait upon,” “examine,” and by extension, “to spy,” and *hou* 候 “to wait,” “expect,” and “watch.” *Jian* 間, “agent” in many contexts, refers to “gaps” or “the spaces between pillars,” it’s primary meaning, and *xi* 隙 to “cracks,” “crevices,” and fissures.”

⁵⁴ Here *fan jian* again means an agent who has returned rather than a “turned agent,” and thus coincidentally shows Zhu’s rather imprecise use of what should be, according to traditional usage, a technical term for an enemy spy that has been turned or doubled.

⁵⁵ *Zhan* fundamentally means “to spy on,” “to glance at.” (The *Liji* is a massive, probably early Han compilation of a wide variety of materials related to China’s early ritual theory and practices.)

died, Zi Han wept for him in grief and the people responded accordingly. They probably cannot be attacked yet.' When Confucius heard about it, he said, 'How excellent was this clandestine observing (*zhan*) of their state.'"

The *Heguanzi* terms them *sheng*⁵⁶ and in the section titled "Wang Tie" states, "*sheng* are able to thwart each other."⁵⁷

The *Shihji* terms them "*zhong xiong*" (中 訶).⁵⁸ In its biography of the lord of Huainan (Liu An), it states, "The king of Huainan had a daughter named Ling whose was intelligent and a glib speaker. The king loved Ling and frequently gave her golden coins so she could penetrate (*zhong dong*) activities in [the capital of] Chang'an and make connections with the emperor's assistants."⁵⁹ Meng Kang's commentary states, "When pronounced *zhen*, the western part (of the realm) takes returned agents (*fan jian*) to be *xiong* (訶). The king had his daughter spy (*zhen* 偵) on the emperor." Shigu's commentary states, "*Xiong*, something is being spied on (*hou si* 候伺). Someone who spies, the meaning is the same

⁵⁶ Another character not in Word's set, it conjoins the signifier for man 人 on the left and *sheng*, "sage" 聖, on the right. (Rather than by a single individual, the *Heguanzi* is an eclectic compilation of highly enigmatic, possibly late Warring States material including obscure rhetorical passages, pronouncements associated with Daoism, and military concepts.)

⁵⁷ Presumably through counterintelligence. However, the statement occurs in a passage discussing the need for government to accord with the universal flux and bring about harmony among the people, causing them to be familiar with each other. Soldiers are then able to recognize each other in night battles and "*sheng* able to thwart each other."

⁵⁸ "*Zhong*" (中) means middle and *xiong* (訶) "to see through," "comprehend," and "understand."

⁵⁹ Having his daughter serve as a spy and *femme fatale* in the intrigue filled capital was but one step in Liu An's plan to revolt. Unfortunately for An, who is best remembered for fostering the compilation of the eclectic work known as the *Huainan Zi*, the rebellion was quashed at its inception in 122 BC, doubtlessly because he dithered too long and didn't recognize the "moment."

as *xiong* but the pronunciation is different.”

Zhu comments: In Li Sihang’s biography, the *Tangshu* states, “When the duke of Tang was about to arise, he had a spy (*zhan*) spy on (*xiong*) Chang’an.” Moreover, in Zhang Shuo’s biography it speaks about “secretly (窺) spying (*xiong*) on contemporary activities.” In this meaning both characters are pronounced in the upper sound, following Yan Shigu’s reading.

The *Hou Hanshu* (*History of the Later Han*) refers to them as *zhen hou* (偵候 “clandestine observers”).⁶⁰ And its “*Xunli*” section, it speaks about “stopping *zhen hou* from the Rong hordes.”

A *Zuozhuan* commentary also says, “Spies (*die*) are also called “roving *zhen*.” Commentators to the *Erh Ya* and *Zuozhuan* refer to *jian* as today’s *xi zuo* (細作).⁶¹

Du You’s commentary for King Xuan’s eighth year states, “With regard to *die* (spies), we today refer to the *jian die* who came and went as *xi zuo*.”

{Sunzi’s Five Agents}

As to the methods for employing agents, what Sunzi said about the five agents is the most perceptive and detailed.

Sunzi said, “There are five types of agents to be employed: village agents,⁶² internal agents, turned agents (double agents), dead (expendable) agents, and living agents. When all five are employed together and no one knows their Tao, this is termed “spiritual methodology.””

⁶⁰ *Zhen* 偵 means “detect,” “spy,” or “reconnoiter.”

⁶¹ *Xi* 細 means “fine” or “detailed” and *zuo* 作 “to do” or “make,” but here “action.” In the Qing spies were sometimes termed *xi zuo*.

⁶² In the original, as discussed below, Sunzi terms them “*yin jian*,” not “*xiang jian*,” *xiang* (鄉) – the character Zhu employs – meaning village.

Explication: As already noted in the foreword, in his infamous disquisition on spies and spycraft, “Employing Agents,” found in the *Art of War*, Sunzi identifies five types of spy by their origins and fates. Over the succeeding centuries other military thinkers would expand the originals and add to the categories, but the five would never lose their definitive nature.

**As for the five agents, the first is called a
“village agent” because village people are
used as agents.**

Sunzi said, “For village agents, employ people from the local village.” [Du You’s] commentary states, “If you can learn the enemy’s true situation, the enemy’s “vacuity and substance,” through relying on village people, then engage and employ them. They can be used as clandestine observers (*si hou* 伺候).

Explication: Sunzi’s passage is more opaque than it appears because he is talking about *yin jian* (因 間), not *xiang jian* (鄉 間), the term that would actually mean “village (鄉) agents,” whereas *yin jian* literally means something like “reliance agents.” While someone obviously has to be “relied upon,” no adequate explanation has been offered as to the real meaning of *yin* here.

Sunzi and the later military writings also discuss the importance of “village guides” – people with detailed knowledge of the topography – and the inimical consequences of failing to employ them. In “Military Combat,” Sunzi states, “Someone unfamiliar with the mountains and forests, gorges and defiles, the shape of marshlands and wetlands, cannot advance the army. One who does not employ village guides (鄉導) cannot gain advantages of terrain.” Village agents are thus a kind of local guide and their willingness to share knowledge of the terrain, despite normally being enemy

civilians, should make them a kind of turned agent in Zhu's conception. Although local agents can be assigned more extensive responsibilities if deemed trustworthy, the military writings also warn against too readily trusting or overly relying upon them.

**The second is called an “internal agent”
because members of cliques are employed.**

Sunzi states, “For internal agents, employ people who hold government positions.” [Du You's] commentary states, “Rely on those who have lost their government positions, the sons and grandsons of men who have been punished or executed, or families that have suffered punishment. Rely upon the existence of fissures to engage and employ them.”

Zhu comments: Using members of enemy cliques and phony officials⁶³ as agents makes them internal agents. As for employing (ordinary) people who have suffered harm within their cities, they similarly become internal agents.

Explication: Although Zhu frequently cites Du You's commentary, its inclusion here is somewhat puzzling because of Du's unusual selection of people who have been ousted from power and barred from the court, if not the capital itself. While the early military writers often advise recruiting them for highly motivated military units and a desire for revenge would make them prime candidates for cooperation, their access to information would probably be limited. Du Yu's focus is therefore somewhat puzzling even though other commentators such as Li Quan and Du Mu concur.

⁶³ “Phony officials” is Zhu's way of referring to the officials of presumptive states and external enemies, entities that presume to challenge the order that sanctifies the Chinese dynasty – in this case the Qing – as the realm's legitimate ruler.

**The third are “turned agents,” which means
employing the enemy’s agents but turning them
about to spy upon [their own state].**

Sunzi said, “For turned agents, employ the enemy's spies.” [Du You’s] commentary states, “When the enemy has an agent come to spy on us and we know it, we should bribe him with gifts and make generous promises to turn him into our spy.” Xiao Shicheng comments, “This says that when someone is sent to observe us, we should pretend not to know it but instead show him some vacuous affair that will be undertaken at a future time and have him return to report it. He is therefore termed a ‘turned agent.’”

“The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states, “If the enemy sends someone to probe our vacuity and substance, investigate our movement and rest, and ferret out our plans by acting as a spy, we should pretend being unaware, house him generously, and treat him well. Subtly talk about false reports and specious affairs, showing how they will materialize in the future, for then what we need will be what the enemy loses. By relying upon their agents and turning them, if they take our vacuity to be substantial, we will be able to exploit their enervation and realize our aim.””⁶⁴

Explication: Sunzi’s description, “for turned agents, employ the enemy's spies,” is the very essence of simplicity. The key qualification for both Sunzi and Li Jing – actively being employed by the enemy as a spy – couldn’t be clearer. However, as discussed in the foreword and manifest in the text’s examples, in Zhu’s extended concept of the term “turned agent,” the individual in question need not be a foreigner nor someone in enemy employ. (Many so called *fan jian* in *Book of Spies* are unwitting dupes rather than conscious participants and may even be simply men who

⁶⁴ The assertion about agents being able to float or overturn a boat follows immediately after these statements.

returned, *fan* having this sense as well, as seen in Sunzi's definition of living agents being agents who return (*fan*) to report.)

In addition, there are two classic ways to "turn" agents, both seen in *Book of Spies* and commentaries to the *Art of War* passages, overt and covert. In the former situation the agent is either well treated and persuaded by bribery and enticing promises to furnish information and shift his loyalty or is coerced by various means, including threats to his family. The latter, however, is more subtle because the turned agent never realizes he's been identified and is being fed false information or otherwise manipulated. (The last entry in the theoretical section describes how this might be done.) Of course, in either case, when their information proves false, they share the same fate as so called "dead agents," torture and execution.

The fourth are called "dead agents." Have criminals act as agents and die in order to implement our agent activities.⁶⁵

Sunzi said, "Dead agents are employed to spread disinformation outside the state. Have our agents know it and leak it to enemy agents."⁶⁶ A commentator [Du You] states, "To effect a false affair outside the state, pretend to leak something. Have our spies know it so when they go into the enemy's midst and are captured, they will certainly leak the affair to the enemy. When our adversaries prepare for it but what we do differs, the spy will die." He also says, "An agent comes and learns of our specious affair and returns with it, but nothing goes as planned. These two agents cannot know our deep secrets, so they are called dead agents."⁶⁷ Xiao

⁶⁵ "Dead" or "doomed" agents are further discussed in the exemplifications.

⁶⁶ The original text simply states, "convey it to the enemy," which is far simpler than "leak it to enemy agents."

⁶⁷ In this case the foreign agent becomes a "turned agent" in Zhu's

Shicheng's commentary to Sunzi states, "Enemy prisoners, rebellious officers, and those guilty of serious crimes or offenses that have been remitted by payment should be constrained not to let their affairs leak out. Pretend to talk about something secret and let the enemy's spies hear about it. If you then let them escape, they will return home and the enemy will certainly believe them. After the affair develops, they will definitely die, so they are called dead agents."

Explication: Following Xiao's interpretation of the passage, Zhu takes the moral high ground in *Book of Spies* by specifying that only condemned criminals should be employed as dead agents, a view he reiterates in the first historical illustration in section II, "dead agents." However, his examples also show praiseworthy commanders such as Han Xin and Li Jing suffered no such compunction.

Although it's human nature to believe any information suddenly acquired when under duress, Xiao's comment that "the enemy will certainly believe" the accounts of former prisoners runs contrary to a continuing, well expressed awareness in both Chinese and Western military writings about the unreliability of such information.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, several well known historical incidents that he includes among his exemplifications attest to the ploy's sometimes startling success, including "Yue Fei manipulated a Jin spy."

Du Mu, another famous Sunzi commentator, interprets the passage somewhat differently: "This says that when our agents [residing] in enemy territory don't know about our affairs, we should deceptively create some visible evidence. Then we should let

conception, as well as a "dead agent."

⁶⁸ For a discussion and examples, see Sawyer, *Lever of Power: Military Deception in China and the West*, 200-230.

them know about it so they will sincerely transmit it to the enemy and gain their trust. If we then undertake some activity that doesn't cohere with it and our spies can't escape, they will be killed by the enemy." Why they would convey it to the enemy except under instructions or duress isn't clear, but the intent to manipulate, the activist aspect of spycraft and a core component of Sunzi's doctrine, is.

The fifth are called "living agents." The intelligent are used as agents so that when they undertake their missions, they will return alive and report to us.

Sunzi said, "Living agents return with their reports." [Du You's] commentary says, "Select among your sagacious talents and wise planners, men who can access the enemy's imperial relatives and aristocrats, who can investigate their movement and rest, and learn their affairs and plans. When they have acquired the information, they return and report, so they are called living agents."

Explication: These are what the world commonly considers spies or agents – men who penetrate the enemy's lair, acquire crucial information through various means, and return to make actionable reports. Here their targets are no longer the disgruntled and disparaged, but the men closest to the exercise of power.

{Turned Agents}

The five types of agents are successful through being employed together, but the turned agent is the basis for the local agent, internal agent, living agent, and dead agent.

Sunzi said, "As for the armies you want to strike and the cities you want to attack, you must first know the names of the defensive commander, his assistants, staff, door guards, and

attendants.⁶⁹

When an enemy agent comes to spy on us, we should profit and house him. In this way turned agents can be obtained and employed. By learning things from him, we can employ village and internal agents. From what we learn from him our dead agents can inform the enemy of our specious affairs. From what we learn from him, our living agents can be employed on a timely basis. The ruler must know these five aspects of espionage work. Knowledge comes from turned agents so you must be generous to them.”

Explication: The original *Art of War* passage includes an additional target, “the men you want to assassinate,” which Zhu apparently excised on moral grounds. However, in so doing he contravened China’s popular approbation for assassins which dates back to Sima Qian’s famous *Shiji*. Although the subsequent dynastic histories dropped the category (presumably because the compilers felt any discussion of assassins would prompt idolization and antisocial behavior), stories about their courage and extraordinary resolve continued to fascinate the populace.

{Rewards and Secrecy}

**Employ them with spirit-like secrecy and generously
reward them in order to solidly gain their loyalty,
for then you can begin to employ them as agents.**

Sunzi said, “Of those close to the Three Armies, none are closer than agents.”⁷⁰ No rewards are more generous than those given

⁶⁹ A commentary states, “The door guards protect the gates, the attendants wait upon them. Know these in advance so that you can call upon them in exigencies and not be thwarted. Also, this is a way to know the enemy’s situation.”

⁷⁰ Alternatively, based on a variant text, “Of all the Three Armies’ affairs, no relationship is closer than with spies.” Du You states, “If you don’t bring them close, aren’t solicitous, or fail to give them generous rewards, they will be turned and employed by the enemy and will leak our affairs.”

to agents. No affairs are more secret than [using] agents. If the affair is heard about before it is initiated, the agent and all those he informed should be executed.” The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states, “Agents require the greatest secrecy. Only when they are generously rewarded, and the secret made even more secret, will you begin to succeed.”

Zhu comments: According to the *Shihji*, “When Qin sought to have Jin Bi estrange [the Lord of] Xinling, they used 10,000 catties of gold. When Han [Gaozu] had Chen Ping estrange Chu,⁷¹ he gave Chen 40,000 catties of gold to do whatever he wished. Probably without generous amounts of gold it’s not possible to run agents. However, today the army’s finances are insufficient, so we can’t possibly use such large amounts for agents. But being too parsimonious won’t lead to success. Nothing would be better than levying local people for military training, then selecting the best. Selecting the best will reduce the expense. Employing half of what has been saved to run agents will then prove doubly successful. As for esteeming secrecy when managing them, the *Yijing* expresses it well: “Harm results when subtle affairs are not kept secret.”⁷² All military affairs esteem secrecy but running agents should especially be kept secret.

⁷¹ “Chu” refers to Xiang Yu’s abortive state of Chu. The incident is reprised as “Chen Ping manipulated Fan Zeng” in the exemplifications and is also cited in the original Sunzi commentaries.

⁷² The statement is found in part 7 of the *Yi Jing*’s “*Xi Ci*,” generally known as “The Great Appendix,” rather than among the materials collated under each hexagram and is the concluding comment to the danger of the *junzi* (Confucian perfected man) speaking when he shouldn’t. (The selection would be somewhat surprising if China’s great Zhou dynasty divination text, the *Yi Jing*, supposedly edited by Confucius himself, hadn’t been deemed one of the Confucian classics and long been considered essential material for the imperial examinations.)

***Taizi*⁷³ Jian of Chu's experience can serve as a mirror
for failing to preserve secrecy.**

For Duke Ai's 16th year (481 BC), the *Zuozhuan* states: "When *Taizi* Jian of Chu sought to avoid the chaos in Sung [where he had taken refuge] by going to the state of Zheng, the inhabitants treated him extremely well. Later, when he was in Jin he plotted a sudden attack on Zheng with Jin and therefore sought to return there. Zheng treated him as before. Jin subsequently sent a spy (*die*) to Jian to ask about how they were to proceed.⁷⁴ However, Jian had treated someone in his village badly and the man exposed him. By observing him, Zheng captured the spy and then killed Jian."

Su Zhe's words can serve as an admonition for what happens when one isn't generous.⁷⁵ Su Zhe said, "When the *Taizu* employed spies as part of their border preparations, he generously rewarded them with the military taxes collected at the passes and presented them with gold and silk. For this reason, warriors with death defying strength who were greedy for the gold coins sacrificed their lives and risked great hardship to enter enemy territory, discover hidden plans, and convey them back. Nothing in the enemy's eating, drinking, action, and nonaction remained unseen. As a result, it was always known in advance when an invasion would occur. Preparations were therefore minimized and there wasn't any need to segment the forces."

However, today it's different. What are termed public appropriations don't exceed several thousand string (of cash) which are expected to cover everything. Officials also scrutinize all the income and expenses and control them according to the law. When

⁷³ "*Taizi*" means "heir apparent."

⁷⁴ A commentary states he asked about the time for attacking Zheng.

⁷⁵ Su Zhe (1039-1112) was an eminent late Northern Sung high official and writer.

it comes to employing agents, the officials give them some bricks of tea and bolts of variegated silk. Now it's clear that a small amount of tea and some bolts of silk are inadequate compensation for a man's death. For this reason, the men who act as spies today aren't reliable. They merely listen to rumors and select doubtful affairs. Their travels don't amount to much more than just going across the border. What they hear is nothing more than what they get from the people they know, so the real situation can't be learned. I would like your majesty to select some generals and reward them generously so that they can nurture spies (*jian die*) to be their ears and eyes. Then, even though the enemy might be strong, they won't dare come near."

{*Li Weigong Bingfa* on Agents}

The five agents discussed in the *Li Weigong Bingfa* and in *Sunzi* are like inner and outer. The first relies upon townspeople,⁷⁶ *Sunzi*'s village agents. The second relies upon political hostages,⁷⁷ *Sunzi*'s internal agents. The third relies on the enemy's emissaries, *Sunzi*'s turned agents. The fourth relies on selecting the worthy and capable, *Sunzi*'s living spies. And the fifth relies on delaying the punishment of offenders, *Sunzi*'s dead agents.

The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states: "There are five types of agents in the Dao of spycraft: Townspeople are relied upon to secretly make observations and report their findings. Political hostages are relied upon to disseminate specious and false information. The enemy's emissaries are relied upon to deceive

⁷⁶ Yi (邑) town, larger than a village (*xiang* 鄉), *Sunzi*'s term.

⁷⁷ Often used in early China to ensure compliance with treaties and coerce the continued obedience of subordinate states.

them with affairs and return (to report them). The worthy and capable are relied upon to observe the enemy's vacuity and substance from behind and return to report it. And offenders whose punishment is falsely delayed are relied upon to subtly leak our phony plans and perish in doing so."

Explication: As discussed in the foreword, several important passages on spy activities attributed to Li Jing are preserved in a number of later military compilations and encyclopedia, most of which Zhu incorporates in his text.

Duke Wei's discussion of agents also speaks about the method for estranging intimates,⁷⁸ the capable, assistants, allies, and attendants

The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states: "Victory in battle can be sought from Heaven and Earth, but it relies upon men for completion. When I study how the ancients employed agents, some estranged rulers, others their confidants, the capable, assistants, allies,⁷⁹ staff, or the persuaders for the horizontal and vertical alliances."⁸⁰

Zhu comments: Rulers are estranged the way Zi Gong did Wu and Yue. Intimates (relatives) are estranged the way Qin estranged Wei's ruler and the Lord of Xinling. The capable are estranged the way Su Li played Bai Qi.

According to the *Zhanguo Ce*, Su Li said to the Zhou ruler, "The one who defeated Han and Wei, killed Xi Wu, attacked Zhao,

⁷⁸ The term *qin* 親 means both relatives and those who are close, so equally intimates. (The Lord of Xinling was both.)

⁷⁹ Literally neighbors, but generally refers to other states in alliance with each other.

⁸⁰ Although advocates for the horizontal and vertical alliances in the Warring States period took Qin as their pivot (as the excerpts below will show), Li Jing is no doubt thinking of those who proposed making alliances with the nearby, highly troublesome steppe peoples.

and seized Lan, Lishi, and Qi was in every case Bai Qi.⁸¹ He used the army to attack but has also been favored by Heaven. If he now attacks Liang, Liang will certainly be destroyed. If it's destroyed, Zhou will be endangered." "Then it would be best if you can stop it," the ruler replied.

Su [then went to see] Bai Qi and said, "Yang Yuji in Sung is an outstanding archer who can hit the target a hundred times in a hundred tries. A passerby said to him, 'With such skill I can teach you archery.' Yang Yuji replied, 'Everyone says I'm an excellent archer, only you have said I can be taught archery. Why don't you give it a try?'"

Su replied, "Even if you hit the target a hundred times in a hundred tries, unless you change and rest, your *qi* will decline, and your strength will wane. Then, even though you can still pull the bow and notch an arrow, once it's released, if the arrow isn't accurate it will completely negate your previous accomplishments. It would be better for you to plead illness and not go forth."

Explication: Being the most successful and prominent commander of his time, Bai Qi is the perfect subject for historical estrangement. However, in this incident Su Li didn't act as a subversive, an agent who poisoned the ruler's mind and thus directly caused the individual's death, but merely a persuader whose motivation should have been apparent to his target. In contrast, as reprised as "The king of Qin estranged the Lord of Xinling" in the exemplifications, local and doubled agents subverted the lord in the traditional manner.⁸²

⁸¹ Su Li, Su Qin's brother, was one of several brothers who attempted to follow in Qin's footsteps after his death.

⁸² Bai Qi was ultimately undone when Su Dai persuaded the marquis of Ying to disparage him to the king of Qin in order to prevent him from becoming more honored than himself. Oddly, though, Zhu didn't choose to employ the estrangement effort as an example even though Bai ultimately perished because

**Assistants are estranged the way Zhang Mengtan
manipulated Han and Wei.**

The *Zhanguo Ce*⁸³ states: “Three states – Zhi Po’s, Han, and Wei – attacked Zhao’s city of Jinyang. The king of Zhao’s minister Zhang Mengtan secretly went to see the rulers of Han and Wei and said, “I’ve heard that when the lips are lost, the teeth are cold. Zhi Po has now led you two to attack Zhao. But if Zhao perishes, you will be next.”

They asked, “What can we do?”

Zhang replied, “Any plan you discuss will enter my ears alone, no one will know it.” The two rulers then secretly arranged a time with Zhang for their three armies to kill the soldiers guarding the levees and break them to flood Zhi Po’s army. They then captured Zhi Po.”

Explication: Even before it was finally sundered into the three successor states of Han, Wei, and Zhao, Jin’s great ministerial families had carved it into discrete enclaves similar to fiefdoms. This incident, which dates to 453 BC, retells the important defeat of the powerful Zhi Po, already well embarked on a trajectory to dominance, amid the mutual animosity that destroyed one of the Spring and Autumn’s formerly great states. (The three states of Han, Wei, and Zhao were formally recognized by the king of Zhou in 403

of it in 257 BC.

⁸³ The *Zhanguo Ce*, generally known as *Intrigues of the Warring States* in English, purports to be a record of important political persuasions that occurred during the era. Compiled by Liu Xiang in the first century BC from extant materials, its veracity has always been controversial. The sophistication of the dialogues also raises questions as to how these lengthy, often highly complex pronouncements could have been accurately recorded. Nevertheless, it remains a key source for the period, as well as the repository of Su Qin’s and Zhang Yi’s persuasions. (The only translation to date has been by J. I. Crump, *Chan-Kuo Ts’e*.)

BC, not that his authority then was more than nominal.)

Allies are estranged the way Zhang Yi manipulated the king of Chu.

The *Zhanguo Ce* states: “Qin wanted to attack Qi, but Qi and Chu had reached a diplomatic accord. Troubled by it, King Hui of Qin asked Zhang Yi about it. Zhang replied, “Let me try.” He then went south to see the king of Chu to whom he said, “The king of Qi has offended us by badly insulting our insignificant state, so we want to attack it. However, your great state is on good terms with them. For this reason, our king isn’t able to obey your commands and I am unable to serve you. But if your majesty were to close the passes to Qi and sever relations with them, you could have an emissary accompany me back to Qin to request the king give back the six hundred *li* of territory in Shangyu [you previously lost]. This will certainly weaken Qi. Having become weaker, Qi will inevitably fall under your control. With a single act you will have weakened Qi in the north, garnered Qin’s approbation for Virtue in the west, and profited from acquiring the territory in Shangyu.”

Elated, the king of Chu had an emissary break off relations with Qi. Qin and Qi then secretly concluded an alliance. However, when Chu sent an emissary to formally receive the land, Zhang Yi said, “It’s six *li*, from this point to that.” Enraged, the king of Chu attacked Qin. Qin and Qi fielded a conjoined force and Han joined them. Chu’s army was badly defeated.

Explication: In the middle Warring States period two statesmen gained great fame and extensive power as proponents of the horizontal and vertical alliances, the former designed to subjugate the remaining six states in servitude to Qin, the latter a scheme to preserve them by uniting in opposition to it. Zhang Yi, Qin’s prime minister, was the horizontal alliance’s progenitor, while

Su Qin, a peripatetic persuader, was the chief spokesman for the vertical coalition.

According to the *Shiji* account of Chu's history, the incident was somewhat more complex than portrayed in Zhu's excerpt and had an unexpected ending. To establish Zhang Yi's credibility, in a sort of weak version of the "ploy of suffering flesh" Qin made Zhang appear to be a disgruntled official, one motivated by having been conspicuously dismissed as prime minister. Nevertheless, he still purports to speak on Qin's behalf, ostensibly to gain the success that would get him reinstated rather than acting out of a desire for revenge by formulating plans for Chu that would actually subvert it.

King Huai's acceptance of Yi's proposal was perspicaciously opposed by one of his ministers, Chen Zhen, who remonstrated with him:

Qin treats your majesty respectfully because you have Qi's friendship. Severing relations before the land has been received will isolate Chu. How will Qin then view our solitary state? Furthermore, if they provide the territory first and we then sever relations with Qi, Qin's plan won't work. But if you sever relations first, then accost Qin for failing to yield the land, Zhang Yi will have tricked you. If he tricks you, your majesty will certainly be annoyed. And if you become annoyed, you will definitely incur misfortune at Qin's hands after having severed relations with Qi in the north. Having aroused Qin's displeasure and severed relations with Qi, troops from both countries will certainly descend upon us.

To ensure Chu's break with Qi would be total, Zhang Yi resorted to an additional subterfuge. According to the *Shiji*:

When Zhang Yi returned to Qin, he feigned a

drunken fall from his carriage and didn't appear in court for three months because of the injury. Consequently, Chu couldn't obtain the promised land. King Huai of Chu [wondered], "Does Zhang Yi think that my actions in breaking relations with Qi have been too meager?" He therefore dispatched a courageous officer to the north to insult the king of Qi. Greatly angered, the king broke the emissary's tally in half and reestablished cordial relations with Qin. Zhang Yi then appeared in Qin's court where he asked Chu's general, "Why haven't you accepted the land that stretches some six kilometers from north to south?"

When King Huai received the report, he mobilized the army and attacked Qin despite Chen Zhen who opposed it saying: "Attacking Qin is hardly a plan. It would be better to bribe them with an important city and join them in attacking Qi. Then we shall recoup from Qi what we have lost to Qin and the state can be preserved. Now that your majesty has already broken relations with Qi and would accost Qin for tricking you, we will simply bring Qi and Qin together and summon the realm's forces down upon us. The state will certainly suffer serious harm.

When their armies clashed at Danyang in the spring of 312 BC, Chu indeed suffered a severe defeat and reportedly incurred 180,000 casualties. Qin also went to seize the area of Hanzhong, which promoted another aggressive Chu attempt that was quashed at Lantian when Han and Wei joined Qin in the conflict.

Events took an unexpected turn when Zhang Yi ended up

back in Chu where he employed a ploy (recounted in the exemplifications) that Chen Ping would use slightly over a century later to save the first emperor of the Han dynasty,⁸⁴ making it doubly worthwhile to append the remainder of the *Shiji* account:

In King Huai's eighteenth year [311 BC] Qin sent an emissary to reestablish close relations with Chu, offering to give back half of Hanzhong to make peace. The king of Chu said: "I would rather have Zhang Yi than land." When Zhang Yi heard this, he asked permission to go to Chu. King Hui said to him: "Chu desperately wants to take revenge on you. How will you manage?"

Zhang Yi replied: "I am close to the king's attendant, Jin Shang, who in turn has access to Deng Xu, the king's favorite consort. King Huai will heed whatever she says. Moreover, my former embassy set up the disavowed agreement to cede Shangyü and caused the great hatred that resulted in the battles between Qin and Chu. Unless I personally apologize to the king, King Huai will never forget his enmity. Furthermore, as long as your majesty lives, Chu will never dare seize me. However, if it is to Qin's advantage, I am willing to die."

Zhang Yi then ventured to Chu as an official emissary. However, intent on killing him, King Huai not only refused to see Zhang but instead imprisoned him. Zhang Yi managed to bribe Jin Shang who spoke to the king on his behalf: "The king of Qin will certainly be angry if you hold Zhang Yi. When the realm sees that Chu lacks Qin's support, they will

inevitably slight your majesty.”

In addition, he advised the king's consort, Deng Xu: “Although the king of Qin loves Zhang Yi very much, our majesty wants to kill him. King Hui is about to offer six districts from the commandery of Shangyong as a bribe to spare him, as well as beautiful women to serve as the king's concubines, accompanied by excellent singing girls from his own palace. Our king covets the land and he will certainly esteem the women from Qin, so you will definitely be neglected. Why not go in and speak with the king?”

Deng Xu eventually spoke with the king on Zhang Yi's behalf and obtained his release. Thereafter, the king treated him well and Zhang Yi in turn advised the king to revolt against the vertical alliance directed against Qin and join in an alliance of friendship with Qin itself.”

Insofar as Zhang Yi wasn't a bogus defector but a Qin emissary, his estrangement (*jian*) of Qi was the work of a lobbyist or persuader rather than a clandestine agent. Clearly Zhu's understanding of the term *jian* is much more expansive than the classical writers. In this regard, the thrust of Chen Ping's manipulation of the *shanyu*'s consort was essentially the same, but his use of estrangement agents in the traditional manner against Xiang Yu (also reprised in the exemplifications) completely different.

**Attendants are estranged the way Qin manipulated
Guo Kai, as already seen.**

**Proponents of the horizontal and vertical alliances are
estranged the way Yan employed Su Qin, for which
see the *Zhanguo Ce*.**

Explication: Perhaps because he felt Zi Gong and Zhang Yi's two persuasions sufficiently illustrate the genre, Zhu didn't provide an example of the arguments Su Qin (died 284 BC) advanced to convince the rulers in the six remaining eastern states to join in a so-called vertical alliance against powerful, well ensconced Qin in the west. Nevertheless, just as Zhang Yi's rhetoric, his efforts during visits to Yan, Qi, Chu, Zhao, Wei, and Han are apparently preserved in the *Zhanguo Ce* (*Intrigues of the Warring States*), accounting for Zhu's reference to it, and much of a recently discovered bamboo strip manuscript.⁸⁵

Su Qin has an interesting, though no doubt overly dramatized, history that can be winnowed out of the *Zhanguo Ce* and bamboo manuscript and is retold by Sima Qian in a dedicated *Shiji* biography.⁸⁶ His life quickly became the stuff of stories and legend, making the task of reconstructing his impact, which was decidedly significant, in the years around 300 BC, more complex. However, he and Zhang Yi were undoubtedly locked into a momentous political struggle during their lifetimes which affected the seven remaining states in varying degrees, Zhang Yi being a

⁸⁵ Despite being itself problematic, the previously unknown material in the bamboo strip manuscript contributes to reconstructing the era's history. (In addition to journal articles, the text was early on published under the title *Mawangdui Hanmu Poshu Zhanguo Conghengjia Shu*.) For a succinct discussion of these famous persuaders and the period's history, see *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, pp. 632-641.

⁸⁶ A full translation may be found in Nienhauser, *The Grand Scribe's Records, Volume VII: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China*.

proponent of the horizontal alliance which essentially would allow the six eastern states to (temporarily) survive by acknowledging Qin's dominance and Su Qin advocating vertical integration to forestall Qin's conquest of the realm. This would preserve them all intact, if only they could forego their mutual animosity.

Ironically, both Zhang Yi and Su Qin were reputedly students of the legendary recluse known as Guiguzi or Master of Demon Valley.⁸⁷ However, in contrast to Zhang Yi who became prominent as much for his military as political accomplishments, Su Qin reportedly began his career by having his strategic advice rebuffed by Qin's ruler. This ignominious rejection prompted a year of zealously studying the extant military and strategic writings. After achieving a sort of enlightenment from reportedly pondering Tai Gong's *Liutao*,⁸⁸ he screwed up his courage and once again went forth. Success quickly followed in Yan, where he initially occupied the office prime minister, after which he went on to unite Qi, Chu, Zhao, and the others in an alliance that managed to achieve significant, albeit short lasting, military success against Qin.

Near the end of his life Yan perfidiously attacked the state of Qi which managed to survive only through Tian Dan's efforts (recounted in example 22). After order was restored, Qi accused Su Qin of having betrayed them and he was attacked and fatally wounded while visiting Qi. However, before dying he apparently concocted a ploy with the king in which he was accused of having been a subversive and conspicuously executed in the marketplace in order to lure his killers into revealing themselves to receive a reward. While his enigmatic life of uncertain loyalties thus

⁸⁷ Although a slim volume in his name exists, it's undoubtedly a late creation, albeit one that has spawned a virtual industry in *Guiguzi* books ranging from slim "authentic" teachings through massive expansions and attributions. (The idea of a horizontal alliance was first broached by Gongsun Yan in Qin.)

⁸⁸ Or the *Yin Fu*, which is supposed to be the same text under another name.

dramatically ended, his career continues to pose perhaps unanswerable questions, including why Zhu deemed him a *fan jian* since his objectives – personal aggrandizement as much as, and through, the alliance – and primary loyalty to Yan should have been apparent. A “lobbyist” and disinformation agent who based his persuasions upon somewhat fluid political and military assessments, he never acted as a clandestine operative except perhaps for Yan at the very end of his years.

Although shorter than the extensive, heavily analytic disquisition he successfully employed with the king of Zhao, no better example of Su Qin’s approach can be found than the brief but important persuasion that convinced the King of Yan, the realm’s northernmost Chinese state, to enter into an alliance with Zhao. Although ostensibly undertaken to protect Yan from Zhao, Su Qin’s real objective was creating a coalition that would be formidable enough to block Qin’s otherwise certain expansion. According to the *Zhanguo Ce*:

For the purpose of forming the vertical alliance Su Qin spoke with the king of Yan in the north. “East of Yan is Chaoxian and Liaodong, to the north are the Lin Hu and Lou Fan (peoples), to the west is Yunzhong and Jiuyuan, and to the south the Hutuo and Yi Rivers. Your territory covers more than two thousand *li* and your mailed soldiers number several tens of thousands. You have seven hundred battle chariots, six thousand cavalymen, and sufficient grain for ten years. Furthermore, in the south you have the fertile areas of Jieshi and Yingmen while the north produces an abundance of chestnuts and dates. Even if the inhabitants didn’t grow them, there would still be enough to allow the

people to eat fully. Yan is a state blessed by Heavenly advantages. Your state has thus been peaceful and happy, and being free from war, hasn't been troubled by the worry and harm of seeing your armies defeated and generals slain. Because of this, no state surpasses Yan.

Does my great king know what brought about these circumstances? The reason Yan hasn't suffered any invasions or military disasters is that Zhao shields you in the south. If Qin and Zhao were to fight five times and Qin were to win twice and Zhao three times, both of them would be exhausted while Yan, with its forces intact, would be able to control them from behind. This is the reason Yan hasn't confronted any difficulty. Moreover, if Qin wants to attack Yan, it would have to pass over Yunzhong and Jiuyuan and travel through Dai and Shanggu, tramping several thousands of miles. Even if the army manages to seize a few cities in Yan, there isn't any way it can successfully retain them. Qin's inability to harm Yan is therefore clear.

In contrast, if Zhao were to attack Yan, several tens of thousands of troops would be camped outside Dontan within ten days of the mobilization order being issued. For its army to ford the Hutuo and Yi Rivers and reach the outskirts of the capital wouldn't require more than an additional four or five days. Thus, I say that any Qin assault on Yan would require fighting more than a thousand *li* away, whereas a Zhao attack on Yan would only require battling within a hundred *li*. A strategy that isn't

concerned with [the consequences that will arise] within a hundred *li* but instead focuses on those a thousand *li* out couldn't be more erroneous. For this reason, I hope your majesty will ally yourself with Zhao in the vertical alliance. When the realm is united, your state will be untroubled."

{Contemporary Employment}

At the present time, we can truly use spiritual enlightenment to transform and employ these methods to estrange the capable, their assistants, and their allies.

Zhu comments: Today it's important to employ agents to estrange the capable and their supporters among the raiders out in Tongren. The capable among their "phony" officials include their generals and commanders. Their generals should be estranged the way Zhong Shiheng thwarted [the king of] Yeli.⁸⁹ As for estranging their commanders, the way Chen Ping eliminated Fan Zeng will be like the invaders losing their left and right hands. Furthermore, local bandits such as the Miao gangs have numerous groups.⁹⁰ Even when they operate separately, they aren't easy to attack, and when they join together, are especially difficult to harm. If we can estrange one group the way Zhang Mengtan separated (*jian*) Han and Wei (from Zhi Po) and secretly aided them or Ban Chao damaged the Shache through the help of estrangement measures, they will have one less group to support them. In both cases their agency measures were effective.

As for estranging allies, today's raiders can hardly be called

⁸⁹ Reprised in "Zhong Shiheng manipulated the king of Yeli" in the exemplifications.

⁹⁰ Literally, their "thighs."

“allies.” But in terms of power, the local bandits and Miao gangs are “neighbors.”⁹¹ At the moment the best plan would be to have agents manipulate the local raiders into attacking the Miao and manipulate the Miao into attacking the local raiders. If they can’t be motivated with reconciliation measures, entice them with profit. If they can’t be motivated by profit, entice them with rank. If rank doesn’t entice them, coerce them with majesty.

If they can be mentally entangled and transformed into turned agents, they will mutually attack each other. The Miao and the local raiders attacking each other can be compared to two tigers fighting. The stronger will certainly be injured, the weaker will definitely die. If we wait until the weaker one dies and the stronger is injured, our effort will be halved but the results doubled. Then it won’t be necessary to have men desperately fight with tigers.

It can also be compared with hunting. We just have to call the hunting dogs to catch the rabbit, that’s all. Why should men and the hunting dogs collide with each other trying to catch rabbits? If we don’t use agents today but instead urgently train soldiers to fight with the Miao and local bandits, it will be like the men and dogs hunting a rabbit colliding. Having the good fight with the perverse isn’t a plan. But when it comes to tricking the Miao and the raiders into fighting each other, they are both perverse people. We can be happy if they win but needn’t pity them if they perish or are wounded. If we then train soldiers to support their power, strengthen their courage, and control the aftermath, we can harvest the results.

As for the way the ancients estranged other peoples’ allies, we can learn from their ideas and transform them so they will be effective today. When we read the ancient military writings, we don’t need to get enmired in their language or mark the side of the boat where a sword dropped overboard. We should use our spiritual

⁹¹ “Allies” and “neighbors” being the same character, *lin* 鄰.

wisdom to penetrate and transform them.

Wei Gong also said, “Employ slanderers to estrange the enemy’s critical advisers.”

The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states: “If the enemy has highly favored courtiers who are employed as trusted associates, we should employ agents to send them marvelous curios and satisfy their desires in order entice and closely attach them.”

Zhu comments: Have slanderers estrange the enemy’s favorites and intimates the way Zhang Yi employed large amounts of money to manipulate King Huai’s official Jin Shang in Chu into deceiving the king’s favorite concubine Zheng Xu [into thinking she was going to be displaced].

[Officials] that have lost their power can be estranged with profits.

The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states: “We can entice those among the enemy that have lost their power, who are dissatisfied, with generous profits and deceive them into thinking we are close in order to ferret out the [government’s] real affairs.”

The boastful can be esteemed and promoted in order to turn them into agents.

The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states: “If there are men among the enemy who speak boastfully and like to discuss advantage and harm, we can have our agents conceal their own thoughts and esteem and promote them, and also provide them with jewels and gifts, then investigate where they can serve as spies and turn them about to do it.”

**Those we detain can be secretly listened to in order
to use them as agents.**

The *Li Weigong Bingfa* states: "Detain their emissaries and have people constantly accompany them. Pretend to be intimate and in harmony with them, be congenial morning and night, double their gifts of marvelous curios, and observe their complexion and investigate them. Whether at sunrise or sunset remain with the emissary. Have men with acute hearing hide within the walls in order to secretly listen to what they can. Once the emissaries have overstayed the time to return, they will fear being reprimanded and become susceptible to discussing their secrets. Once we know their plans, we can send them away and use them."

II

Historical Exemplifications

I investigated how the ancients and our current age employed agents to realize great achievements. The changes of their ten thousand transformations are subtle in their minuteness. I've therefore selected the best for discussion here.

1

Their skill in using *si jian* ("doomed agents")⁹² is seen in cases such as Duke Wu of Zheng's manipulation of Guan Qisi.

According to *Han Feizi's* chapter "Shuo Nan" ("Discussion of Difficulties"): "Duke Wu of Zheng wanted to attack [the state of] Hu so he married his son into Hu's [royal family].⁹³ Thereafter, he asked his ministers, "Who can we attack if I want to employ the army?" The high official Guan Qisi said, "Hu should be possible." Angrily saying, "Hu is a brother state. How can you say we can attack it," the duke executed him. When Hu's ruler heard about it,

⁹² In the *Art of War*, the term employed for these sort of agents is literally "dead agents," *si* (dead 死) *jian* (間). However, while they may be fated to death, they aren't dead yet, so a better term that indicates their fate would seem to be "doomed" or "expendable."

⁹³ Attributed to the prominent political philosopher Han Feizi (died 233 BC), the *Han Feizi* emphasizes the need for strong government and a powerful state, both achieved through an impartial administrative system, strict adherence to well publicized laws, the imposition of state values, and the implementation of draconian punishments and generous rewards. Incorporating fundamental naturalistic concepts from Daoism, including the idea of the system functioning by itself without the ruler's personal involvement, Han Feizi's conception synthesizes beliefs first advocated by Shang Yang, the important Qin reformer, and others, including his teacher, the Confucian Xunzi, simplistically known for his doctrine that human nature tends to be evil. In addition to theoretical discussions, the book contains numerous historical incidents that are cited to establish the validity of various principles. (Burton Watson's translation of many important chapters – contained in *Basic Writings of Mo Tzu, Hsün tzu, and Han Fei Tzu* – remains a useful introduction to the philosopher's thought.)

he thought Zheng regarded him as a relative and didn't make any [defensive] preparations. Zheng soon struck Hu and destroyed it."

Zhu comments: Duke Wu of Zheng used Guan Qisi as a "doomed agent." Although his spycraft (*jian*) was skillful, what crime had Qisi committed? A morally perfected man wouldn't have done it.

Today, if we want to pacify invaders and the ruler wants to fight, it will be difficult to achieve certain victory. Conversely, even if the ruler wants to pursue a policy of reconciliation, the invaders will never believe it. This is certain. The solution is to take a condemned criminal, change his clothes, and secretly instruct him, saying "Tomorrow morning, during the army's strategy session when we discuss whether to reconcile with the invaders or extirpate them, you should shout out, 'Extirpate them!' Otherwise you will die."

The next day, when the criminal acts as instructed, the commander should immediately execute him, saying "I advocate reconciliation. Anyone who wants to call for extirpation should take note." Everyone within the army will then fearfully advocate reconciliation.

When the invaders hear about it, they will become submissive. After instituting conciliatory measures, secretly identify the overtly reconciled but secretly rebellious and mount a surprise attack at night. Victory will be assured, and the army's awesomeness will be displayed. The secretly rebellious should certainly be attacked, condemned criminals should be executed. This differs greatly with Duke Wu of Zheng's slaying of the innocent and attacking a state related by marriage!

Explication: Because the man is executed by his own people to establish the veracity of some falsehood rather than slain by the enemy after they discover his perfidy, Guan Qisi's case falls well

outside the classic definition of a “doomed agent.” On the other hand, Duke Wu’s actions perfectly, albeit brutally, illustrate the use of well-conceived disinformation to manipulate enemies or potential targets.

2

Zhang Liang manipulated Li Shiqi in the Han.

According to the “Lord of Liu’s Family Biography” in the *Shihji*: “The duke of Pei (Han *Gaozu*) wanted to use 20,000 troops to attack the Qin forces ensconced below Yao Pass. Zhang Liang⁹⁴ said, “Qin’s army is still strong and cannot be taken lightly. I’ve heard their commander is the son of a butcher. Merchants are menials, men easily moved by profit. I’d like you to temporarily remain here on the mountainside and have some men go in advance to make preparations to feed 50,000 men. In addition, increase the number of flags and pennants displayed on the mountain in order to create phony troops. And have Li Shiqi bribe the Qin commander with valuable treasures.”

The Qin commander proved willing to join Han *Gaozu* in attacking [Qin’s capital of] Xianyang and the future emperor wanted to accept him, but Liang said, “It’s only the commanding general who wants to rebel. I’m afraid the officers and troops won’t follow him. If they don’t, we will certainly be in danger. It would be better

⁹⁴ Zhang Liang (died 189 BC), who played a prominent role as a strategist in the turbulent years leading to the Han dynasty’s establishment, was the only important early supporter Han *Gaozu* didn’t eliminate during his lifetime. Traditional accounts claim he derived his expertise from the work known as the *Sanlüe* or *Three Strategies* after he received it in highly melodramatic fashion from a mysterious figure known as Huangshi Gong, the duke of Yellow Rock. Purportedly a long lost work composed by the eminent Tai Gong, it’s actually the last of the classic military writings and was probably composed near the end of the Later Han. (A complete translation may be found in Sawyer, *Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*.)

to take advantage of their negligence to strike them.” Han *Gaozu* then led the troops in an attack that destroyed the Qin army.

Zhu comments: Liang’s use of Shiqi to discuss peace before he attacked was a case of using Shiqi as a doomed agent. This time he was lucky to avoid death. Later [as discussed next], when he persuaded Qi to surrender and Han Xin then attacked, Shiqi was again employed as a doomed agent and subsequently died. Before Liang had Shiqi persuade the Qin commander [to surrender], he deployed phony troops in order to coerce him. Then he enticed him with valuable treasures, so this was a case of spycraft (*jian*) and harmony resulting in Qin failing to maintain their defensive preparations. Striking where they were unprepared realized Sunzi’s admonition to “go forth where they don’t expect it, attack where they aren’t prepared.”⁹⁵ Victory was certain.

Today, if we want to use agents (*jian*) against someone, we should first manifest the army’s awesomeness in order to threaten them. Then, when our agents succeed and they surrender, if we unexpectedly strike, we will always attain our objective.”

Explication: Although Zhu, unlike Sunzi, had qualms about fating a guiltless agent to death, the lack of righteousness inherent in deliberately negotiating a false peace accord intended to induce laxity in an enemy prior to assaulting them doesn’t seem to have perturbed him. This well recognized ancient ploy, one much commented upon in the military manuals, receives its most pointed formulation in the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*. Under the specific topic of “Peace Negotiations in Warfare” (which uses the incident at Yao Pass for its historical illustration) the tactical discussion states:

⁹⁵ As asserted in the *Art of War*’s very first chapter, “Initial Estimations.” However, this tactical principle is also the focus of an extended discussion in “Vacuity and Substance.”

Whenever about to engage an enemy in battle, first dispatch some emissaries to discuss a peace treaty. Even though the enemy assents to the talks, the way you each understand the language of the proposals is invariably not the same. Then, relying upon their indolence and laxity, select elite troops and suddenly strike them, for then their army can be destroyed. A tactical principle from the *Art of War* states: "One who seeks peace without setting any prior conditions is executing a stratagem."⁹⁶

Whether proposed by agents or simply emissaries who escape Li's fate, peace offers raise the possibility of a cessation in hostilities. They therefore spawn hope and feelings of relief and often result in laxity. Over the centuries commanders who found themselves in desperate situations frequently resorted to this ploy. Sometimes they simply used deliberately concocted rumors and disinformation agents, including "escaped" prisoners, prompting admonitions such as Sunzi's to remain vigilant. While credibility was a much stressed virtue, in reality concern over the army's survival frequently displaced idealistic notions.

3

Han Xin exploited Li Shiqi.

According to the "Lord of Huaiyin's" biography in the *Shiji*: "As Han Gaozu's emissary Li Shiqi had already persuaded Qi to surrender, Han Xin intended to stop [the army's advance]. However, Kuai Tong persuaded Xin otherwise by saying, "The king sent an agent to have Qi surrender, but did he order you to halt?"⁹⁷ In accord

⁹⁶ A quotation from "Maneuvering the Army."

⁹⁷ Kuai Tong was another of the astute strategists that emerged during the multiyear battle between Liu Bang (Han *Gaozu*) and Xiang Yu. After Han Xin –

with Tong's strategy, Xin then crossed the river.

Having already acceded to his persuasion, [the king of] Qi detained Li for a ceremonial drink and abandoned further defensive measures. Xin suddenly struck Qi's army at Lixia and proceeded as far as Linzi. Thinking Li had deceived him, the king of Qi had him boiled before going to Gaomi."

Zhu comments: While Li was alive, he persuaded the king of Qi to surrender but Han Xin treated him as a doomed agent by suddenly attacking. Tang Jian had already achieved a reconciliation with the Turks, but Li Jing treated him as a doomed agent by attacking. Their use of doomed agents was the same.

Explication: This well-known story appears as part of the historical illustration for the topic of "Rivers" in the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*, as well as in various chapters of military compendia such as the *Wujing Zongyao*. Again, Li's fate as a "doomed agent" wasn't foreordained, he was simply a victim of circumstances, just as Tang Jian who is discussed in exemplification six below.

4

Lu Kang manipulated Yu Zan.

The *Wuzhi* (*Chronicles of Wu*) in the *Sanguo Zhi* (*Chronicles of the Three Kingdoms*) states: "Xiling's supervisor, Bu Chan,

the Lord of Huaiyin – had grown powerful following his conquest of Qi and asked Han Gaozu to make him king of the area, Kuai Tong advised him to strike an independent course rather than remain loyal to the treacherous *Gaozu*. As long as Xiang Yu remained active, the three could then divide the empire (which would have foreshadowed the Three Kingdoms period), but Xin didn't listen. When Han Xin was accused of treachery and executed later, despite being charged with having incited Han to revolt, Kuai managed to gain *Gaozu's* approbation and finish his years as an imperial adviser. The book on strategy he reportedly penned was apparently lost (or deliberately destroyed) early on.

surrendered the city to Jin.⁹⁸ When Kang learned of it, he supervised the army in racing to Xiling where he constructed a countervailing wall that encircled the city that was intended to besiege Chan in the interior and withstand external aggressors. However, he didn't assault the city.⁹⁹ Shortly thereafter Jin's general Yang Zhao came forth to rescue them.

At that time, it happened that Wu's *Jun Dudu* (Grand Military Supervisor) Yu Zan suddenly defected to Zhao. Kang said, "Being one of my former officers, Zan is thoroughly familiar with the army's vacuity and substance. I have been worried about the Yi contingent's lack of training. If the enemy launches an attack, it will be against them." That night he changed the Yi contingent's position and placed an experienced general in command. The next day Zhao in fact attacked the location where the Yi had formerly been deployed and Kang responded with a counterattack. The stones and arrows fell like rain and Zhao withdrew during the night. Kang didn't pursue him but had the gongs loudly beaten, just as if they were going to attack. Zhao's army collapsed and fled. Kang then returned to Xiling and executed Yu Zan."

Zhu comments: Zan defected to the enemy and became a spy for them. Kang exploited the strategic situation by [effectively] turning Zan into his agent and thus used him as a "dead" agent. According to one commentary to *Sunzi*, "In undertaking affairs, when our agents know something that they convey to the enemy but we act differently, the agent is slain." Xiao Shicheng comments, "If there are rebellious officers in the army, allow them to defect, for

⁹⁸ The *Sanguo Zhi*, which derives its name from the realm's division into the three contending states of Wei, Shu, and Jin, records the important developments in China's intrigue filled Three Kingdoms (220–280) period. (For an account of the era, see *The Cambridge History of China: The Six Dynasties, 220–589*, 27–95.)

⁹⁹ As *Sunzi* famously advises in "Planning Offensives."

when they defect, they will certainly return to the enemy and the enemy will believe them. If they go there, they will certainly die, so they're called dead agents." Kang's manipulation of Zan fully realized the crux of Sunzi's doomed agents and was the same as Tan Daoqi's use of a deserter [as discussed in the next example].

Explication: As noted in the theoretical portion, Sunzi's classic description of "dead" or "doomed" agents presumes deliberate intent: "Doomed agents are employed to spread disinformation outside the state. Provide your doomed agents with false information and have them leak it to the enemy's agents." As conceived in subsequent military writings, these disinformation agents (and double agents used for this purpose) were not informed of the nature of their mission or the falsity of the information, and thus were unwitting participants. Others, such as those who were exploited in versions of China's infamous *ku rou ji* (苦肉機 ploy of suffering flesh), sometimes did so willingly, sometimes out of ignorance. However, in Zhu's conception, even individuals who weren't intentionally employed to spread disinformation could become doomed agents though the reaction and manipulation of others, as here.

5

Tan Daoqi exploited a deserter in the Song.

According to the *Songshu*: "Tan Daoqi invaded Wei, reaching Licheng. Wei had light cavalry press his front and rear and burn the grass in the valley. As the army's provisions were exhausted, Tan led them back out. A soldier who fled and surrendered to Wei fully informed them about the situation. Because Wei's forces were pursuing them, Tan's troops grew fearful and were on the verge of collapsing. During the night Tan therefore had millet placed atop sacks filled with sand. In the morning, when

Wei's soldiers saw the stacks, they assumed Tan's provisions were more than adequate, and concluded the soldier had lied. They therefore executed him. Tan was thus able to return with the army intact."

Zhu comments: Lu Kang's exploitation of the dead agent Yu Zan, Tan Daoqi's of the deserter, and the Song officer's of a Rong warrior at Linzhou [described immediately below] all differed, but their intent was the same. Accordingly, they enlighten us about the varying methods of commanders.

Explication: In an age when military intelligence could only be gained from human agents and visual observation, creating the impression of plenty under conditions of want relied upon effective, but not overly obvious, staging. In Tan's case, he negated the value of the deserter's information, thereby transforming him into a doomed agent even though that wasn't the original intent. Then, rather than releasing feigned deserters with contrary "facts," Tan fabricated a physical façade that was sufficiently visible to be noticed by enemy troops. A famous example of this ruse that occurred during the Sixteen Kingdoms period relied on the garrulity of the local populace:

General Heruo Dun of the Northern Zhou led his troops across the Yangtze River to seize the minor state of Zhen, so General Hou Qi of came forth from Xiangzhou in Zhen to exterminate him. The autumnal rains overflowed the land, flooding the roads along the river and cutting off Heruo's provisions and support. His men were terrified by their predicament.

General Heruo segmented his troops to forage and plunder in order to supply their requirements. Meanwhile, as he feared Hou Qi

would learn that their provisions were scarce, he raised a number of earthen mounds in the camp and covered them over with a layer of grain. He then summoned some people from a nearby village, pretended to ask them about local conditions, and then sent them away. When Hou Qi heard about the grain mounds, he assumed Heruo's provisions were substantial. General Heruo also improved his fortifications and built reed huts to show they intended to remain indefinitely. The people abandoned agriculture between Xiangzhou and Luoshan and Hou Qi didn't know what to do.¹⁰⁰

6

Li Jing manipulated Tang Jian.

According to the *Tangshu*: "When Li Jing, duke of Wei, attacked the Turks and defeated Jili *Khaghan*, the *khaghan* requested peace talks. Emperor *Taizung* sent the *Honglu Qing* (Chief Minister for State Ceremonies) Tang Jian to discuss reconciliation. Jili *Khaghan* appeared submissive but was actually undecided. Jing said, "Although we have defeated him, Jili still has more than 100,000 troops. If they go out north past Jiaoqi, it will be difficult to plan against him. Now that our imperial emissary is there he will certainly relax somewhat. If we suddenly strike with 10,000 cavalry, we can capture him without a [major] battle. Men like Tang Jian are hardly worth worrying about." He then led an elite force in a night attack that badly destroyed the Turks.

Explication: This famous case appears in a number of military works, including as the historical illustration for

¹⁰⁰

As reprised as the historical illustration for "Hunger" in the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*.

“Advancing” in the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*. However, even at its inception, officials such as Zhang Gongjin questioned the appropriateness of Li’s planned strike, saying, “The emperor has already assented to their surrender. And what about the men who have gone out there?” Li’s response to Zhang’s query coincidentally shows the continuity of military knowledge:

Li Jing replied, “The opportunity cannot be lost. This is the way Han Xin destroyed Qi during the Han dynasty’s founding reign. As for men of Tang Jian’s advanced age, what is there to regret?”

He then supervised the soldiers in an urgent advance. When they had proceeded as far as Mount Yin, they encountered more than a thousand of the *khaghan*’s perimeter troops, all of whom surrendered and joined Li’s army.

Once the elated *khaghan* received the Tang ambassador, he neglected the army’s supervision. Li Jing’s vanguard took advantage of a heavy fog to advance within seven miles of his quarters before he first became aware of them. Before he could deploy their formations, Li Jing released his troops for an assault that resulted in killing more than ten thousand enemy soldiers. They also took more than a hundred thousand men and women prisoner, captured the *khaghan*’s son Guluoshi, and killed Princess Yicheng. The *khaghan* fled but was subsequently captured by Zhang Baoxiang, the Commander-in-Chief of the Datong Circuit campaign army, and sent back to the emperor. The Tang thus enlarged its territory from Mount Yin north to the Gobi Desert. In mounting what a number of Confucians subsequently

termed a “perfidious attack,” Li Jing adhered to two fundamental, well articulated military principles. First, aggressively exploit any weakness in the enemy, even those accidentally created by otherwise righteous and orthodox actions. Second, act in a timely manner, never miss the subtle moment when events can be decided. Li’s unrighteous strategy was condemned for having compromised the emperor’s credibility. However, the official accounts reflect the assumption that the *khan* actually intended to deceive the emperor by seeking a phony peace accord, a view Tang *Taizong*, emperor at the time, apparently accepted according to a revealing dialogue in the *Question and Replies*:

The *Taizong* asked: “Formerly, when Tang Jian served as an emissary to the Turks, you availed yourself of the situation to attack and defeat them. People say you used Tang Jian as an expendable spy. Up until now I have had doubts about this. What about it?”

Li Jing bowed twice and said: “Tang Jian and I equally serve your Majesty. I anticipated Tang Jian’s proposals wouldn’t necessarily persuade them to quietly submit. I therefore took the opportunity to follow up with the army and attack them. In order to eliminate a great danger, I didn’t concern myself with a minor righteousness. Although people refer to Tang Jian as an expendable spy, that wasn’t my intention.

According to Sunzi, employing spies is an inferior measure. I once prepared a discussion of the subject and stated at the end, ‘Water can float a boat, but it can also overturn the boat. Some used spies to be successful; others, relying on spies, are overturned

and defeated.'

If one braids his hair and serves the ruler, maintains a proper countenance in court, is loyal and pure, trustworthy and completely sincere, how can this sort of employment sow discord even if someone excels at spying? Tang Jian is a minor matter. What doubt does your Majesty have?"

The *Taizong* said: "Truly, without benevolence and righteousness one cannot employ spies. How can ordinary men do it? If the Duke of Zhou, with his great righteousness, exterminated his relatives, how much the more so one emissary?¹⁰¹

Clearly, there is nothing to doubt."

Somewhat surprisingly, as noted in the foreword, Zhu ignores Li Jing's famous pronouncement, "Water can float a boat, but it can also overturn the boat."

7

The way an officer at Linzhou manipulated a Rong tribesman is a true example of being skillful at using doomed agents.

According to the *Dongxuan Bilu*: "Linzhou is situated at a strategic point beyond the Yellow River where it provides a defense against the Xi Xia.¹⁰² There aren't any wells in the city. In the

¹⁰¹ The Duke of Zhou, one of the principal figures in the Zhou's founding, was thereafter regarded as a great paragon of virtue for his many righteous actions. However, when one of King Wen's brothers rebelled after the latter's death, the Duke of Zhou had to conduct a campaign of suppression that saw numerous family members perish. (For an extensive account, see Ralph D. Sawyer, *Conquest and Domination in Early China: Rise and Demise of the Western Chou*.)

¹⁰² Xi Xia, a powerful Tangut state founded by a peripheral people with a lengthy history in the Ordos region, posed a threat to sedentary China throughout its existence from 982 to 1227. (For a brief history see "The Hsi Hsia" in *The*

middle of the Qingli reign period [1041-1048], a Rong tribesman said to the king, Yuanhao, "If we besiege them for half a month, the soldiers and inhabitants will certainly die of thirst." Yuanhao [therefore] had his soldiers surround them for several days, causing the city to be severely distressed.

An officer in Linzhou suggested in a plan that he was willing to take some mud from a ditch and have people [appear to be] piling muddy grass on a height with it. Linzhou's commander accepted his plan. When he witnessed this off in the distance, Yuanhao abruptly said to the Rong who had suggested the plan, "You said they didn't have any wells, but now they have mud." He then had him executed and abandoned the siege.

Explication: The muddy grass was probably used to repair some part of the fortifications, accounting for the activity being readily noticed. At the same time, it was commonly known the city lacked an internal water supply, so neither the tribesman's nor officer's suggestions were surprising. This then was a ruse that dovetailed with developments in the Rong camp rather than a conscious effort by Chinese forces to dispatch a doomed agent on a disinformation mission. Only the hapless tribesman's speedy demise merited his inclusion in the category of dead agents in Zhu's expanded categorical definition.

Masking shortages by fabricating a visible appearance of abundance was a common employed deception throughout the ages in China, as well as a frequent topic of discussion in the military manuals and compendia.¹⁰³

Cambridge History of China: Volume 6, Alien Regimes and Border States, 907-1368.)

¹⁰³ For an extended discussion and additional examples, see "Mask and Exploit Shortages" in Sawyer, *Lever of Power: Military Deception in China and the West*.

**Those skilled in employing turned agents sometimes
used letters as their turned agents, such as the
Qin general who [employed one] against Li Liang.**

According to Zhang Erh's biography in the *Shihji*: "The king of Zhao had Li Liang develop a strategy for [attacking] Taiyuan. When he reached Shiyi, a Qin general created a phony letter purportedly from Qin's emperor Erh Huangdi [reigned 210–207] to Li Liang but didn't seal it which said, "Once, by serving me, you gained rank and glory. If you sincerely rebel against Zhao and revert to Qin, I will pardon your offense and honor you."

After Liang received the letter, he returned to [Zhao's capital of] Handan to request additional forces. On the road he happened to meet the king's sister whom he took to be the king. Liang therefore prostrated himself toward the carriage but as the king's sister was drunk, she had a cavalryman dismiss him. Long having been a man of rank, Liang felt humiliated. As he had already received Qin's letter, he decided to rebel and angrily pursued and killed the king's sister before attacking Handan itself.

Explication: Although Liang's loyalty was "turned," the letter merely served as a direct enticement in unusual circumstances rather than being employed in the usual fashion to implicate someone (as in the example that follows) or spread disinformation that would infuriate a ruler or a high commander, resulting in an individual's dismissal or execution.

**In the Western Wei, Wei Xiaokuan
manipulated Niu Daochang**

According to the *Weishu*: "When the Eastern Wei general Duan Chen occupied Yiyang [in 538 AD], he sent General Niu

Daochang to incite trouble along the border and entice [the people to change their allegiance]. Western Wei's general Wei Xiaokuan [509-580], who was opposing him, dispatched a spy to obtain a copy of Daochang's writing style, then had a skilled calligrapher forge a phony letter between Daochang and himself in which he discussed Daochang's intent to revert his allegiance. Then he singed it as if it had been dropped into a fire and had a spy take it into Duan Chen's camp. After he acquired it, Duan became suspicious of Daochang and no longer employed his plans. Learning they had become estranged, Wei Xiaokuan sent unorthodox forces out to mount a sudden attack on Daochang, Duan Chen, and others."

Zhu comments: Imitating someone's writing style to forge a letter requires absolute precision. If it isn't perfect, no one will believe it. All the leaders of the current rebellion in the Tongren district have passed the imperial exams so it would be appropriate to secretly acquire [samples of] their writing style and their chops and forge some unusual letters that will prompt them to doubt and destroy each other. Then a one page letter will be worth more than 100,000 troops. I therefore particularly advise imitating their calligraphy and forging their chops.

Explication: This is the classic way to employ a letter for estrangement purposes.

10

In the Tang, Wei Gao manipulated the king of Yunnan.

The "Tang Chronicles" in the *Tongjian* state:¹⁰⁴ "The Turfan

¹⁰⁴ One of China's most famous historical works, the *Zizhi Tongjian* (*A Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government*) summarily chronicles the important historical events from 403 BC through 959, the former date being viewed as the inception of the Warring States period. It was compiled from extant historical materials, some now lost, under the auspices of the great scholar and high ranking official Sima Guang and completed with government sponsorship in 1084 AD.

mobilized 100,000 troops to invade Xichuan¹⁰⁵ and also mobilized [the semi-independent state of] Yunnan's forces.¹⁰⁶ Although Yunnan was internally subservient to the Tang, externally it didn't dare rebel against the Turfan so it sent several tens of thousands of troops that encamped at Lubei. Wei Gao [745-805] knew about Yunnan's indecisiveness so he sent a letter to the king of Yunnan, praising his sincerity [in planning to] rebel against the Turfan and revert to the Tang, put it into a silver money bag, and had a member of the Eastern Man convey it to the Turfan. Beginning to doubt Yunnan, the Turfan send 20,000 troops to invest Huichuan in order to stop them from moving along the road to Shu (Sichuan). Angered, the king of Yunnan withdrew his troops and returned to Yunnan. As a result, Yunnan and the Turfan became suspicious of each other and the king's intent to revert to the Tang grew much stronger. Turfan power first began to weaken after they lost Yunnan's support."

Zhu comments: Today, when we are worried the Miao on the upper and lower reaches [of the Yangtze River] might unite and also worry the Miao and the Turfan might cooperate, we should consider using this method to separate them.

11

During the Song, Yue Fei manipulated a spy from Jin.

According to Yue Fei's biography in the *Songshi*: "Fei knew that since Liu Yu, [emperor of the puppet state of Da Qi], was connected with Tiehan [Wanyan Zonghan] and that [Wanyan] Wuzhu hated Liu Yu, he could employ an agent to cause disruption.¹⁰⁷ The Song army happened to catch a Jin spy, so Fei

¹⁰⁵ Near present day Chengdu.

¹⁰⁶ Referred to as Yunnan here, Nanzhao was a semi-independent state centered in the Yunnan area. (The incident dates to 785 AD.)

¹⁰⁷ Da Qi was a puppet state established by the Jurchen (Jin) in the vast area of Hebei, Shandong, Henan, and Shenxi from lost Chinese territory at the start of

openly questioned him: “Aren’t you Zhang Bin from my army? I sent you to Qi to establish connections with the fourth *taizi* (Wuzhu). When you went off but didn’t return, I sent others to make inquiries in Qi. Qi has agreed to bring the fourth *taizi* to Qinghe with the objective of joining in an invasion of the Jiang area. The letter you carried to the prince didn’t reach him. Why did you betray me?”

Wanting to postpone his death, the spy played along with the situation. Fei then created a wax encased letter that said he was planning with Liu Yu to kill Wuzhu. Then he said to the spy, “I’m going to pardon you and again send you to Qi to ask when we should mobilize our troops.” He then cut open the spy’s thigh and put the letter in, warning him not to leak it out. When the spy went back, he gave the letter to Wuzhu. Startled, Wuzhu raced to report it to the ruler. Li Yu was subsequently dismissed.

Zhu comments: Cutting the man’s thigh to conceal it increased the secrecy, making it readily believable.

Explication: One of China’s greatest heroes, Yue Fei (1103-1142) was known for his astute command and battlefield achievements, often realized against much greater forces, as well as his determination and resolute commitment to the Chinese state. An innovative leader, Fei employed every possible method to thwart the Jurchen conquest of China, including using duped spies to spread disinformation, as recounted in exemplification 20, “Yue Fei manipulated Cao Cheng’s spy.” Constantly undermined by a weak

the Southern Song (1127-1279). Liu Yu, whom they appointed ruler in 1130, was finally removed in 1137 at least in part through Yue Fei’s ploy. Tiehan was commander-in-chief at the time of the incident and Wuzhu, another member of the royal family, one of their leading generals. (He reappears in example 43, “Liu Qi employed Cao Cheng.”) The Jin is traditionally dated from 1115 to 1234 when they were vanquished by the Mongols but had been a significant opponent long before being recognized as a dynastic state. (For an overview of Jin history see “The Chin dynasty” in the *Cambridge History of China: Alien Regimes and Border States*.)

emperor and perverse officials, he was murdered in 1142 AD, as much for his military success as for continuing to oppose the policy of appeasement that saw many martial accomplishments politically reversed.

12

Zhong Shiheng manipulated the Yeli king.

The *Songshi* states: “[The Xi Xia king Li] Yuanhao had two generals who were very close to him, the Yeli king and the Tiandu king. Because they both commanded crack troops and threatened to inflict severe harm on the Song, Zhong wanted to eliminate them. The Yeli king happened to send three men – Langmai, Shangqi, and Meiniang – to discuss surrendering to Zhong. Zhong knew it was a ruse, so he said, “Rather than killing them, it would be better to use them as turned agents.” He therefore detained the emissaries, treated them well, had cavalry accompany them whenever they went in and out, and greatly favored them.

[At the time] there was a monk at Purple Mountain Temple called Fa Song whom Zhong investigated and found to be both courageous and reliable and could therefore be used. Accordingly, he brought him in as an assistant and enticed him into serving as an officer. Because he achieved visible success in capturing members of the enemy when the army went out, Zhong promoted him to be the *Zhihuishi* (Commander) for the Third Contingent, brought him into his headquarters, and made him responsible for managing his household affairs. Fa Song therefore prepared Zhong’s quarters, cavalry equipment, and other items.

Song also drank excessively, visited brothels, and gambled. There wasn’t anything he didn’t do but Zhong treated him even more generously. Song was very grateful. Suddenly one day Zhong angrily said to Song, “I’ve treated you this way, but you’ve got

secret connections with the enemy. How could you have betrayed me like this?" After severely torturing him for tens of days, Song still displayed no animosity. Instead he said, "I'm an upright stalwart. You must have listened to the words of perverse individuals. If I'm killed, it will merely be death."

After a half year, when Zhong investigated and found Song still hadn't turned against him, he undid his bounds and had him bathe and brought him into his quarters where he comforted him and apologized, saying, "You didn't do anything wrong, I was testing you. If I want to employ you as an agent, your suffering will be much greater than this. Will you be able to withstand it and die for me without speaking?" Weeping, Song assented. Zhong then dashed off a letter to the Yeli king, sealed it with wax, stitched it up inside his inner garments, then whispered to him: "Don't reveal this until you are about to die. If you have to leak it, then say, 'I failed my benefactor, I'm unable to complete the general's mission.'" He also gave him a scroll of a turtle (*gui*) and some dates (*zao*) to give to Yeli.

When the Yeli king saw the scroll and dates, he deduced there must be a letter and sought it from Song. However, looking about at the others in attendance, Song replied there wasn't any. The Yeli king then dispatched everything with a letter to Yuanhao who then summoned Song and the king several hundred *li* away [to Xingzhou] and interrogated Song about whether a letter had been sent. Song obstinately maintained there wasn't any, nor did he admit it under severe questioning.

Several days later Yuanhao had him secretly brought into the palace and questioned him, telling him, "If you don't talk quickly, you will die." In the end Song still didn't say anything so Yuanhao ordered him dragged and beheaded. At that point Song yelled out, "I die for nothing, I failed to fulfill my mission. I betrayed you,

general, I betrayed you.” When Yuanhao’s men urgently raced to question him, Song retrieved the letter from his inner garments. They went back in and shortly thereafter Yuanhao ordered Song taken back to the guest quarters and secretly dispatched a closely connected general whom he ordered to pretend to be an emissary from Yeli and undertake a mission to Zhong Shiheng.

Suspecting he was Yuanhao’s emissary, Zhong had him housed for a few days instead of seeing him right away, then interviewed him. When he queried him about the staff in Xingzhou, the man’s replies were fluid, but when he asked about the Yeli king’s subordinates, they were incomplete. Zhong immediately had several recently captured prisoners secretly observe the emissary through a crack and the prisoners provided his name. He was indeed Yuanhao’s man. Zhong then had him brought in for an interview and sent him off with generous gifts. When he calculated the emissary had made it back, Song returned, and it was reported the Yeli king had already been put to death.

Having arranged for the Yeli king to be killed, Zhong then wanted to get rid of the Tiandu king. He set up a sacrificial altar, wrote the ceremonial words on a wooden tablet, and described his and Tiandu’s intent to cooperate. That morning, just when the ceremony was nearly finished, it was interrupted, and the wooden tablet lost among the paper offerings when Xi Xia forces appeared. Zhong was forced to abandon the ceremonial site and return (to the army). Since the tablet’s writing couldn’t be destroyed (in time), the soldiers found it and forwarded it to Yuanhao. The Tiandu king was thus also deemed guilty. After the conclusion of a peace accord, Song retook his name of Wang Song. His rank subsequently reached that of *Jusishi* (Commissioner of Various Offices).”

Zhu comments: Both the *Tongjian*’s “Song Chronicles” and Shen Cunzhong’s *Bu Bitan* record these events with slight

differences. The *Bu Bitan* says, “Zhong Shiheng sent Song off with generous gifts and a number of military secrets, saying, “You can use these to help accomplish your objective.” When he was about to depart, Zhong took off his thick coat and presented it to him, saying, “It’s bitterly cold in the north so take this as a parting gift. Once you get there, you must find a way to see Yuqi. Without him you won’t be able to gain access to [Yuanhao’s] confidants.”

Doing as instructed, Song sought a way to see Yuqi. However, this made the northerners suspicious of him and he was turned over to the officials. Several days later they discovered Zhong’s letter to Yuqi in the coat’s lining and were surprised at its intimacy. Song hadn’t known the letter was in the lining, so even when the bandits tortured him, he didn’t disclose the truth. The barbarians therefore began to suspect Yuqi and killed him. They also sent Song to the northern border, but he escaped and returned.” According to what the *Bitan* says, Song’s courage was strong because he didn’t know about the letter in the lining. Zhong’s employment of an agent was thus even more secret than usual, his strategy even more unorthodox.

Explication: Li Yuanhao [Weiming Nangxiao], who ruled the peripheral Tangut state of Xi Xia from 1032 to 1048 after distinguishing himself as a military commander and natural leader while still heir-apparent, engaged in a lengthy conflict with the Song from 1039 to 1044.¹⁰⁸ As the Yeli clan was one of the three or four powerful enough to rival the royal family’s power, any successful general – including the two brothers active during Yuanhao’s reign – would readily fall under suspicion. Their dismissal near the end of

¹⁰⁸ A summary account may be found in *The Cambridge History of China*, 5:1: *The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors*, 907-1279, 300-316 and an expanded history of the Xi Xia (982-1227) in *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol 6, *Alien Regimes and Border States*, 907-1368, 154-214.

his reign, possibly as portrayed in this incident (which may date to 1042 AD), has been suggested as due to Song subversion.

Although Zhu doesn't discuss it in these terms, Song was a disinformation agent and the letter served as the instrument of estrangement. Concealing its existence from Song as in the second version would well accord with the classic interpretation of Sunzi's conception of a "doomed agent." However, since the ploy's success depended upon having the letter discovered, it might be wondered whether Song's intransigence in the face of extreme torture wouldn't have threatened to undermine the information's credibility.

Rather than being randomly chosen and innocuous, Zhong's gifts of a scroll depicting a turtle and a cluster of dates were intended to symbolically convey the fatal message, "early on return" or "return early," depending upon the sequence in which Song presented them.¹⁰⁹ Their significance derives from the word for turtle, 龜 *gui*, having the same pronunciation as that for "return" (meaning here "revert your allegiance"), 歸 *gui*, and dates (jubes), 棗 *zao*, being identical with early, 早 *zao*. If he realized the implications – presumably the reason he asked about a letter – the Yeli king certainly erred in making the incident known to Yuanhao, though he may have done so out of fear of others reporting it.

13

In the Ming, Wang Shouren manipulated

Li Shishi and the opera performers,

The *San Dagongchen* states: "When Zhu Chenhao (Prince of Ning) rebelled [in 1519], Wang Shouren's troops hadn't yet assembled and he was worried Chenhao's army would quickly come

¹⁰⁹ Zhong's intent is explicitly noted in his biography, *juan* 335 of the *Songshi*, but has dropped out in Zhu's retelling.

forth [from Nanchang]. Every day he issued orders to the provincial cities to prepare. He also sent missives sealed in wax balls to [Chenhao's confidants] Li Shishi and Liu Yangzhen stating, "I've received secret indications that you both intend to be completely loyal to the state. You only need to urge [the prince] to quickly go forth, for once his feet leave the province, the great affair [of suppressing him] will be accomplished." He next deliberately tied up one of Chenhao's spies and threatened him with death before he had a crafty jailor who pretended to be inclined to the prince's cause because he had been suffering under Wang's command leak the contents of the missive and release him. When Chenhao learned about the letter, he became doubtful and indecisive and so planned with Shishi and Yangzhen, both of whom urged him to quickly go to Nanjing and assume the emperorship. This made Chenhao even more doubtful, but after somewhat more than ten days, when he learned no troops were coming from outside the center, he realized Shouren had deceived him."

The *Zhinang Bu* states: "When Wang Yangming was defending Fengcheng, he heard about the rebel Chenhao's revolt. As the army's strength was incomplete, he urgently wanted to go upstream to Ji'an. However, when the sailors heard Chenhao had dispatched more than a thousand men to capture Wang, they were too afraid to go out until Wang pulled out his sword and cut off one of their ears. As dusk approached, he calculated he couldn't proceed any further, so he secretly looked for a fishing boat and went forth after changing his clothes. However, he left a member of his staff behind to wear his official garments and remain in the boat. Only after Chenhao's soldiers indeed attacked the boat, got the imposter, and learned Wang had gone far off did they desist.

When he was in the middle of his journey, fearing Chenhao would quickly come forth, Wang had a phony spy pretend he was

following secret orders from the court go to the two Guang provinces and order the commander at Huxiangdu and the *Bingbu* (military) officials in the two capitals to take their armies forth and secretly establish ambushes at critical points where they were to await the arrival of Chenhao's forces and launch surprise attacks. He also selected some opera performers and had them put similar documents inside the lining of their clothes. When he was about to send them off, he arrested some family members of Chenhao's *Taishi* (Grand Preceptor) and had them brought to the boat's aft where they would be able to notice the performers. Wang then pretended to be angry with them and had them dragged onto the shore as if to be executed, but instead released them and ordered them to run off and report. When Chenhao had the performers' garments searched and retrieved the documents, he delayed, and being suspicious, didn't go forth."

It also says, "When Wang reached Ji'an and calculated they were logistically prepared, he issued orders for the first time for the punitive forces to race to the city of Nanchang. A scout (*zhen* 偵) reported, "There are ten thousand troops lying in ambush at Xinjiuguang prepared to launch a pincer attack." Wang dispatched troops by local byways to suddenly strike and destroy them. Then he conveyed his plans to Wu Wending and the others, "First we will entice them with roving forces and pretend to be defeated in order to draw them forth. We'll wait until their front engages in pursuit of profit, then attack from all four sides and have our troops lying in ambush all arise together."

He was also worried that the aristocrats or other subversives within the city might act, so he personally comforted the populace and proclaimed, "I won't pursue inquiries against those who have been coerced. Even though the rebels may have given you an official position, anyone who can escape and return will be spared from

death. Those who can kill the rebels and surrender now will be rewarded.” He had the people living both inside and outside the city, as well as the inhabitants of the villages, transmit the announcement in every direction. He also split forces off to attack Jiujiang and Nankang in order to sever the rebel army’s route of return. At that point their entire strength arose and the head of the rebels was captured.

Zhu comments: King Wencheng’s (Wang Shouren’s) manipulation of Li Shishi employed old knowledge, Yueh Fei’s manipulation of the Jin spy. His use of the performers was similarly prior knowledge, being the same as Zhong Shiheng’s manipulation of Fa Song. But his changes were especially marvelous, so they weren’t wasn’t perceived as repetitive.

Explication: This major event indicates the turmoil that had come to plague the Ming dynasty (1472-1528) following the demise of the powerful figures who had established it through battle and conquest less than three generations earlier. At the inception of the prince’s revolt, many of the major military positions were held by former civil officials who had originally qualified for the highest bureaucratic offices through the formal exam system. Even though Wang Shuojen numbered among them, in his identity as Wang Yangming he was an exceptionally prominent intellectual whose new interpretation of Confucianism and man’s innate moral abilities attracted hundreds of disciples and thousands of followers and spawned a distinctive school of thought that long survived his death. Wang also achieved considerable success in his role as a military commander, reputedly quelling Zhu Chenhao’s rebellion in just 43 days, as portrayed.

Li Chongsi manipulated [Zhu] Chenhao.

Chen Jiru's *Jianwen Lu* (*Record of What I Heard and Saw*) states: "Although Wang Yangming received credit for Chenhao's defeat, in actuality Li Wushan made the major effort. Li, who was known as Chongsi, was a native of Neijiang in Sichuan. In the fourteenth year of the Zhengde reign period (1518), when he was serving as Imperial Inspector for the Nanjing area, he heard Prince Chenhao was increasing his personal forces. Sighing, he said, "When a tiger grows wings, disaster is imminent." Although he forcefully reported the prince was likely to rebel to the court, his concerns were dismissed. He therefore set about preparing the military forces. From the assembled troops he picked out one man, the *Zhihuishi* (Commodant) Yang Rui, brought him in, and said, "I leave Wancheng's preservation to you."

In the fifteenth year (1519), the rebel forces penetrated Jiujiang. Li personally encamped the army at Caishi¹¹⁰ in order to block the upstream portion of the river and sent a "flying command" to Wancheng ordering Rui to respond to the enemy as opportunity might allow but be certain to achieve victory in every clash.

In addition, he used the spy service's special "fire tablets," writing that "This is an urgent intelligence report intended to inform *Qianjai* (Inspector Generals) and *Taijian* (Palace Directors) that more than 100,000 troops under the commander-in-chief and other commanders have been mobilized. One half will arrive at Nanjing, the other half are racing to Anqing. In addition, the wolf troops in the two Guangs¹¹¹ and the local deployments throughout Huguang

¹¹⁰ Which was known for its cliffs and the narrowness of the river at that point.

¹¹¹ The provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi. ("Wolf troops" refer to contingents composed of minority peoples known for their ferocity.)

are today advancing by water and will assemble together at Anqing. They will shortly advance and attack the rebels in Jiangxi. I am today sending a fire tablet flying report to those of you who are on their route of advance so you will mount a united defense and prepare the necessary provisions and fodder while awaiting orders for their future use.”

When Chenhao’s boat reached Lake Liyang, he happened to acquire one of the fire tablets and was startled to read it. At this point half his troops scattered and were lost. In addition, Li had a thousand sailors boldly displaying their battle flags board a hundred swift boats. Beating the drums and claiming to be going to support Anqing, they advanced. When the people in the city looked out and saw them, their *qi* increased a hundredfold. Rui opened the gates and the rebels crumbled under attacks by both land and water. When Chenhao, who was encamped at Huangshiji at the time, heard about the defeat, he withdrew at night. Li personally led the army in pursuing him northward. Chenhao then raced to Poyang Lake where he encountered Wang Yangming (Shouren) who was bringing his troops there and was captured. Later, when the court discussed credit for the suppression, Li wasn’t mentioned. The censor Hu Jie, who personally witnessed the events, attacked the decision and especially recounted Li’s actions, but they weren’t reported.

Zhu comments: Using a fire tablet as a turned agent is even better than a letter. Li truly excelled at making changes.

15

There were those who turned the enemy’s agents the way Zhao She did Qin’s.

Lian Po’s biography in the *Shiji* states: “When they attacked Han [in 270 BC], Qin’s forces encamped at Ehyu. The king [of

Zhao] summoned Lian Po and asked, "Can we rescue Han or not?" Lian Po replied: "The road is long, difficult, and narrow, so it would be difficult to rescue them." The king also summoned Zhao She and queried him. Zhao replied, "The road will be long and the passes narrow. It might be compared with two rats fighting in a hole. The more courageous general will win." The king then ordered Zhao to assume command of the army and rescue Han.

When the army had proceeded about thirty miles out from Zhao's capital of Handan, Zhao She announced, "anyone who dares to remonstrate on military matters will be executed." When Qin deployed their army west of Wuan, they beat the drums and drilled, causing all the tiles on Wuan's houses to shake. When one man from Zhao's army suggested they should urgently rescue Wuan, Zhao immediately had him executed. He then further solidified the walls and remained for twenty-eight days without advancing before again augmenting their fortifications. When spies came from Qin, Zhao fed them well and sent them back.

After receiving their report, Qin's commanding general happily said, "They aren't more than thirty *li* outside the capital, but instead of advancing, they just augment their fortifications. Ehyu certainly isn't Zhao's objective." However, after he dispatched Qin's spies, Zhao had his forces roll up their armor and race after them, resulting in them arriving at Qin's encampment in only two days and a night. He then ordered his best archers to go and encamp about fifty *li* from Ehyu. Only after their fortifications were complete did Qin learn about them, don their armor, and race there.

An officer named Xu Li remonstrated with Zhao She. When General Zhao admitted him, Xu Li said: "Whoever occupies the mountain to the north first will be victorious, whoever arrives afterward will be defeated." Agreeing, Zhao dispatched ten thousand men to race there. Arriving after them, Qin's forces futilely

fought to ascend the mountain. Zhao then released his soldiers in an attack that severely destroyed Qin's army."

Explication: Zhu's abbreviated account doesn't mention Han had asked Zhao to extricate them from Qin's siege and that Zhao She's victory accomplished that objective. The passage again indicates Zhu's unique interpretation of the term *fan jian* because Qin's observers, hardly spies in being so overt, clearly do not fall into the category of *fanjian* as traditionally conceived. However, based on his appraisal in other sections, he probably deemed the soldier who first offered advice contrary to She's prohibition a "dead" agent.

16

In the Han, Chen Ping subverted Fan Zeng.

According to Prime Minister Chen's family biography in the *Shihji*: "Chen Ping [died 178 BC] said, "King Xiang (of Chu) has only a few trusted subordinates, such as Yafu (Fan Zeng), Zhong Limei, Lung Ju, and Zhou Yin. If you are willing to spend several ten thousands of gold, we can employ turned agents to estrange the ruler and his ministers by making him doubtful. As King Xiang is by nature suspicious and readily believes slander, he will execute them. If you then mobilize the army and attack, Chu can certainly be taken." The king of Han agreed, so he gave Chen 40,000 catties of gold to do as he liked and didn't inquire further about its expenditure.

Chen Ping then used the money to release turned agents amid Chu's army. They spread the word that despite Xiang Yu's generals such as Zhong Limei having achieved considerable success, Xiang Yu would never segment his territory and make them kings. Accordingly, they wanted to unite with the king of Han to extinguish the Xiang family and divide the territory. It turned out that Xiang

Yu soon no longer trusted Zhong Limei and the others.

When this occurred and Xiang Yu sent an ambassador to the Han king, Han *Gaozu* had a *tailao* feast prepared. But when Chu's emissary arrived, the king said with surprise, "I thought you were Yafu's emissary, not Xiang's!" He had the feast removed and coarse food and fodder brought in. When the ambassador returned and made a full report, Xiang became very suspicious of Yafu. At that time Yafu wanted to urgently attack Rongyang but Xiang Yu didn't trust him and wasn't willing to listen. When Yafu heard Xiang Yu doubted him, he angrily said, "The great affair of grasping the realm is settled. Do it yourself! Let my old bones return home." On the way he suffered a back illness at Pengcheng and died."¹¹²

Explication: However infamous and criticized, Chen Ping's measures came to define the classic estrangement ploy. It would not just be cited in all the military compendia and many of the theoretical manuals, but frequently raised whenever rulers and commanders sought to debilitate their enemies. In Zhu's rendition, turned agents were reportedly employed to disseminate the false information, but the task could easily, if not more effectively, have been accomplished by local agents, either "village" agents or "internal" agents. Chen, of course, simply took advantage of a character flaw – Xiang Yu's inherently suspicious nature – and exploited the resulting dynamics. His success in targeting Fan Zeng, whom Xiang Yu informally referred to as Yafu ("second father"), was particularly spectacular given the closeness of their relationship.

¹¹² More likely, this is a euphemistic way of implying he was assassinated by being stabbed or shot with an arrow in the back, as early writers suggest.

In the Tang, Li Su manipulated the offense of sheltering spies.

According to Li Su's biography in the *Tangshu*: "Li Su [773-821] was about to attack Caizhou [in 816 AD]. According to an old order, anyone sheltering a spy would have their entire family executed. Su abolished the order and was lenient to the people. As a result, spies turned and informed him [about the enemy] so Su knew many more details than before about the enemy's vacuity and substance."

In the Ming, Feng Menglong said, "There's no harm in allowing spies to be sheltered if you are able to employ them. However, you must first know their identity before you can employ them. [To achieve this] you must keep the people from concealing them, for only then will you know who the spies are. You must employ beneficence and majesty in order to have the people submit before you can prevent them from concealing spies. Just speaking about it is hard!"

Gao Renhou manipulated Qian Neng's spy.

According to the *Tangshi*: "The Qiongzhou military commander, Qian Neng, rebelled and invaded Shu's border, causing trouble. The authorities summoned the *Shangshu Pushe* (Vice Minister of State Affairs), Gao Renhou, and appointed him to lead the army back on a punitive campaign. The day before they were to set out a flour vendor who had come into the camp aroused the suspicion of a security patrol. Detained and questioned, he indeed turned out to be one of Qian Neng's spies. Renhou ordered his ropes untied, then questioned him. He replied, "I'm just an ordinary villager but Qian Neng imprisoned my father and mother, wife and children, and ordered me, 'Go make observations and report back.

If they're accurate, I'll spare your family, but if not, you'll all die.' I didn't follow his order willingly."

Renhou said, "If that's really true, how can I bear to kill you? I'll let you go so you can rescue your father and mother, wife and children, but you must say to Qian Neng, 'Gao *Shangshu* will soon set out, but he'll only be leading five hundred men, no other troops.' Then, since I will have kept your family alive, you should convey the following words to the men in the fortifications on my behalf: "The *Shangshu* commiserates with you good people who have come under the control of brigands. Circumstances compelled you. When he comes, he wants to rescue and clear you all and have you return to your previous work. If you each cast aside your weapons and heed his request to surrender, he will have the two characters for 'repatriated' written on your backs and send you back to your old occupations. The ones he wants to execute are Qian Neng, Luo Hunqing, Gou Huseng, Luo Fuzi, and Han Qiu, just these five. No such punishment will be imposed on ordinary people like you."

The spy replied, "This is just what we common people want. Since you know it and are going to rescue us, who won't dance when he hears the order!" Renhou then sent him on.

The next day Renhou's army went forth. When they reached Xuangliu, the local military commander Bai Wenxian came out to meet him. Looking about at the fortifications, Gao angrily said, "Qian Neng is an ordinary officer and his troops are farmers. You leveed all the people in the district, yet in more than a year you haven't been able to capture him. And now I see the stockades have been rebuilt like a prison. It would have been better to rest the people and ensure a plentiful food supply instead of nurturing the invaders and striving for achievement." He ordered him taken out and executed but spared him when the *Jianjun* (Military Supervisor) forcefully argued for leniency. He had the stockades flattened,

assigned 500 troops to defensive duties, and had all the others follow him. He also summoned the soldiers from the other fortified points who followed each other in and assembled.

When Qian Neng heard that Renhou would soon arrive, he had Hunqing establish five defensive positions west of Xuangliu and placed a thousand men in ambush at Yeqiaoqing. Having learned about it all, Renhou sent a man dressed in plain clothes into the bandits' midst to tell them just what he had earlier said to the spy. The rebels happily competed to abandon their armor and surrender.

Renhou then had the two characters written on their backs and had them return to speak with the soldiers in the fortified positions who hadn't yet surrendered. The remaining troops jostled each other to come out. When Hunqing desperately tried to race off, his troops seized him and turned him over to Renhou. Renhou then ordered the fortifications, weapons, and armor burnt, but spared the flags.

The next day Renhou said to those who had surrendered, "I initially wanted to send you all back but the people in the villages ahead don't know my intentions. I'd like to borrow you to go on ahead of us. Once you pass Chuankou and Xinjin, show the characters on your backs and inform them of what I've said. When you reach Yangong, you can go back."

Then he took up Hunqing's flags, assembled the men into units of fifty with a flag for each, and had them wave the flags and shout out [as they advanced], "Luo Hunqing has already been captured. A great army is about to arrive at your fortifications. If you quickly surrender as we did, you won't be held responsible."

When they reached Chuankou where Gou Huseng had established eleven strongpoints, all the men within surrendered. Astonished, Gou drew his sword and tried to stop them. However, they attacked him by throwing tiles and stones and captured him,

after which they presented him to Renhou. All five thousand troops surrendered.

The next day Renhou once again burnt the stockades and had the men who had surrendered take up the flags and race before him to Xinjin where Han Qiu had set up thirteen defensive points protected by stockades. When all his men surrendered, Qiu jumped into a deep moat and died. The officers wanted to burn the stockades but Renhou stopped them. "The men who have surrendered haven't eaten. First bring some provisions in, then burn them." The newly surrendered men cooked the food and ate it together with those who had previously surrendered. They talked happily and sang and played their instruments through the night.

The next day Renhou had the men from Xuangkou go back, then had those from Xinjin take the flags and race ahead, telling them, "When you enter Qiongzhou's border, you can disperse and return home." Luo Fuzi had set out nine defensive palisades at Yangong. When the troops there looked out in the distance and saw the brightness from the fires at Xinjin the night before Renhou was to attack, they expectantly waited to surrender all night without sleeping.

When Renhou reached Xinjin, Luo Fuzi escaped and ran off to join Qian Neng. He and Qian planned to mobilize all their troops for a desperate struggle but before they could finish their plans it was nearly dusk and the men who had surrendered at Yangong arrived. Qian Neng rode his horse around the stockades in a tour of inspection and wanted to send the army forth, but the troops wouldn't respond. After Renhou's main army arrived the next day, with much yelling the rebels seized Qian and Luo and knelt, weeping, before Renhou's horse. The army had only been in the field for six days but had already pacified the five rebels."

Feng Menglong said, "He only employed a single spy and

the rebels competed with each other to surrender. He used just a few surrendered soldiers, yet [the men] at the twenty-four defensive positions saw the trend of events and wanted to respond to his offer of amnesty. Must ears always be taken to achieve success?"¹¹³

Explication: In this case the captured spy really did become a turned agent in the classic conception, with the others being propaganda agents rather than disinformation agents, though Zhu would probably consider them turned agents as well.

19

Song *Taizu* manipulated Lin Renzhao.

According to the "Song Chronicles" in the *Zizhi Tongjian*: "General Lin Renzhao of the Southern Tang wanted to regain the territory they had lost north of the Yangtze River, but the king wouldn't listen. Wary of his awesome reputation, the Song bribed an attendant who stole a picture of Renzhao that they hung in an outer chamber. They then brought the Southern Tang ambassador in to view it. When Song *Taizu* asked, "Who is this," the ambassador replied, "Lin Renzhao." The king said, "He's going to surrender so sent this picture in first to establish his trustworthiness." Then he pointed to an empty guest house and said, "I am going to allot this to Renzao." After the ambassador returned to the Tang, he informed the king. Not knowing it was an estrangement ploy, the king had Renzao poisoned."

Zhu comments: This is the ancient wisdom Chen Ping

¹¹³ Referring to the early military practice of determining battlefield merit – and thus rewards – based on the ears of the dead. (Later writers and a few commanders who pointed out the many problems associated with the practice, including the danger of soldiers stopping in the midst of combat to claim an ear being themselves slain, recovery parties being attacked after a battle, and fights developing over who actually killed an enemy soldier, futilely railed against the practice. However, as Sunzi noted, rewards were key motivators in battle and couldn't be dispensed with.)

employed to estrange King Xiang and Fan Zeng. But the idea of changing the agency (*jian*) to a picture is innovative.

Explication: Han dynasty writers have suggested Chen Ping resorted to having the army's painter produce portraits of beautiful Han women that Chen then employed to persuade the *Shanyu's* consort beauties like them could displace her in his affection if he didn't release Han *Gaozu*. (The incident is summarily described in example 26, "The Xiongnu manipulated Han *Gaozu*," and 34, "Han *Gaozu* manipulated Yanzhi.")

20

Yue Fei manipulated Cao Cheng's spy.

The *Songshi* states: "Yue Fei responded to an imperial dictate to attempt a reconciliation with the bandits in Lingbiao, but [the bandit leader] Cao Cheng wouldn't submit. Fei therefore submitted a memorial, saying: "When these bandit groups are strong, they act brutally, but when their strength is constrained, they submit. If we don't eliminate them but instead hastily call for their submission, it won't be easy." Then he went into the area.

The army happened to capture one of Cheng's spies. After tying him up, they left him outside Yue's tent. When Fei came out to arrange the army's meals, an official openly reported, "our provisions are exhausted, what should we do?" Fei conspicuously responded, "We'll return to Chaling in a little while." After that he almost absentmindedly looked at the spy, then turned around and went back into his tent. He then secretly ordered the spy released.

When he calculated the spy had returned and made his report and that Cheng had certainly come forth in pursuit, he ordered their meal prepared, then they secretly proceed to Raoling. Before light they were already pressing the enemy's fortifications. Having been unexpected, the startled sentries yelled out, "Yue's army is here!"

Yue Fei took advantage of the situation and the enemy eventually collapsed, after which he seized the mountain passes in succession. Having ended the bandit's power, Fei said, "Now we can implement the order to reconcile."

Zhu comments: Without a turned agent, victory would have been impossible. Without Fei's victory, the invaders wouldn't have been diminished. If the bandits aren't diminished, they might be reconciled today but rebel tomorrow.

21

Li Chongze manipulated a Qidan spy.

According to Li Chongze's biography in the *Songshi*: "When a Qidan (Khitan) spy was captured, Chongze unbind his bindings and treated him generously. The spy said, "Yanjing's great king sent me."¹¹⁴ Then he gave Li the notes from his investigation of the resources, topography, and number of soldiers and horses along the border. Chongze said, "What you have gathered is erroneous." He then called the chief lictor and had him provide the correct information from their records, after which the spy asked that it be sealed and chopped. Chongze gave him a generous amount of gold and allowed him to depart. Before long, the spy hurriedly came back and returned the gold and the estimates which remained sealed as before. He then turned about and reluctantly informed Li about Liao's soldiers, horses, resources, passes, and terrain."

Zhu comments: Being generous with gold and tying them up with beneficence will cause every agent to turn and become our agent."

Explication: Zhu's optimism here in the face of warnings expressed throughout the later military writings about the potential unreliability of defectors and supposedly doubled agents is

¹¹⁴

Yanjing refers to the Qidan (Liao) capital at the moment.

somewhat puzzling. But, as noted in the foreword, he seems to have been untroubled by Li Jing's pronouncement about the danger information received from spies might be intended to balk well conceived operations.

22

Tian Dan subverted Yue Yi in the Warring States period.

The *Zhanguo Ce* states: "On behalf of King Zhao of Yan, Yue Yi led a coalition force of five states in attacking Qi. Although he subjugated more than seventy towns, three remained when King Zhao died. After King Hui ascended the throne, Tian Dan employed Qi double agents to cause the king to doubt Yue Yi and replace him as commander with Qi Que. Yue Yi fled to the state of Zhao.¹¹⁵ By deceiving Qi Que, Tian Dan suddenly defeated Yan's army and eventually regained the other seventy cities".

The *Shihji* states: "After King Zhao of Yan appointed Yue Yi as commander, he destroyed more than seventy towns in Qi. Eventually King Hui, who had previous differences with Yue Yi, ascended the throne. Qi's commander, Tian Dan, then released double agents in Yan to spread a rumor which said: "Now that the king is dead and only two towns remain unconquered, Yue Yi fears being executed and doesn't dare return. He gained fame for his attacks on Qi, but in actuality he wants to unite the troops, face south, and become Qi's king. But because the people of Qi haven't given their allegiance yet, he has slowed his attacks."

Thinking it to be true, the king of Yan had Qi Que replace Yue, which caused Yan's officers and troops to become estranged. Dan also released turned agents who said he "only feared that Yan's troops would dig up the graves outside the city and desecrate the bones of their ancestors." When Yan's soldiers acted accordingly,

¹¹⁵ Zhu abridges the account at this point.

Jimo's enraged inhabitants demanded they fight. They badly defeated Yan's army and recovered the more than seventy towns that had been lost."

Zhu comments: Tian Dan's use of turned agents against Yue Yi accords with Li Weigong's method for "estranging the capable" as described in the *Li Weigong Bingfa*. In our dynasty, Jin Chunchang employed this method in the second year of the Jiaqing reign period (1797) when the Miao in Guizhou's Nanlong district rebelled and surrounded the city. Jin Chunchang, the *Jingli* (Registrar) had an agent get the Miao to dig up people's graves. The angry inhabitants then assisted him in defending the city to the death.

Explication: The siege of Jimo lasted roughly five years because Yue Yi adhered to Sunzi's admonition not to foolishly incur casualties by assaulting fortified cities.¹¹⁶ The dispersal of the coalition's other members, leaving just Yan's forces to continue the siege, no doubt played a role in Yue Yi's reluctance. The *Shiji* usefully expands the conflict's background:

During the thirty-first year of King Nan of Zhou in the Warring States period [284 BC], the king of Yan ordered Yue Yi to attack Qi in alliance with armies from Qin, Wei, Han, and Zhao. They defeated Qi and King Min of Qi fled to Ju. When Yan learned that the king of Qi was in Ju, they united their forces

¹¹⁶ As articulated in the *Art of War's* "Planning Offensives." (Prior to the inception of explosive weapons, well ensconced defenders reportedly enjoyed a three or four to one advantage over any aggressor, provided they had a secure water supply and adequate provisions.) However, it should be noted that Sunzi equally counselled against engaging in prolonged warfare, stating in "Waging War," "A victory that is long in coming will blunt the soldiers' weapons and dampen their ardor. If you attack cities, their strength will be exhausted. . . . In military campaigns I have heard of awkward speed but have never seen any skill in lengthy campaigns."

and attacked it. Chu's general Nao Chi, who was in Ju, wanted to split Qi's territory with Yan, so he seized King Min, proclaimed his crimes, and executed him. However, he was quickly killed by the inhabitants who then stoutly defended the two cities of Ju and Jimo by resisting Yan's army for several months without flinching. Yue Yi besieged both cities and eventually the leader of Jimo was slain in battle. The inhabitants then acclaimed Tian Dan their commanding general. Shortly thereafter King Zhao of Yan died and was succeeded by King Hui.

Earlier, while he was still the heir-apparent, King Hui had frequently clashed with Yue Yi. Learning of this, Tian Dan released double agents throughout Yan who said, "Yue Yi and the new king of Yan have had their differences. Therefore, Yue Yi is afraid of being executed and wants to unite with Qi's forces to become king of Qi. Since the people of Qi won't submit to him, he is mounting a slow-paced attack on Jimo in the hope internal support will develop. The only thing that the people of Qi fear is that some other general will be sent, because then Jimo will be destroyed." Assuming it to be true, the new king of Yan dispatched Qi Jie to replace Yue Yi who then fled to Zhao. From this point on there was nothing but discord among Yan's generals and officers.

This extremely famous episode also appears as the historical example for the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*' topic of estrangement.¹¹⁷ The tactical discussion summarily advises:

¹¹⁷ Tian Dan's tactical inventiveness and Qi's refusal to yield also became

Whenever engaging an enemy in warfare, you should secretly await the appearance of discord among their rulers and ministers, for then you can dispatch spies in order to estrange them further. If a ruler and his subordinates become mutually suspicious and doubtful, you can employ elite troops to exploit the opportunity and inevitably gain your desires. A tactical principle from the *Art of War* states: "If they are united, cause them to be separated."¹¹⁸

The idea that discord must first exist before estrangement methods will prove effective, especially estrangement by forged letters, received further development in such later military writings as the *Caolu Jinglüe*.¹¹⁹

23

Qin estranged the Lord of Xinling.

According to the biography of the Lord of Xinling in the *Shihji*: "The Lord of Xinling's awesomeness caused the realm to quaver. Because the king of Qin was worried about him, he dispersed ten thousand catties of gold to find perverse retainers in Wei to deprecate Prince Wei (the Lord of Xinling) to the king who said, "The prince lived outside the state [in Zhao] for ten years and now he is a Wei general to whom all the feudal lords submit. They only listen to the prince, not your majesty. The prince wants to face south and become king at this time. Because they fear his awesomeness, they all want to establish him." Several times Qin also employed turned agents to offer phony congratulations by

the stuff of numerous tales and heroic legend.

¹¹⁸ A quotation from "Initial Estimations."

¹¹⁹ For example, in "*Lidi*," "Estranging the Enemy"

asking “whether the prince had ascended to the throne or not.” When the king heard these deprecations, he couldn’t avoid believing them. As a result, he had the Lord of Xinling replaced as commanding general. The prince then retired from the court on pretext of illness and spent long nights drinking strong wine with his guests and dallying with women. In the end he died from alcoholic excess.”¹²⁰

Zhu comments: Tian Dan’s double agents said that Yue Yi “wanted to face south and be king of Qi.” Qin had their double agents estrange the Lord of Xinling by saying, “he wants to face south and become king of Wei.” In addition, Qin bribed Zhao’s favored minister Guo Kai to act as an estrangement agent against Li Mu by saying he wanted to rebel. In the Han, Chen Ping estranged Xiang Yu’s general Zhong Limei by saying he wanted to eliminate the Xiang clan. Men with numerous accomplishments such as these wouldn’t have been shunted off if turned agents hadn’t harmed them. These cases all successfully employed the same technique.

Explication: The king of Wei’s surprise at the Lord of Xinling’s extensive knowledge of activities unfolding across the border in Zhao has already been noted in “Esteem Forerunners” in the theoretical section. However, having spent ten years in Zhao as an honored guest after he disregarded the king of Wei’s disinclination to aid Zhao when it was attacked by Qin (by filching the military tally necessary for command and even killing the actual commander when he resisted), his familiarity shouldn’t have been unexpected. Over the ten years he must have cultivated numerous “friends” and “retainers,” many of whom no doubt remained in Zhao. That he was ever able to return to Wei since he acquired the tally through the help of one of the king’s most favored concubines

¹²⁰ The Lord of Xinling, who received his fief from the king upon the latter’s ascension, was the king’s younger (half or step) brother. Early on he acquired a reputation for righteousness and virtue, and also cultivated men of varying ability.

in a frequently cited example of exploiting sex and beauty is puzzling, his failure to detect the estrangement campaign being mounted against him and take measures to thwart it inexplicable.¹²¹

24

Wei Xiaokuan of Northern Zhou manipulated Hulü Guang.

The *Qishu* states: “Northern Qi’s Hulü Guang, whose style name was “bright moon” (*ming yue*) was one of the era’s famous generals. In Northern Zhou, Wei Xiaokuan [509–580], who was responsible for the defense of Yulei, was wary of Guang’s martial power. Being something of a divination expert, Xiaokuan’s *Canjun* (Army Adjutant), Qu Yan, said to him, “Next year Qi’s court will certainly be marked by mutual killing.” Xiaokuan then had Yan create a ditty and ordered their spies to circulate it in the city of Ye. The ditty ran, “A ‘hundred pints’ (*hu*) will fly up to Heaven, a ‘bright moon’ will shine on Ch’ang-an.” It further went, “The high mountain, unpushed, will crumble by itself, the *hu* tree, unsupported, will establish itself.”

[In Northern Qi] Zu Ting then extended it with “When the blind old man takes the great axe off his back, the loquacious old woman won’t be able to talk.” Wei then had children chant it in the streets. When Mu Tipo heard it, he informed his mother Lu Lingxuan. She felt the loquaciousness was a criticism of her and the blind old man referred to Zu Ting. She therefore plotted with Mu to bring the ditty up with the empress and Hulü Guang was executed. After hearing about it, the Northern Zhou emperor granted an amnesty throughout his realm and began to think about eliminating

¹²¹ The concubine was willing to help the Lord of Xinling because he had arranged for the death of her father’s murderer, ending her painful three year quest for revenge. (For a reprisal of the incident and the role played by the vaunted Chinese skill of “knowing men,” see Sawyer, *Tao of Spycraft*, 111-116.)

Norther Qi. In the end he pacified it.”

Explication: This incident shows the power of rumor and prophetic verse throughout Chinese history while coincidentally illustrating the nature of Chinese word play. Numerous members of the powerful and famous perished because of well contrived couplets and several dynasties, including the Han and Tang, arose in part by exploiting omens and prophecies. In the Northern Zhou era, a *hu* was a large measure for corn and grain equal to “100 pints,” but was also part of Hulü Guang’s surname, so the “100 pints” would immediately be understood as referring to him. The “bright moon” of the first couplet, simply being his style name, reinforced the identification.

The second couplet turns upon the emperor’s surname being *gao*, translated as “high” in “high mountain,” and thus implies the emperor will perish. Its second half asserts that the *hu* tree – a name formed by adding a “wood” signifier to the Chinese character identical with Hulü Guang’s surname and similarly pronounced – would gain its position even without external support. Zu Ting, known for conniving and deceit, was indeed a blind old man, having lost his sight earlier while imprisoned under the Northern Qi regime. Mu became a high official through his mother’s powerful influence as she had been the young emperor’s wet nurse and had close connections with his mother, the empress. They were thus the perfect conduit for the implications that resulted in Guang’s death.

Although Wei Xiaokuan earned a reputation as an upright military administrator, he was also known for adroitly employing spies and subterfuge: “In the sixth century, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, general Wei Xiaokuan of the Northern Zhou succeeded in protecting the area about Yubi through his virtuous actions. He excelled in settling and governing the people and was able to gain their willing allegiance. All the spies he

dispatched into Northern Qi fully exhausted their abilities. Moreover, Xiaokuan also bribed many Northern Qi citizens with gold for information and reports, and thus knew all about Qi's actions and court affairs.¹²²

25

**There were those who employed *fan jian* in their affairs,
just as Dou Bobi manipulated Sui's *Shaoshi*.**

For Duke Huan's sixth year [706 BC], the *Zuozhuan* states: "After King Wu of Chu invaded Sui, he had an emissary seek an agreement and encamped the army at Xia to await the outcome. Sui dispatched their *Shaoshi*¹²³ to undertake the task. Dou Bobi said to the king, "Failing to gain our objective east of Han is our own fault. We deployed our three armies and had our mailed soldiers approach them in a martial manner. Having frightened them, [the states in the east] are cooperating in planning against us, making it difficult to divide them. Sui is the largest of the states in the east. If Sui grows stronger, it will certainly abandon the smaller states, which will benefit Chu. The *Shaoshi* tends to be excessive, so I suggest we display an exhausted army in order to make them feel powerful." The king had the army assume a decrepit appearance before bringing the *Shaoshi* in. When he went back, the *Shaoshi* requested permission to pursue Chu's army and the marquis of Sui was about to approve when Li Liang stopped him by saying, "Chu's decrepit appearance is designed to entice us."

Zhu comments: This was a case of making the substantial appear vacuous and the enemy's emissary becoming a turned agent.

¹²² "Agents," *Baizhan Qilüe* (*One Hundred Unorthodox Strategies*).

¹²³ The early commentators argue over whether *shaoshi* is a person's name or a title, something like "minor general."

Furthermore, the *Gongyang Zhuan* says,¹²⁴ “Zi Fan of Chu [once said], ‘Coral and feed gagged horses while you show fat ones to our guest.’ That was a case of making the vacuous look substantial. The Xiongnu’s subsequent [deception of] Han *Gaozu* and the Qidan’s [manipulation of] Ma Renjie were similar. These cases of making the vacuous look substantial through turned agents all employ Dou Bobi’s ancient knowledge.

26

The Xiongnu manipulated Han Gaozu.

According to the *Hanshu*: “When the Han army took advantage of their victory to pursue the Xiongnu, Han Gaozu heard that [the *Shanyu*] Mao Dun was staying at Shanggu. He dispatched men to observe them, but Mao concealed the stalwart fighters and fat oxen and horses and only displayed old and weak (soldiers) and emaciated livestock. Gaozu dispatched ten different observers, all of whom said the Xiongnu could be attacked. However, when the emperor again dispatched Li Jing to go and check, Jing returned and reported: “When two states are about to attack each other, it’s appropriate to try to magnify one’s appearance. But when I went this time, I only saw the emaciated and thin, old and weak. They must be [deliberately] displaying inadequacies and have troops hidden in ambush ready to fight for profit. It’s my ignorant opinion that they can’t be attacked.” The emperor didn’t listen and was indeed surrounded at Baideng.”

Explication: *Gaozu’s* campaign against a former ally who revolted, King Han Xin, carried the overconfident emperor far out into the steppe when he decided to strike Han Xin’s ally, the Xiongnu. According to the historical records, a massive campaign

¹²⁴ The *Gongyang Zhuan* is another of the famous Warring States commentaries to the *Zuozhuan*.

force of some 320,000 men had already been mobilized when *Gaozu* received Li Jing's report, prompting him to angrily curse Jing by saying "You son of the despicable Qi, you obtained your position through your tongue, yet you now wantonly use it to impede our army!" He then threw him into jail where Jing languished until *Gaozu* returned, freed him, and acknowledged his error.

The debacle is remembered not only for *Gaozu's* error, but also for the suffering endured by the troops in the bitter conditions for a week or more. Many perished from starvation and the cold, with a third of their number reportedly suffering severe frostbite. However, the most notable aspect was Chen Ping's innovative extrication of the Han emperor from certain death, though Zhu gives *Gaozu* credit for it in "Han *Gaozu* manipulated Yanzhi" that follows. The exact method remains unknown, but Chen apparently augmented the promise of great gifts to the Shanyü's consort by exploiting her jealousy and insecurity, making her fear she would be displaced by elegant Han princesses. (As already noted, commentators have suggested he had portraits of alluring women painted to solidify her fear.) Irrespective of the method, his achievement assured its inclusion in the later military compendia. But it also attracted the condemnation of many self-assured moral exemplars such as Huan Tan who termed his plan "skimpy, lowly, stupid, and odious."¹²⁵ However, Huan reluctantly conceded, "This sort of persuasion is uncouth but effective."

The tactical discussion from the *Hundred Unorthodox Strategies* chapter "The Strong in Warfare" (which similarly employs the incident as a historical illustration) states: "In general, if you want the enemy to engage your stronger, more numerous troops in battle, you should feign fear and weakness in order to lure

¹²⁵ Huan's disparaging comments, which are recorded in his *Xin Lun*, were subsequently cited by *Shihji* and *Hanshu* commentators to the episode.

them into it. When they carelessly come forth, you can suddenly assault them with your elite troops and invariably defeat their armies. A tactical principle from the *Art of War* states: ‘Although capable, display incapability.’”¹²⁶

27

Ban Chao manipulated the Shache.

The *Hou Hanshu* states: “The Protector-general for the Western Region, Ban Chao [32-102 AD], mobilized all the government troops in Yutian and nearby states to attack the Shache and Qiuci.¹²⁷ However, he conspicuously announced that as his troops were [too] few, he was going to dismiss them, then released a prisoner to return with the report. Elated, the king of the Qiuci didn’t make any preparations. Ban then secretly had elite cavalry race to the Shache whom they badly destroyed and forced to surrender.”

Explication: The eleven extensive campaigns out into the Western Region (Xinjiang) undertaken during Han Wudi’s reign (141–87) made the Silk Road possible, but only by subjugating and annihilating numerous steppe groups and tribal states and coercing the rest into acknowledging Chinese suzerainty. Military power, marriage alliances, and political acknowledgements were integral parts of the tribute system that supposedly interlocked them, but relations fluctuated between abject subservience and mutual exploitation and were always marked by an atmosphere of thinly

¹²⁶ The classic *Art of War* pronouncement found in “Initial Estimations” states, “Warfare is the Dao of deception. Thus, although capable, display being incapable. When committed to employing your forces, feign inactivity. When your objective is nearby, make it appear as if distant. When far away, create the illusion of being nearby.”

¹²⁷ These two peoples / tribal states were located on the periphery of the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang, the Shache on the west and the Qiuci in the north.

concealed animosity. Wang Mang's interregnum (6-25 AD) eroded Han control of the Western Region, allowing the resurgence of independent groups such as the two located on the periphery of the Tarim Basin that Ban Chao battles in this episode. In fact, commencing in 91 AD, through a combination of military conquests and astute governance Ban successfully restored Han dominance of the *Xi Yu* (Western area), a task similarly shouldered by his son after his death. In all, Chao spent some thirty years in this semiarid region, not just due to his mastery of inventive Chinese tactics, but also the administrative and extemporaneous methods required to combat the fiercely independent, highly mobile steppe peoples.

28

Liu Yao of Jin manipulated Shen Chong.

According to Qu Chong's biography in the *Jinshu*: "When Liu Yao pressed Chang'an, he again surrounded the northern region.¹²⁸ The *Taishou* (Prefect) Qu Chang sent a messenger to request aid from Qu Chong who responded by leading forth a force of infantry and cavalry. While they were still several tens of *li* from the city, the soldiers surrounding the city set fires whose smoke obscured the sky. They also released a turned agent who deceived Chong by saying, "The provincial city has already fallen and the fires have nearly finished burning it. The army shouldn't go there." Chong believed him and the troops fearfully scattered. Several days later Qu Chang suddenly broke out and went to Chang'an, after which the north succumbed."

¹²⁸ The charismatic Liu Yao reigned over the Northern Zhou which he founded from 318-329 during China's turbulent Sixteen Kingdoms period when virtually interminable conflicts fragmented the land and steppe peoples successfully occupied north China, displacing the Han inheritors. (For the era's history and its conflicts see *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 2, *The Six Dynasties*, 220-589.)

Qifu Qiangui of Western Qin manipulated Lü Yan.

According to the *Shiliuguo Chunqu* (*Spring and Autumn of the Sixteen Kingdoms*): “The Later Liang general Lü Yan attacked Qifu Qiangui, king of Western Qin, and badly defeated him.¹²⁹ Qiangui therefore released a turned agent who claimed, “After they collapsed, the troops fled east to Chengji.” Yan believed it and was about to pursue them there but his *Sima* (*Minister of War*), Geng Zhi, said, “The reporter looked up high and his complexion flushed. It’s certainly some sort of crafty plot. You cannot.” Yan didn’t follow [his advice] and when they encountered Qifu Qiangui was defeated in battle and died.”

Zhu comments: Ban Chao’s use of turned agents against Shache relied on openly declaring he was going to disperse [the army] while Qiangui manipulated Lü Yan by saying the troops had collapsed and run off. Both were strong but pretended to be weak in order to entice the enemy.

Those skilled in employing village agents other than the states of Qin (which employed Guo Kai) and Jin (which used lowly retainers) in the Warring States period include Hou Yuan who manipulated some prisoners.

According to the *Weishu*: “When Erhzhong Rong had the *Dadu* (Grand Protector) Hou Yuan conduct a punitive campaign against Han Lou [in 528 AD], only a small number of troops accompanied him. When someone asked Rong about this, he replied, “Hou Yuan’s strength lies in formulating strategies for exigencies.”

Hou Yuan amplified the army’s reputation and led several

¹²⁹ Two short lived kingdoms, Later Liang lasted from 386-403 and Western Qin, founded by the Xianbei’s Qifu clan, from 385-431.

hundred cavalry in a deep penetration before he encountered the enemy several hundred *li* away. . . ¹³⁰ Yuan then secretly set out ambushes and an attack at the rear to badly destroy Han Lou and capture 5,000 men. But he returned their horses and staves and let them go back into the city. When his staff all objected . . . Yuan said, "Because our forces are few, we cannot engage in a battle of strength. I'm using an unorthodox tactic to estrange them, after which we will be able to conquer them." When he calculated they had entered the city, he led the cavalry in a nighttime advance that brought them right up to the city gate before dawn. Han Lou indeed suspected the former prisoners were planning an interior response and fled. Hou's men pursued and captured him."

Explication: Zhu's classification of the released prisoners as village agents rather than turned agents is somewhat puzzling. Any fear on Han's part, clearly Hou Yuan's objective, was simply the product of his own suspicion, not any deliberate action on the part of the agents who were merely passive participants.

31

Yang Kan manipulated men who had surrendered.

According to the *Zhinang Bu*: "When Wei's *Cishi* (Prefect) in Yingzhou, Xiao Baoyin, rebelled and attacked Fengyi, the *Shangshu Pushe* (Vice Minister of State Affairs) Zhangsun Zhi conducted a campaign to suppress him. The *Zuocheng* Yang Kan said to Zhi, "Since the rebel's defense is solidly established, it would be better to proceed north and seize Puban, cross over the river and go west right into the heart of his territory. This will bring about Huazhou's release without any fighting and Chang'an's extrication will quickly follow."

Zhi replied, "Right now Xue Xiuyi is besieging Hedong and

¹³⁰

Here and below Zhu abridges the account.

Xue Fengxian is occupying Anyi. What will we do if the army is unable to advance?"

Kan said, "Hedong is administered from Puban. Since Xiuyi compelled the soldiers, officers, and inhabitants to race westward to besiege the city, their fathers and mothers, wives and children remain in their old towns. If one morning they hear an imperial army is approaching, they will all be worried and naturally collapse."

Zhi then had his son Yan and Zhu lead a cavalry force to cross over north of Hengnong and occupy Shizhuibi. Zhu loudly announced, "We'll stop here to wait for the infantry." Then, expecting the people would be inclined to go northward, he selected several people who had surrendered and sent them back to their villages, instructing them to wait for his signal of three fires atop the towers and similarly reply. Those who didn't respond would be considered rebels who would be subject to being attacked and slaughtered, with the officers and men being rewarded with whatever they seized. The village people quickly informed each other and even those who hadn't yet submitted raised signals on their towers. Within two nights the light from the fires extended several hundred *li*. Unable to comprehend what was happening, the besieging forces scattered and returned home. Xiuyi managed to escape and offered to surrender with Fengxian. When Zhi conquered Tongguan and then entered Hedong, Baoyin fled."

Explication: In contrast to the previous incident, the former prisoners were active participants even though their role was simply to spread information intended to achieve effects other than just indicating acquiescence. Nevertheless, while active rather than passive, their role wasn't the usual one of information gathering and furnishing local knowledge.

Zhao Chen manipulated Cen Zhang in the Ming.

The *Liuqing Rizha* states: "Cen Zhang was a local administrator in Guishun province. A knowledgeable and good strategist, he excelled at developing officers. Cen Meng in Tianzhou was his son-in-law. Meng was lawless so the *Dufu* (Governor General) reported he was planning to rebel. A rescript was issued that any local official able to capture or kill Meng would be promoted one rank and given half his land. His cohorts and supporters should also be executed. The *Duyushi* (Censor-in-Chief) Yao Mo, who was about to raise a force, thought that Meng Zhang might join in the plan, so he asked the *Duzhihui* (Regional Military Commissioner) Shen Xiyi about it. Shen knew that among his subordinates the *Qianhu* (Battalion Commander) Zhao Chen was on good terms with Zhang, so he summoned and queried him about a plan: "I've heard that Zhang's daughter has lost favor with her husband Meng and Zhang hates him. How can I go about having Zhang destroy Meng?"

Chen replied, "Zhang is very knowledgeable and slow to be suspicious. He certainly won't believe it if I speak about it directly. We can use a ploy to get him to do it but it would be hard to compel him."

Shen asked, "What sort of ploy?"

Chen replied, "Zhen'an and Guishun have been enemies for generations. If you send men to Guishun, Zhen'an will be suspicious, while if you send them to Zhen'an, Guishun will be suspicious. If you send me with a punitive force to Zhen'an, Zhang will certainly invite me in for questioning and the plan can be set in motion."

After Shen dispatched him in accord with the plan, Chen made a detour to visit Zhang's headquarters. Sitting down he sighed but when Zhang questioned him, didn't say anything. The next day,

Zhang plied him with wine, then deliberately questioned him: "Are you passing through here because I somehow failed in my responsibilities or have aroused the enmity of others and you're here to arrest me?" When Chen began visibly weeping, crying Zhang said, "Egad, lord Zhao, if I die today, I die. How can you bear to oppress me this way."

Chen responded, "We have the same thoughts though we have two different mouths. There's something urgent I must tell you. If you don't die today, I will."

"Why?" Zhang asked.

"I am following an order to conduct a punitive expedition in Tianzhou. It's been said that you have colluded with Meng because of your daughter. I am about to call up the troops in Zhen'an to attack you. If I don't tell you, you will certainly die. But if I speak about it and you balk my plans, I will die. That's why I weep."

Greatly startled, Zhang immediately exclaimed, "If it weren't for you today, my whole family would have perished!" After that he strongly persuaded Chen to remain in the government residence on pretext of illness while he urgently dispatched a messenger to the military headquarters to report on Meng's plans to rebel and indicate that because he was afraid he would be implicated, he was willing to take action himself. Shen granted him permission to do so and subsequently informed Yao Mo, at which point Mo began to focus his plans on attacking Meng.

Meng's son Bangyan was in charge of defending the strategic chokepoint at Gongshao. Zhang openly sent a thousand men to assist him who were to act as subversives, all of whom had one inch silk patches on their lapels for recognition, and secretly reported this to Shen. At that time the Tianzhou forces were defending the pass to the death so the imperial troops didn't dare advance. Shen then went alone and engaged in battle with them three

times while he had more than a thousand cavalry proceed by a circuitous route and come out on the side of the pass conspicuously waving their flags. The troops from Guishun yelled out, "The imperial troops have come by a side route!" When Tianzhou's army collapsed in panic, Shen took advantage of it to slay several thousand men and Bangyan died.

When Meng heard about the defeat, he wanted to kill himself, but Zhang enticed him to go to Guishun where he put him in separate quarters.

However, the other generals such as Hu Yaoyuan were jealous of Shen's achievement and wanted to use the 10,000 men under their command to pummel Guishun. Zhang learned about it in advance, so he dispatched a messenger with a hundred cattle and thousand pints of wine to meet the army thirty *li* away. He said to Yaoyuan, "Yesterday, when Meng was defeated, he was about to go by Guishun into Jiaonan. I attacked and he was struck in the eye by an arrow. He then went south but I don't know where. I worry about developments if you are hasty, but if you cleverly delay five days, he ought to be caught." Yaoyuan approved. Zhang then returned and deceived Meng by saying, "The imperial army has retreated but if you don't submit a memorial to report your actions, they won't be clear."

"Alright," Meng replied. "Do you have someone who can do the writing?"

Zhang then had someone prepare the draft for Meng, then pressed him to chop and seal it. Once he knew where Meng's seal was, he set some wine out to congratulate him, had music played, and treated him well. When the wine was half finished, Zhang raised a poisoned beaker which he presented to him, "The imperial army has been urgently searching for you so I can't hide you."

"You sneaky old bastard," Meng yelled out. He then drank

the poison and died.

Zhang chopped off his head and took it and the seal and raced by a side route to the military headquarters. He also executed another criminal and attached his head to Meng's body before throwing it to the army. The soldiers began noisily killing each other [to get it] and race to the military headquarters where Meng's head had already been hanging for a day. The generals were outraged and accused Zhang of being licentious and dissolute, while the government officials secretly harmed Yao Mo. It was said, "Meng hasn't really died. The dead person is actually a Taoist named Qian Yizhen." The *Yushi* (Censor) Shi Jin subsequently examined Mo for dereliction of duty and didn't report any of Shen Xiyi's or the others' achievements. Zhang quickly became a student of Taoism.

Zhu comments: The successful are slandered and slanderers are successful. It's always been thus. That is why men of good intention give up and raiders and bandits don't get punished.

33

Kong Yong's manipulation of Chen Duan was also a case of employing village agents.

The *Zhinang Bu* states: "A Xi was a member of the Miao in Guizhou's Qingping protectorate. He was brutal and arrogant but considered a hero among the Miao. He had an adopted son named A Ci whose physical strength far surpassed the ordinary. Ci could wear three layers of armor, wield three spears, and jump three to five *zhang*. The two men's schemes and courage supported each other as they rampaged across the border settlement. At the end of the year they took double the tax amount. Whenever travelers passed through the border, they immediately lured members of the Miao into robbing them. Officials who investigated and sought to make arrests invariably consulted Xi about their plans, which allowed him

to become important, gain heavy bribes, and arrange for distant Miao of no use to him to be arrested by falsely accusing them of being robbers in order to respond to his orders. As a result, far off Miao all feared him and sought his protection, making him king of the border area. After he began bribing the *Jianjun* (Army Inspector Censor) and *Zongshi* (Regional Preceptor) at year end, he became increasingly dissolute and willful and stirred up trouble from time to time between the officials and Miao in order to profit from the turmoil.

In the Ming's Hongzhi era [1488-1505], the *Duyushi* (Censor-in-Chief) Kong Yong conducted a tour of inspection in Guizhou and learned about the situation. He questioned the *Jianjun* and *Zongshi* but they both exculpated Xi. Realizing he couldn't work with them, Yong went to Qingping to recruit some good men from among the subordinate officials and obtained the *Zhihui* (Commander) Wang Tong whom he treated generously. When he inquired about the area's affairs, Tong compliantly replied to every query but just didn't mention Xi. Yong said, "I have heard that in these affairs A Xi is the major figure, so why have you kept him secret and not spoken about him?"

Tong didn't reply but when forcefully questioned, said: "It would be fortunate were to speak about it and you could do something. But if not, your prestige will suffer, and my family will be exterminated."

Laughing, Yong said, "If you talk about it, you won't need to worry about nothing being done." Xi then openly arrayed the affair from start to end. The duke said, "Who facilitates Xi's bribing of the officials?"

Tong replied, "The *Zhihui* (Commander) Wang Zeng and the *Zongqi* (Platoon Commander) Chen Rui. You'll have to motivate these two men to make it possible."

"Fine," Yong replied. The next day he summoned the staff to a meeting in the administrative hall and said, "I'd like to have an official make a tour of inspection. If you'll all come before me, I'll select someone." Then, pointing to Zeng, "You'll do for now."

When everyone had gone out, Yong pointedly asked, "Why are you connected with the brigands?" Startled, Zeng bowed repeatedly. Yong said, "You are the intermediary when A Xi annually bribes the high officials. If you dispute this and don't submit, I will execute you." Zeng knocked his head to the floor but didn't dare reply.

Yong said, "Don't be afraid. Can you seize A Xi for me?" Zeng then described the circumstances of Xi and Ci's strategic and physical cooperation. Then he added, "If you can get one other official involved in this affair, it can succeed."

When Yong ordered him to name the person, he said, "No one would be better than Chen *Zongqi*." Yong replied, "Please bring him in with you."

In a little while Zeng came in with Rui, the man he selected, and Yong interrogated him just as he had Zeng. Rui kept eyeing Zeng who then said, "Don't lie. He already knows all about our affairs. Just exert yourself to tell him all about everything." Rui then discussed the difficulty of the situation.

Yong said, "You only need to lure him outside of the post, then I will be able to seize him myself." Rui agreed and went out.

The Miao customarily enjoyed bull fights. Rui therefore sought out a good ox and had him led out onto the road. He then hid a hundred men around the ox in a shallow depression before going into the border checkpoint to see Xi. Xi asked, "How come you haven't been here in a long time?"

Rui replied: "The *Dutang* (Executive Censor) has newly arrived so I haven't had any spare time."

"What's the *Dutang* like?" Xi asked.

"He's a weak fellow, incapable of doing much."

"I heard that when he was in Guangdong, he became famous for killing thieves. How can you say he is incapable?" asked Xi.

"It was someone with the same surname, not this man," replied Rui.

"How's the bribery going?" Xi asked.

"Slowly at the moment. Why should we fill his place with gold right away?"

Xi then poured some wine for Rui and they began to talk about bull fighting. Rui said, "Coming here, I happened to see an ox on the road. It was really gigantic. Why not arrange a contest with your ox?"

"Definitely. I want to buy it," said Xi.

"The ox seller isn't a local person so I'm afraid it will be difficult to get him to come into the post," said Rui.

"We'll just go see it," replied Xi. He wanted Rui to go with him. Rui said, "We really ought to lead your ox out for a fight with him in order to decide which one is superior."

By nature, the Miao believe in ghosts so both action and inaction have to be divined. Xi divined with a chicken, but it wasn't auspicious. He also said he had dreamt there was a great net over his body which he thought wasn't auspicious. However, Rui said, "You dreamt you got a fish in your net. The ox will certainly be yours."

They led the ox and some cavalry and went out. When they reached the place, he saw the ox and liked it. Just when the two oxen were about to clash, it was suddenly reported an inspector had arrived. Rui said, "Do you know him? It's Commander Wang."

Laughing, Xi said, "How lucky old Wang is to have this glorious position. When he arrives I'll ridicule him."

Rui said, "When an inspector travels in a border area, you

should go out to meet him, especially when he is familiar.” Laughing, Xi and Ci were about to ride off on their horses when Rui said, “Gentlemen, please leave your sabers behind. If he sees them, it won’t be advantageous.”

Both Xi and Ci got rid of their sabers and went to see Zeng. Wang Zeng then loudly asked, “How is it that you high ranking officials aren’t preparing the headquarters but are strutting about out here?” Thinking he was joking with them, Xi and Ci put him off. Zeng then very angrily said, “Do you think I can’t capture you two?” When they smiled arrogantly, Zeng yelled out and the troops in ambush arose from the shallow depression to capture Xi and Ci. Ci struck and injured several tens of men with his fists but in the end they tied him up. They then raced to Guiyang to see Kong Yong who had them torn apart in the marketplace. For the first time the border was peaceful.”

Zhu comments: Yong’s capture of the bandit leaders in Guizhou can teach us about future affairs. He didn’t need to trouble the army, expend provisions, or perturb himself, he just used two village agents to capture the two leaders. If he hadn’t used Wang Zeng and Chen Rui as village agents, they would have acted as ears and eyes for the thieves and it wouldn’t have been easy to capture the leaders. Right now, the bandits have many ears and eyes among the local security forces. This is why last year, when I extirpated the bandits in Puan, the bandit leader Sun A De at Qiandi and the Baisha leader Liu A Run had a lot of them because their ruthless organization was flourishing. In both cases I did what was unexpected and used plots to capture them.

Explication: Both Rui and Zheng could be considered triple agents because they had been working for Xi and Ci, though this isn’t one of Zhu’s categories.

Apart from Zhang Yi who manipulated Jin Shang and Zheng Xiu, others who were skilled at using internal agents in the Warring States period include Han Gaozu who played Yanzhi.

The *Shihji* states: “*Gaozu* was surrounded by the Xiongnu *Shanyu* Mao Dun at Baideng so he employed an agent to deliver generous gifts to Yanzhi. Yanzhi then said to Mao Dun, “Rulers shouldn’t cause difficulty for each other. Even if you gain the Han, being *Shanyu*, in the end won’t be able to dwell there. In addition, the Han king enjoys spiritual assistance. You should investigate that.” Mao Dun then released a corner of the siege, whereupon Han *Gaozu* ordered his warriors to proceed there with their arrows drawn upon their bows. They then managed to go straight out the open corner and finally reunite with the main army. Mao Dun withdrew his forces.”

Explication: For some reason, this highly condensed version of the incident at Baideng previously reprised in “The Xiongnu manipulated Han *Gaozu*” doesn’t mention Chen Ping’s role while bribery has become the sole motivation. It’s as much a case of *meijen ji* (美人機) – the ploy of beautiful women – as the employment of an internal agent, though in Zhu’s extended conception Mao Dun’s consort can be called a turned agent because she essentially betrayed her husband, balking his plans.

In the Sui, Heruo Bi manipulated the men from Chen.

The *Suishu* states: “[In 588 AD] Heruo Bi, who was planning to attack Jingkou, bought a lot of boats from [the state of] Chen and concealed them. He also bought fifty or sixty old boats and left them in a shallow moat. Chen’s agents observed them and concluded Sui

really didn't have any [usable] vessels. In addition, when he had the defenders deployed along the Yangtze River assemble at Guangling, they set out a great many flags and their encampment covered the open area. Chen thought a large Sui army had arrived and urgently mobilized their soldiers in preparation. After a while they knew [it wasn't for an attack] and didn't continue their strict preparations. Sui's army then crossed the Yangtze without Chen's forces becoming aware of it."

Zhu comments: This was an example of something the enemy observed being used as a turned agent. First Bi displayed vacuity, then it became substantial.

Explication: The Sui emerged out of the Northern Zhou under Yang Jian, a leader for whom Heruo Bi provided an array of strategies and served as an early commander, including in this incident in which the short-lived Chen dynasty, the last remaining obstacle to Sui domination, was conquered. Unfortunately, despite his acumen and contributions, Bi suffered the fate of many prominent generals, entanglement and execution.

Displaying a decrepit fleet was a case of minimization since concealed boats were ultimately used to cross the river.¹³¹ However, prominently assembling a massive army and making a majestic display of forces to subvert an opponent's awareness is a particularly unorthodox ploy because it contravenes the normal approach of "being capable but appearing incapable" to realize the ideal of being about to act but showing inactivity.

¹³¹ Chen's intelligence agents were seriously remiss in not knowing about the purchase of the boats nor, subsequently, where they were concealed.

During the Tang, the Qidan manipulated Ma Renjie.

The *Tangshu* states: "During the empress' reign [691-705],¹³² [the Qidan generals] Li Jinzhong and Sun Manrong broke into a military camp and imprisoned several hundred people. When they heard that Ma Renjie and others were about to arrive, they ordered the guards to deceive the prisoners by saying, "Our families are cold and hungry and unable to survive. When the imperial forces arrive, we will surrender." One day they also brought out some prisoners and fed them gruel. To comfort them, they added, "We lack food to feed you but can't bear to kill you. How about if we release you and allow you to go back?" When they all prostrated themselves and begged for their lives, they allowed them to go.

After they reached Yuzhou and reported their experience in detail, the soldiers and officers enthusiastically wanted to go forth. When they reached Huangluan Valley, the bandits had the aged among them seek refuge with the imperial army and placed old cattle and emaciated horses along the side of the road. Renjie and the other commanders then abandoned their infantry and advanced with just their cavalry, whereupon enemy forces lying in ambush mounted a slashing attack that captured Renjie and the others. The entire army perished."

Zhu comments: What do the Xiongnu and Qidan know about military tactics? Yet, their use of turned agents was thorough. Han *Gaozu* and Ma Renjie were both trapped by [foreign] agents. Recently the local bandits in Qian (Guizhou) and the Tou Miao have also been very crafty. I advise our commanders to send agents forth among them and not get trapped by their agents."

¹³² That is, Empress Wu Zetian, the only fully titled and acknowledged female emperor in China's lengthy history.

Some men were skilled at employing living agents.

37

Other than Zi Gong and Chen Ping, those who employed the worthy and capable as living agents include Li Zhi in the Spring and Autumn period who used them against Xing.

According to the *Zuozhuan*'s chronicle for Duke Xi's 24th year (636 BC): "Wei's ruler wanted to attack Xing but Li Zhi said, "If we don't get control of their defenses, the state cannot be taken." The commentary states, "He requested permission to be a spy (*jian die*) and went in advance with his brothers to Xing to seek employment."

Zhu comments: This then is Sunzi's "living agent" but the intent is deeper and more difficult. The ancients regarded the *Zuozhuan* as a military work with good reason. That's why famous generals of old such as Guan Zhuangmu (Guan Gong), Du Zhennan (Du Yu), and Yue Zhongwu (Yue Fei) all liked to read it.

Explication: Zhu's idea of a living agent differs somewhat from Sunzi's simple definition which states "living agents return with their reports." In this case Li Zhi and his brothers weren't spies seeking information, but subversives who were intent on undermining Xing's government and defenses preliminary to creating havoc at the appropriate moment. Other than Yi Yin, who was a phony defector intent on gathering information but reportedly tried to cripple the Xia's military response, they are the first "sleepers agents" visible in China's historical writings.

38

Zhu zhi Wu manipulated Duke Mu of Qin.

According to the *Zuozhuan*'s chronicle for Duke Xi's 30th year (630 BC): "The marquis of Jin and the duke of Qin besieged

[the city-state] of Zheng [on the pretext of] it having been disrespectful to Jin and inclining to Chu. Jin's army encamped at Hanling and Qin's at Fannan. Yi zhi Hu said to the Duke of Zheng, "The state is in danger. If you send Zhu zhi Wu to see Qin's ruler, their army will certainly withdraw." The duke followed his suggestion.¹³³

Zhu zhi Wu went down a rope [hanging from the city wall] that night and saw the Duke of Qin to whom he said, "With Qin and Jin besieging Zheng, we know we are doomed. If Zheng's destruction would be of any benefit to you, would I dare bring the matter up? But you know that crossing another state to subjugate someone is difficult. Moreover, what's the use of destroying Zheng if it only doubles your neighbor? Your neighbor's thickness is your thinness. If you allow Zheng to be the master of the eastern roads, whether your baggage is coming or going, it won't have any difficulty and you won't suffer any harm.

In addition, you once were generous to Jin's ruler [Duke Wen]. In the morning he promised you the towns of Jiao and Xia once he recovered the state but built defensive earthworks that night, as you well know. What limit will Jin recognize? When it has made Zheng its vassal in the east and wants to increase its fief in the west, where will it get it if not Qin? Reducing Qin to profit Jin is something you ought to ponder." Pleased, the duke concluded an alliance with Zheng and returned."

Zhu comments: Zhu zhi Wu's estrangement of Qin and Jin in the Spring and Autumn was the same as Zhang Mengtan's estrangement of Han and Wei. But Zhu zhi Wu just brought about the departure of Qin's army, whereas Zhang Mengtan estranged Han and Wei in order to eliminate Zhi Bo. With the passage of time, the objective of employing *fan jian* became increasingly perverse.

¹³³

In the original *Zuozhuan* account he is reluctant to do so.

Explication: Having been caught up in a battle for succession, in a highly romanticized tale Duke Wen of Jin wandered about in exile for some nineteen years, surviving only through the beneficence of other rulers, including in Qin and Chu. The reforms he instituted after he returned coupled with considerable ruthlessness made Jin powerful enough to achieve hegemony over the realm before he died.

39

Hua Yuan manipulated Zi Fan.

According to the *Zuozhuan*'s chronicle for Duke Xuan's 15th year (594 BC): "Chu's army assaulted Song for nine months but Song wouldn't submit. The army was about to depart from Song, but the high official Shen Shushi said, "We should build huts and return to farming. ¹³⁴ Song will then certainly submit to our demands." The prince of Chu followed his suggestion.

Terrified, the people of Sung had Hua Yuan penetrate Ch'u's encampment one night. He climbed up onto Zi Fan's bed, then roused him and said, "My ruler has ordered me to report our extremity, saying that 'In our debilitated city we are exchanging our children and eating them and cracking the bones for kindling. Nevertheless, the city is unable to submit to any covenant forced upon us in our debilitated condition. If you depart thirty *li*, we will accept your edict.'"

Greatly afraid, Zi Fan made an agreement with him and then informed the prince. After they withdrew thirty *li*, Song and Chu concluded a peace accord."

¹³⁴ There are various interpretations for this sentence, but he was obviously suggesting that they erect a more permanent looking encampment and assign part of their troops to the task of farming in order to provide for their food requirements and thereby cower Song with their determination.

Zhu comments: In this case Song employed Hua Yuan as an agent. In his discussion of employing agents Sunzi says, "You must first know the names of the enemy's chief generals and their attendants and gatekeepers and have our agents know them all so they can search them out when appropriate."¹³⁵ Only because Hua Yuan was able to know everything in advance could he enter the enemy's camp at night and not be obstructed by the attendants or door guards, but instead directly ascend the general's bed. Because of Zi Fan's fear, Sun was able to coerce an agreement.

Explication: China has a lengthy history of employing strongarm techniques and assassins to gain political objectives. Even the *Art of War's* chapter on "Employing Agents" already points out the necessity of knowing certain things so assassins can complete their assignments. Scholarly opinion in later centuries would debate whether a coerced agreement must be observed, but in this case, Chu chose to adhere to it.

40

**In the Warring States period, Zhang Mengtan
manipulated Han and Wei.**

Zhu comments: For Zhang Mengtan's estrangement of Han and Wei, which is clearly visible in the *Zhanguo Ce*, see the earlier discussion [in the theoretical portion].

41

Zhang Qixian manipulated the Qidan in the Song.

The *Songshu* states: "When Zhang Qixian was administering Daizhou, the Qidan (Khitan) invaded. Qixian dispatched a

¹³⁵ As quoted by Zhu, the last line differs slightly from standard editions of the *Art of War* in which it simply says, "You must have our spies search out and learn them all."

messenger with the hope that General Pan Mei [925-991] would bring his army and join in resisting them. The Qidan captured the emissary but one from Pan Mei arrived who said, 'When the army reached Boxing, we received a secret missive from the emperor forbidding us to engage in battle. The army has therefore returned to the province.'

Qixian said, 'The enemy knows Pan Mei was going to come but doesn't know he has turned back.' That night he dispatched two hundred soldiers who each carried a flag and a bundle of faggots to a point thirty *li* southwest of the province and set out a blazing array. When the Qidan saw flags in the glow of the far off fires, they concluded the joint force had already arrived and withdrew somewhat in fright. Qixian had earlier deployed 2,000 men in ambush at Shangdeng Zhai who intercepted and struck them, destroying the Qidan forces."

Zhu comments: Zhang Qixian's exploitation of the captured emissary and Han Shizhong's manipulation of Wei Liangchen [which follows] are both cases of exploiting strategic situations to employ turned agents. Although the incidents differed, the crux was the same. They both excelled at exploiting opportunities and reacting to change.

Explication: Without intending it, Qixian's letter ultimately functioned as a turned agent, though only because he astutely turned what could have been an inimical situation to advantage.

42

Han Shizhong manipulated Wei Liangchen.

According to the "Song Chronicles" in the *Tongjian*: "While Han Shizhong¹³⁶ was encamped at Zhenjiang, [in 1129] armies from

¹³⁶ Han Shizhong [1089-1151] was one of a handful of aggressive generals who battled the Jin to preserve the Southern Song.

Jin and Liu Yu's [kingdom of Da Qi] invaded the south at the same time by separate routes. The [Southern] Song emperor personally sent handwritten instructions ordering Han to make plans to advance and seize them. Han directed the army in crossing the Yangtze River while he had the *Pai Tongzhi* (Assistant Commander-general) Jie Yuan defend Gaoyou and await Jin's infantry forces. Meanwhile, he personally led the cavalry to Dayi in order to oppose the enemy's cavalry and had the trees cut down behind them to block the roads and cut off their route of return.

It happened that Wei Liangchen, whom the emperor was sending as an ambassador to Jin, visited. Han had the equipment for cooking their food removed and deceived Liangchen by saying they had been ordered to shift their camp to defend the river. Liangchen then urgently departed. When Shizhong calculated Liangchen had crossed the border, he mounted his horse and ordered everyone in the army to follow his whip. He then led the army to Dayi, ordered them to deploy into five arrays, and set out more than twenty ambushes, instructing them to arise and strike when they heard the sound of the drum.

After Liangchen reached Jin's headquarters, the officials asked about the imperial army's activities and he replied by telling them about everything he had seen. When Nie'erh Bodong heard that Shizhong had withdrawn, he happily led his army to Jiangkou, about five *li* from Dayi. Once the deputy general Dabo Ye led a 1,000 cavalrymen east past the five arrays, Shizhong signaled with a small flag for the drums to be beaten and the troops waiting in ambush rose up on all four sides. Their flags became intermixed with Jin's and Jin's army became disordered, which allowed the imperial army to advance by intervals. All the soldiers in the Song *Beiwei* Army employed long axes to strike the enemy's cavalry in

the chest and chop the horses' feet.¹³⁷ Wearing heavy armor, the enemy fell into the mud. Shizhong then signaled his elite cavalry to crush them from all four sides. Jin's soldiers and horses all perished and Shizhong eventually captured Dabo."

Explication: This incident unfolded in 1134 AD, right at the beginning of the southern Song after the Jin forced the effete government south across the Yangtze River. Being a proponent of accommodation, Wei Liangchen was the perfect candidate to spread disinformation and be a "doomed" or "expendable" agent in Sunzi's conception, though obviously not Zhu's as he is identified as a turned agent in the immediately previous commentary.

43

Liu Qi's employment of Cao Cheng was an example of skillfully employing turned agents.

The *Dongxuan Bilu* states: "[In 1140 AD], by the time Liu Qi heard that Jin's forces were moving southward, they had already reached Dongjing. Liu raced to Shunchang where he ordered his generals to separately defend the city gates and gave instructions to the scouts and observers. He also recruited local people to act as spies (*jiandie*). Six days later the Jin army arrived at the city.

Liu Qi's call for spies brought him two men, Cao Cheng and another man, whom he informed: "I'm going to send you out as agents. If you are successful, you will be well rewarded. If you just say what I tell you, the enemy certainly won't kill you. I'm going to put you into the cavalry patrols so when you encounter the enemy, pretend to fall off your horses and be captured. When the enemy commander asks what sort of man I am, say, "The son of a Taiping

¹³⁷ These techniques were developed by Song commanders so that China's primarily infantry forces might overcome the cavalry's advantages of speed and height.

border commander who likes music and women. Thinking our two states will soon conclude a peace treaty, the court assigned him to defend Dongjing, but his plans only involve leisure and entertainment.”

Events unfolded as predicted and the men spoke as instructed. Elated, the Jin commander Wuzhu set aside their mobile catapults. The next day, when Qi ascended the wall and saw the two men coming, he lowered a rope for them to climb up. The enemy had provided a letter calling for him to change his allegiance which they had tied onto the mens' shackles, but Liu immediately burned it as he feared it would mislead the army.

Liu dispatched general Geng Xun to provoke a clash with Wuzhu. Wuzhu angrily said, “With my strength, I merely have to employ my whip to destroy your city.” Xun replied, “We’re not just inviting you to fight, we’re certain you won’t dare cross the river. We’re even willing to provide you with five floating bridges so you can cross for a major battle.”

While the enemy was crossing over the next morning, Liu Qi dispatched men upriver to poison the Ying River and nearby grassland and cautioned his own forces not to drink from the river even if they were dying of thirst. Anyone who drank would have their families executed.

It happened to be the hottest part of summer. The invaders had come far without taking their armor off during the day or night. In contrast, Qi’s forces had been resting in rotation and grazing their sheep and horses below the walls. Meanwhile, any Jin soldiers or horses that got thirsty and drank from the river or ate the grass suddenly became sick.

In the cool morning air Qi had his troops remain inactive, but when it finally reached midafternoon and the enemy’s *qi* became exhausted, he suddenly sent several hundred men out the west gate

to engage in battle. Shortly thereafter, he separately sent several thousand out the south gate under strict orders not to yell but attack them with their sharp battle-axes. The enemy was badly defeated.”

Zhu comments: First he employed tuned agents to entice them, then angered them to draw them forward, after which he set out poison to slay them, and labored them in the heat in order to make them negligent. Finally, he employed unorthodox tactics for the attack. Victory was predictable.

Explication: Fought under the direction of Liu Qi [1098-1162], just like the famous clash at Jimo, the battle of Shunchang quickly became a source of national pride and the stuff of legend.¹³⁸ By manipulating the enemy and resorting to highly unorthodox measures, 18,000 resolute Song fighters and several thousand highly motivated inhabitants¹³⁹ turned back a massive force that numbered at least 80,000 under the distinguished but ruthless Jin commander Wuzhu. Qi’s use of poison was unusual, as was his exploitation of night and thunderstorms to have sappers penetrate the enemy’s camp and raise havoc. However, the two phony cavalymen would normally be considered living or local disinformation agents – or potentially doomed agents (who just happened to be spared) – rather than turned agents even though they appeared to be betraying the Song in providing information about Liu Qi. Nevertheless, as previously, Zhu’s expanded concept of “turned agent” readily encompasses them.

¹³⁸ For an extended consideration of the battle and the unusual use of poison and other techniques, see Sawyer, *Fire and Water: The Art of Incendiary and Aquatic Warfare in China*, 335-39.)

¹³⁹ Wuzhu had sworn all the men would be slain, the women enslaved, and the town’s entire wealth seized.

Huang Gai from Wu manipulated Emperor Wu of Wei

According to Zhou Yu's biography in the *Wuzhi*: "[In 208 AD] Sun Quan [emperor of Wu] dispatched a united force under Zhou Yu and Liu Bei to attack Cao Cao (Emperor Wu of Wei). Before they clashed at Chibi, Yu's lieutenant general said, "Right now the invaders are numerous while we are few, so it will be hard to resist them very long. But I noticed that Cao Cao's battle ships are joined together and connected fore to aft so we can set them afire and drive them off." He then took several tens of walled warships, filled them with kindling and grass, poured oil over the piles, covered them with cloth, and affixed his command flags. Before this he had already sent a letter to Cao Cao to deceive him into thinking he wanted to surrender."

(According to the *Jiangbiao Zhuan*), Gai's letter said, "I have been well treated by Sun Quan, frequently served as a commander, and been generously rewarded. But when I examine the realm's geostrategic situation, it's obvious that using indigenous mountain peoples from the six commandaries east of the Yangtze to oppose the central states' mass of a million is a case of the few not being a match for the many. All the officers and officials in the east, whether they are smart or stupid, know they cannot be employed [in this way]. Only Zhou Yu and Lu Su remain unenlightened. My sincere plan at this moment is to give my allegiance to you. You can easily overthrow all those that Yu currently supervises. On the day our fronts clash, I will be at the front and intend to change at that point. My loyalty is near."

When Cao Cao received the letter, he made a special effort to see the messenger and secretly question him, then gave him verbal instructions, saying, "I only fear you are trying to deceive me. If you are sincere, you will be given rank and rewards that exceed whatever

you've experienced."

Explication: One of China's epochal battles, Wu's astonishing victory at Red Cliffs (Chibi) on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River temporarily blocked Cao Cao's conquest of southeastern portion of the realm and preserved the possibility of its division into the Three Kingdoms. However, from Cao Cao's perspective, it was an ignominious debacle because his mighty armada of 2,000 vessels and reportedly 100,000 soldiers and 70,000 sailors were largely destroyed by a paltry force of perhaps 20,000 in the incendiary attack and subsequent ambushes on his retreating forces. Moreover, it's almost inexplicable because Cao Cao wasn't just an experienced commander and wily strategist, he had studied and reputedly edited Sunzi's *Art of War*, as well as written a commentary that provides the first known explication (other than Sun Bin's *Military Methods*), as well as a preface that still exists.¹⁴⁰ No matter how enticing Huang Gai's offer, discretion should have required him to accept Gai's surrender some distance off in case he proved to be a false defector. Instead, the strong wind that reportedly arose rapidly propelled the boats right into the heavily anchored fleet on the opposite bank of the river and fanned the flames that destroyed the fleet.¹⁴¹

45

In the Later Shu, Li Xiong manipulated Piao Tai.

The *Jinshu* states: "The director general (*Mu*) for Yizhou, Luo Shang, dispatched lieutenant general Kui Bo to attack the Shu

¹⁴⁰ For a discussion of Cao Cao's own use of innovative tactics see Sawyer, *The Tao of Deception: Unorthodox Warfare in Historic and Modern China*, 137-153. For his rise and the early history of the Three Kingdoms period, see *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 2: *The Six Dynasties*, 220-589, 255-78.

¹⁴¹ For an analysis and reconstruction of the clash at Chibi, see Sawyer, *Fire and Water: The Art of Incendiary and Aquatic Warfare in China*, 55-59.

rebel leader Li Xiong at Picheng.¹⁴² Xiong recruited a Wudu man named Piao Tai, whipped him until blood was visible, and sent him to deceive Luo Shang by saying he wanted him to act as a subversive and would signal with a fire. Shang believed him, mobilized all his elite forces, and dispatched Kui Bo and others to follow Tai in attacking Xiong.

Xiong's general Li Xiang set ambushes out along the road. [At the city], Tai used a long ladder to climb up [onto the wall] and raise a fire. When they saw the flame arise, Bo's forces fought with each other to ascend the ladder. Tai also let down several ropes that more than a hundred men from Shang's army used to come up, then killed them all. Xiong released troops to attack them from within and without, badly destroying Shang's army."

Zhu comments: The novel *Sanguo Yanyi* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) talks about how Huang Gai participated in a *kuroji* ("ploy of suffering flesh"). However, when we investigate the incident in the actual histories, such as in "Huang Gai's biography" and "Zhou Yu's biography" in the *Wuzhi*, they only speak about a deceitful surrender, nothing about a beating. When we examine the record of Piao Tai's affair in the *Jinshu*, it speaks exactly the same way about *kurouji* as in Huang Gai's episode in the *Yanyi* (*Romance*). I think they transplanted the *Romance's* account and Tai's experience onto Gai. Later, Zhong Shiheng's treatment of the barbarian general [reprised below] also employed this method.

¹⁴² Liu Xiong (274-334), a highly effective commander in Sichuan who renounced other affiliations to establish the state of Cheng, one of the sixteen highly fragmented successors that emerged from the Western Jin during the "Sixteen States period" (304-439), ruled from 303-334.

Daxi Wu of Western Wei manipulated Qi Shenwu.

The *Weishu* states: “Eastern Wei’s commander-in-chief Qi Shenwu [Gao Huan] led the army to race to Shayuan.¹⁴³ Emperor Zhou Wen-ti, Western Wei’s grand commander, then dispatched Daxi Wu to observe them. Wu and the three accompanying cavalry changed their clothes into the enemy’s uniforms. When the sun was setting, they dismounted several hundred paces away from the enemy’s position. After secretly acquiring the army’s password, they remounted their horses and went about the camp as if they were on night patrol. They even badly beat anyone who broke the regulations and managed to acquire complete information about the enemy’s situation which they reported to Zhou Wendi.”

Zhu comments: Wu based his method on Feng Yi. Wang Jun also employed it. The *Hanshu* states, “When Feng Yi battled the Red Eyebrows,¹⁴⁴ [in 27 AD] he had some stalwart officers change their uniforms to be the same as the Red Eyebrows and lie in ambush by the side of the road. Early in the morning 10,000 Red Eyebrows attacked Feng Yi’s forward contingent as they had concluded it was weak. Then, when they employed all their forces to attack, Yi released his main force for a major battle. Late in the day, when the rebel’s *qi* had declined, the troops lying in ambush arose. Once their uniforms became intermixed with those of the rebels, the Red Eyebrows collapsed in fright because they couldn’t distinguish the Han soldiers.¹⁴⁵ Yi then pursued, attacked, and badly destroyed

¹⁴³ Qi Shenwu was the honorific accorded the prominent general and kingmaker Gao Huan (496-547). This incident is found in Daxi Wu’s biography.

¹⁴⁴ The “Red Eyebrows” were a millennium movement that arose in the chaos spawned by the dissolution of Wang Mang’s reign early in the first century AD. They battled the era’s other forces, including those under Liu Xiu (such as Feng Yi) who eventually restored the Han and acquired their distinctive name from the practice of dyeing their eyebrows (or perhaps foreheads) red.

¹⁴⁵ The troops presumably also marked their foreheads in order to be

them.

Furthermore, when the Turfan invaded Lintao [in the Tang] and encamped at Dalaigu, the *Da Duhu* (Grand Protector) for Anbei, Wang Jun [died 732 AD], led all the men under his command, some 2,000 in all, to join with the army at Lintao. He selected 700 unorthodox soldiers and had them change into barbarian uniforms for a nighttime attack. When they were five *li* away from the enemy's camp, he ordered, "Yell out when the vanguard meets the enemy and we'll beat the drums and blow the horns in response." Startled, the bandits grew suspicious and began killing each other when the forces lying in ambush attacked the flanks. The dead were counted by the tens of thousands.

Explication: Though often condemned as contrary to the "laws of war" in many eras and cultures and only uncommonly practiced in China over the centuries, Chinese strategists early on advocated garbing army components in enemy uniforms. For example, in "The Unorthodox Army" in the *Liutao*, the Tai Gong asserts, "Disguising some men as enemy emissaries is the means to sever their supply lines. Forging [enemy] commands and orders and wearing the same clothes as the enemy are the means to prepare for their retreat."¹⁴⁶ In Daxi Wu's case, the uniforms made possible a "living spy" mission, but in the two examples in Zhu's commentary, disguise was employed for combat, rather than spying purposes.

47

During the Song, Zhong Shiheng utilized a barbarian general.

The *Dongxuan Bitan* states: "When Zhong Shiheng was defending the city of Qingjian, he got angry at a barbarian general

completely indistinguishable.

¹⁴⁶ In the Tang dynasty *Questions and Replies*, Li Jing discusses changing the uniforms of the Tang's own "barbarian" (Uigher) components to those of the Tang regular forces in order to confuse their steppe enemies.

for some offense and had his back beaten. His subordinates unsuccessfully asked for leniency. The man who had been beaten then fled to [the Xi Xia king] Yuanhao, who so deeply trusted him he was able to go in and out of their headquarters. After a year, when he had fully learned the enemy's affairs, he went back. Only then did Yuanhao realize Shiheng had employed him as an agent."

Explication: Zhong Shiheng seems to have particularly targeted the king of the Xi Xia, Yuanhao. In example 12, "Zhong Shiheng manipulated the Yeli king," it's also Yuanhao whom he successfully deceives. However, this was a case of using a false defector whose credibility was established by the ploy of suffering flesh.

48

**Some employed ordinary people as living agents, such as
Wang Yao who used Chen Jingxuan.**

The *Zizhi Tongjian's* "Tang Chronicles" state: "When Wang Jian fervently attacked Chengdu [in 891 AD], he surrounded the city with signal towers, a wall, and a moat with a fifty *li* perimeter.¹⁴⁷ A dog butcher named Wang Yao asked to be deceitfully accused of some crime so that he could flee, enter the city, and cause the upper and lower ranks to become disaffected. Jian sent him in.

After going in, Yao had an interview with Chen Jingxuan and Tian Lingzi in which he said that Jian's troops were exhausted and their food depleted, and that they were about to withdraw. After

¹⁴⁷ Wang Jian, a butcher turned bandit leader who sometimes cooperated with the Tang, eventually gained control of virtually all Sichuan, compelling the Tang in its very last days to recognize him as king of Shu in 903. He continued to militarily expand his realm until dying in 919. (For a discussion of the chaotic conditions in Sichuan late in the ninth century and Wang Jian's rise see *The Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 5, part I, *The Sung Dynasty and its Precursors, 907-1279*, 155-162.)

he went out, he bought some tea in the marketplace where he secretly said to the people and officials that Jian was a mighty hero whose military power was strong and flourishing. As a result, Jingxuan and the others relaxed their defensive preparations while the people felt endangered and fearful.

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Liu Xun employed oil vendors.

The *Zizhi Tongjian's* "Tang Chronicles" state: "Wang Shifan dispatched his *Xingjun Sima* (Campaign Army Adjutant) Liu Xin, to seize Yanzhou. At the time Taining's *Jiedushi* (Military Commissioner) Ge Congzhou was about to have the army encamp at Xingzhou. Xun first sent some oil vendors into the city to ferret out their vacuity and substance and find out where the soldiers were deployed. Then on the 43rd, he led five hundred elite soldiers who entered the city by a sewer ditch.¹⁴⁸ By light, the army had already occupied the city but the people in the marketplace weren't aware of it."

Explication: As in this example and the last two in the book, the use of nondescript people dates back to the Spring and Autumn period in China. Being rarely noticed, the unremarkable – those encountered on a daily basis who fulfill ordinary tasks such as small vendors, waiters, street sweepers, laborers, and even monks or itinerant fortunetellers – can readily act as agents in a variety of roles ranging from simple observation through disinformation, deep penetration, and assassination. Since they are normally expected to return with their information, they fall under the classification of local or living agents.

¹⁴⁸

The 43rd day in the sixty day cycle.

During the Song, a northern monk deceived the later ruler Li.

According to Fu Tu's biography in the *Nan Tang*: "During the later ruler's reign [in the Southern Tang], a northern monk whose temple name was *xiao zhang lao* ("little preceptor") claimed he had come in order to beg for alms.¹⁴⁹ He persuaded the ruler Li Yu to construct numerous temples in order to waste the state's funds and also asked him to build a temple on Mt. Oxhead for more than a thousand disciples. They were daily provided with bountiful food they never finished, yet all fresh dishes were made the next day.¹⁵⁰ The monk termed this "*Zhe Dao*" ("reducing reversion") probably because he wanted to create some inauspicious language to perturb the people. When the Song's forces crossed the Yangtze [in 975 AD], they used the temples for their camps."

In addition, it's said a northern monk who wore grass clothes and ate wild vegetables built a stone tower at Caishiji. The later ruler and other people from the state sent things to him but he didn't accept them. However, when the Song army came down to Chizhou and tied their floating bridge to the stone tower, they knew he was an agent.

Ming Taizu used an old gatekeeper.

The *Zhiniang Bu* states: "After Chen Youliang [1320-1363] reduced Taiping, he dispatched men to get Zhang Shicheng's [1321-1367] agreement to invade Jiankang together. Ming *Taizu* [1328-1398] summoned Kang Maocai and said to him, "If these two

¹⁴⁹ Li Yu ruled the Southern Tang, one of the short lived southern kingdoms that briefly existed between 907 and 979 as the Tang collapsed and the Song emerged, from 960 to 975. (He is called Houzhu – later ruler – in the passage.)

¹⁵⁰ Conspicuously contrary to customary Buddhist frugality.

aggressors join together, the harm will certainly be great. If we attack Youliang first, the eastern invader (Shicheng) will be frightened. Can you get him to quickly come forth?"

Kang Maocai replied, "My family has an old gatekeeper who once served Youliang. If I send him, Chen will certainly believe him." He then had the gatekeeper take a letter by small boat to the "phony" Han army headquarters in which he promised to mount an internal response. Chen indeed believed him. When he happily asked about Kang, he was informed he was defending the eastern bridge. When Chen asked, "What sort of bridge," the gatekeeper replied, "A wooden one." Chen therefore gave the man some gold and sent him back with the message, "I'll go and when I arrive there call out "Lao Kang" ("Old Kang") as my signal."

After the gatekeeper returned with his report, the *Taizu* said, "He's fallen into my trap." He then dispatched men to tear down the wooden bridges and replace them with iron and stone ones. They completed the task in one night. He also ordered generals Feng Sheng and Chang Yuchun to lead 30,000 men and set up an ambush at the side of Mt. Shihui, and Xu Da and others to encamp outside of the south gate. Yang Jing was ordered to station his troops at Dasheng harbor, and Zhang Desheng and Zhu Hu to lead their naval forces out from Longjiang pass while the *Taizu* personally took command of the great army at Mt. Lulong. He further ordered the flag bearers to lay yellow flags down on the right side of the mountain and red ones on the left, instructing them, "When the invaders arrive, raise the red flags. When you hear the sound of the drums, raise the yellow ones. The troops being held in ambush should then all arise."

That day Youliang indeed led his army [by boat] down to Dasheng Harbor where the water was shallow. When he encountered Yang Jing, he retreated to the main river and had their

boats directly strike the eastern bridge. Startled to find both bridges were constructed from iron and stone, he quickly called out, “Lao Kang,” but when no one responded realized for the first time he had been deceived. He then split off more than a thousand boats to proceed to Longjiang but first dispatched 10,000 men to ascend the shore and set up stockades. Their strategic power was fierce. However, the season happened to be brutally hot.

The *Taizu* calculated it would definitely rain, so he ordered the army to eat. At that time there weren’t any clouds in the sky but a northwest wind suddenly arose and heavy rain arrived. He had the red flags raised and ordered the army at the front to pull out the stockades. In response, Youliang signaled his forces to go forth and fight. Just after the troops engaged, the rain stopped. When the *Taizu* had the drums beaten, the sound shook [the land]. He then had the yellow flags raised and the ambush released. Xu Da’s army also arrived and joined with their naval forces in launching internal and external attacks. Youliang suffered a severe defeat.”

Explication: This incident, which dates to 1360 AD, was one of many battles that arose over several years among the factions attempting to establish a new dynasty in the aftermath of a century of Mongolian rule that winnowed the various contenders down to the participants noted here. According to the account in the late Ming *Caolu Jinglue*, Kang even gloated a bit: “When Chen Yuliang arrived at the bridge, he was surprised to see it had been constructed from iron and stone and anxiously called out “Old Kang” a number of times. However, there was no response. Startled, he then said, “Old Kang has betrayed me!” Even before he finished speaking the men who had been lying in ambush arose on all four sides and destroyed Chen’s pennants. As he couldn’t withstand them, Chen suffered a major defeat. He escaped by boarding another boat but found a letter under the sleeping board from Maocai that said, “This

sort of stupidity is laughable.”

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Xiong Jing exploited salt vendors.

The *Binglue Zuanwen* states: “[In the Ming], while the *Qianshi* (Vice Commissioner) Xiong Jing was serving in Guangxi, the *Jiezhen Dutai* (Defensive Command Supervisor) for the two Guang areas, Duke Zhu, ordered Xiong to employ trickery against the Yao in Xunjia.¹⁵¹ Jing secretly sent men dressed as traders who carried salt to the places the Yao inhabited on the assumption that they wouldn’t be suspicious of salt smugglers. They ferreted out the “vacuous and substantial” and when questioned, said, “We traders don’t know anything about the new supervisor, but we’ve noticed he has more than ten square vessels shaped like old cauldrons that are filled with stones and capped with sticks and stones. He said he plans to employ them only if the Yao don’t surrender. Otherwise, they will be used to destroy Datengxia.”¹⁵² When the terrified Yao informed their leader, he surrendered the same day. Before the week was out several tens of Yao and Liao clans surrendered.

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Shen Xiyi’s use of some merchants was a case of skillfully employing living agents.

When Shen Xiyi was promoted to *Canjiang* (general commander) for Yujiang, Yujiang was being administered from Liuzhou. Being located amid the high mountains, Liuzhou was just five *li* from the bandit’s lair outside the city. He therefore secretly

¹⁵¹ The Yao were a fiercely independent people centered in the area of Mt. Yao in Guangxi but also found in Yunnan, Henan, and even parts of Guangdong.

¹⁵² “Datengxia” gets its name from the rattan (*teng*) that proliferates in the gorge (*xia*). It’s implied that the mysterious weapon was designed to target the rattan that was also used for barriers, stockades, and buildings.

sought out several tens of itinerant traders who were familiar with the Yao and gave them each five ounces of silver to purchase additional items to dispense in their enclaves. Although the Yao were brutal and enjoyed killing people, whenever traders visited, they always sent them along from barrier to barrier, protected them, and fed them because they feared that if a single one were harmed, no others would come. In this way Shen had them investigate the bamboo planked trails in the bamboo forests. As there wasn't anywhere they didn't go, as soon as there was any activity, they knew about it in advance and raced back to report to Xiyi.

Explication: This is a closely related story that again focuses on subduing the fiercely independent and troublesome Yao. According to another account,¹⁵³ "When Shen Xiyi was responsible for defending Liuzhou [around 1530 AD], he felt that using imperial soldiers as spies in the enemy's lair would certainly draw suspicion. He therefore inconspicuously sought out several tens of itinerant traders who often visited the Yao tribes." Their work being successful, "Whenever Yao fighters went forth at a specified time to a certain location, they found Xiyi already there. When they changed their incursion point, he again preceded them. Startled, the Yao thought he must be a spirit because no one knew the truth." In this version, the author concludes, "the traders were what are termed living agents."

¹⁵³

Caolu Jinglüe (Ruminations in a Grass Hut), 6:10.

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