

# The Research on the Stratagem of the Empty City

XING Cheng

The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

BA Lei

Beijing Forestry University, Beijing, China

The stratagem of the empty city is a kind of traditional stratagem of ancient China. This stratagem is a type of psychological tactic, making full use of the enemy's caution. It can be simply seen as a sort of deceptive tactic, applying to the situations of standoff and retreat. The stratagem of the empty city appeared many times in the war history of ancient China, offering many examples to the researchers. As a matter of fact, in ancient China, it was proved that the stratagem of the empty city could be adopted in many different fields such as military and politics. This stratagem was recorded in *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, one of the most famous military works of ancient China. With time goes by, compared with its original form, the stratagem of the empty city has greatly changed, developing some new forms. This stratagem is also of great use in modern politics and warfare.

*Keywords:* stratagem, the stratagem of the empty city, psychological tactic

## Introduction

The stratagem of the empty city is an extraordinary psychological tactic that appeared in ancient China. This tactic was summarized by *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, one of the most famous military works of ancient China (Editorial Board of Chinese Military Works Corpus, 1994). The basic usage of this stratagem is as follows. You do not have the ability to defeat your enemy directly because the enemy is superior in numbers. Even worse, you do not have the opportunity to retreat immediately. In this situation, you need to act calmly, dropping all pretense of military preparedness. Then, the enemy will think that you have a huge ambush hidden for them.

As a matter of fact, in ancient China, this stratagem appeared much earlier than the completion of *Thirty-Six Stratagems*. In other words, the description about this stratagem in *Thirty-Six Stratagems* is the summary of predecessors' experience.

About this stratagem, we need to make sure about an important point. Empty city was just a concept introduced by ancient Chinese people. They wanted to let the readers understand this stratagem more easily. Of course, the empty city can be a real city with high walls. It also can be a military barracks or some fortifications. Sometimes, it is just a defensive formation consisting of a small number of soldiers.

## The Relations Between the Stratagem of the Empty City and the War Culture of Ancient China

Why could the stratagem of the empty city be popular in ancient China? In order to find the answer, we need

to consider from the aspect of ancient Chinese war culture.

As an old Chinese saying goes, deceit is not to be despised in war (Han, 2011). This sentence shows a phenomenon that psychological tactics and strategy deceit were really common in ancient Chinese war culture. However, at the very beginning, ancient Chinese soldiers were keen on the single combat of war chariots. In the Spring and Autumn Period (770-453 B.C.), in order to fight against the barbarian tribes who did not obey the rule of war chariot's single combat, many states of Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770-256 B.C.) had to give up the tradition, developing some new tactics such as sneak attack and ambush. In this process, the army of the State of Zheng (806-375 B.C.) was famous for its flexible tactics. As time went by, these new tactics were accepted by the armies of many other states. The stratagem of the empty city also appeared in this period.

In 666 B.C., the stratagem of the empty city first appeared during the war between the State of Zheng and the State of Chu (1115-223 B.C.). In the process of the war, the Chu army led by a nobleman named Xiong Zishan (?-664 B.C.) quickly occupied the outer city of the State of Zheng's capital (Zuo, 2009). However, when they got close to the inner city, the soldiers of the Chu army suddenly stopped advancing. Because they saw that the gates of the inner city were open (Zuo, 2009). The Chu army had no ability to make sure whether there was an ambush, finally choosing to retreat.

The appearance of the stratagem of the empty city showed that the tactic of ambush was quite common in this period. As a matter of fact, the Spring and Autumn Period was the beginning of Chinese stratagems. *The Art of War*, the most famous Chinese military work, was also finished in this period. In order to adapt to the changing situation of war, the military men of this period had to accept the popularity of stratagems. In the Period of Warring States (475-221 B.C.), Chinese stratagems especially the psychological tactics experienced a rapid development, becoming the necessary skills of excellent commanders.

Here, we can see that the stratagem of the empty city is of great use when your enemy is cautious enough. At least, he needs to have basic understanding about the tactic of ambush. Otherwise, this stratagem will be useless.

As a matter of fact, in the war history of ancient China, there were many classical battles of the stratagem of the empty city. I will choose a few ones, analyzing them in detail.

### **The Stratagem of the Empty City Without a Real City**

In Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-8 A.D.), the form of war in China changed greatly. Because of the war between the Han army and the Xiongnu army, cavalry gradually became the leading role on the battlefield of this period. In this process, a famous cavalry commander of the Han army named Li Guang (?-119 B.C.) proved that the stratagem of the empty city could also be used without a real city.

According to *Historical Records* written by Sima Qian (145-90 B.C.), the most famous historian of Western Han Dynasty, the battle between Li's cavalry and the Xiongnu cavalry was a skirmish (Sima, 2006). This battle happened in Shang Prefecture (located in today's Suide, Shaanxi Province, China), the northern border of Western Han Dynasty. Li and his one hundred cavalymen pursued three skillful archers of the Xiongnu army, killing two of them and capturing the rest one (Sima, 2006). After that, Li and his cavalymen were discovered by thousands of Xiongnu's cavalymen. However, because the cavalymen of Xiongnu doubted that the main forces of the Han army were nearby, they embattled on a hill, confronting Li's cavalry.

Li and his cavalymen unsaddled their horses, showing that they would not retreat (Sima, 2006). It was a kind of psychological tactic. After seeing it, the Xiongnu cavalry firmly believed that Li's small force was a trap of the Han army. An officer of the Xiongnu cavalry who rode a white horse left the formation of the Xiongnu

cavalry. Li and a dozen cavalymen got on the horses and shot this officer with their bows, successfully killing him (Sima, 2006). After that, they quickly went back to the formation of the Han cavalry. The Xiongnu cavalry did not dare to fight back. At night, the Xiongnu cavalry chose to retreat. The next morning, Li and his cavalymen successfully returned to the large force of the Han army. This skirmish was also recorded in *Book of Han* written by Ban Gu (32-92), the most famous historian of Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220) (Ban, 2007).

Li's experience showed that city and city wall are not the necessities of the stratagem of the empty city. The key to this psychological tactic is that you need to create a false impression that there is a trap nearby. More importantly, you should not let your enemy see that you are nervous. Good psychological quality is the necessity of this stratagem.

### **Scaring Your Enemy: A Special Usage of the Stratagem of the Empty City**

Usually, the stratagem of the empty city requires the commander of the weaker army to make a false impression of setting a trap. As a matter of fact, there is a kind of special usage of this stratagem. In this situation, you need to pretend that your army is much more powerful than your enemy's, so that you can scare off your enemy directly.

In late Eastern Han Dynasty (184-220), Chinese history went to a warlord time. In this period, the stratagem of the empty city started to become popular. This phenomenon greatly influenced the military concept of the Three Kingdoms Period (222-280). In the Three Kingdoms Period, there appeared many commanders who were good at the stratagem of the empty city. One of them is called Xu Sheng (177-228), a general of the Wu Kingdom (222-280). In 224, the Wei army led by Emperor Cao Pi (187-226) intended to cross the Yangtze River and attack the territory of the Wu Kingdom. According to Xu's suggestion, the Wu army built many false fortresses and turrets along the southern bank of the Yangtze River (Chen & Pei, 2006). When Cao and his army arrived at the northern bank of the Yangtze River, they saw the fortifications of the Wu army. Without hesitation, Cao chose to retreat. After retreating, Cao observed that there were many elite cavalymen in the Wei army, but they were totally useless when facing the fortresses of the Wu army (Chen & Pei, 2006).

By the way, Xu's stratagem was somewhat similar to the tactic of cheating the enemy with a number of fake tanks. This tactic appeared many times during the Second World War.

As an old saying goes, war is nothing but the continuation of politics (Clausewitz, 2022). Sometimes, the tactic of scaring the enemy with the stratagem of the empty city may also be useful when dealing with the problems of international relations. For example, if you do not want to have a war, you will need to do the opposite, adopting an aggressive posture. Then, your enemy may not dare to attack. After that, your purpose of avoiding war will be successfully achieved. In the Period of Warring States, a diplomat of the State of Zhao (403-222 B.C.) named Ling Xiangru (329-259 B.C.) once successfully prevented the Qin army from attacking the State of Zhao by adopting this psychological tactic during a meeting with the governor of the State of Qin (770-207 B.C.) (Sima, 2006).

However, this psychological tactic should not be used frequently. Otherwise, your enemy will discover your real purpose.

### **The Stratagem of the Empty City Combining With Counterattack Tactic**

In the war history of ancient China, most of the examples of the stratagem of the empty city were ended with the enemy's withdrawal. However, as a matter of fact, the stratagem of the empty city can combine with counterattack tactic.

As mentioned before, the stratagem of the empty city is usually adopted by the weaker army. If the weaker army wants to counterattack, it will be necessary for it to conserve the forces and wait for the turning point. In this situation, the function of the stratagem of the empty city is confusing the enemy. If the enemy does not launch a general offensive, the weaker army will gain enough time to prepare for the counterattack.

In Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the biggest threat to its northern border was the Mongolian tribes. During the whole Ming Dynasty, the battles between the Ming army and the Mongolian cavalry were countless. In the 16th century, one of the most experienced commanders of the Ming Dynasty's northern army was called Ma Fang (1517-1581). His army once defeated the Mongolian cavalry with the stratagem of the empty city during the battle of Malian fort (located in today's Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province, China).

In the summer of 1566, the army of one of the most powerful Mongolian tribes named Tumod entered the territory of the Ming Dynasty (Zhang, 2000). It was a really powerful army consisting of one hundred thousand cavalymen (Zhang, 2000). Ma's army met the Mongolian cavalry at Malian fort. Ma asked his soldiers to open the four gates of the fort. Being afraid of being ambushed, the Mongolian cavalry did not dare to attack. At night, the Mongolian cavalry lighted the bonfire and shouted loudly. However, Ma just slept on the bed until next noon. In this process, the Mongolian cavalry dispatched many scouts. But none of them could find out what Ma would like to do. Therefore, the Mongols still did not dare to attack. The next day, Ma climbed up the wall of the fort. He saw many Mongolian cavalymen had the movement of looking back. He immediately realized that these cavalymen were ready to retreat. After that, Ma's army stormed out of the fort, defeating the Mongolian cavalry.

The experience of Ma and his army answered a question. What should we do if we cannot directly scare off the enemy with the stratagem of the empty city? Firstly, we need to adopt the stratagem of the empty city, preventing the enemy from attacking us. Then, we will gain an opportunity to save our strength. In this situation, both sides will enter a competition of endurance. After a long wait, the enemy will lose morale. As we all know, morale is an important factor on the battle field. If the enemy loses morale, we will gain an opportunity to counterattack. This tactic requires the commander owning a keen eye and having the ability to find the turning point.

## Conclusion

Stratagem is one of the most important parts of ancient Chinese war culture. As one of the most famous stratagems of ancient China, the stratagem of the empty city once appeared frequently in the war history of many different Chinese dynasties. This stratagem is of great use in the field of war and politics. The research about this stratagem will offer a good reference to the political scientists, strategists, and historians of modern society.

## References

- Ban, G. (2007). *Book of Han*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Chen, S., & Pei, S. Z. (2006). *Records of the Three Kingdoms*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Clausewitz, K. (2022). *On war*. Shanghai: Shanghai Cultural Publishing House.
- Editorial Board of Chinese Military Works Corpus. (1994). *Chinese military works corpus*. Beijing: PLA Press.
- Han, F. (2011). *Han Fei Zi*. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House.
- Sima, Q. (2006). *The historical records*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zhang, T. Y. (2000). *The history of Ming Dynasty*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Zuo, Q. M. (2009). *Zuo Zhuan*. Shenyang: Volumes Publishing Company.