

三十六计

The 36 *Stratagems*

Field cards: the Chinese text, pinyin, a literal translation, the story behind each name and how to use it today. Free edition.

Thirty-six moves, one page each

The Thirty-Six Stratagems (三十六计) are four-character idioms for deception, timing and escape. They are not by Sun Tzu. The phrase is old — the *Book of Southern Qi* quotes 檀公三十六策，走是上计 (“Of Lord Tan’s thirty-six stratagems, running away is best”) — but the 36-item text with its commentary only surfaced in 1941. Its compiler is unknown.

Each card gives the name in Chinese characters and pinyin, a literal translation, the classical line from the 1941 text, what it means, the historical episode behind it, and three practical takeaways. The full pages — with sources, myths and FAQs — are online.

The English renderings of the classical lines are Icons working translations, pending review. The Chinese text follows the Chinese Wikisource edition (public domain).

SOURCES: 三十六计 (WIKISOURCE) · SIMA QIAN, SHIJI · SANGUOZHI · BOOK OF SOUTHERN QI

Index by chapter

胜战计 Winning stratagems · SHÈNG Zhàn Jì

- | | | |
|----|------|--|
| 01 | 瞒天过海 | Deceive the heavens to cross the sea |
| 02 | 围魏救赵 | Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao |
| 03 | 借刀杀人 | Kill with a borrowed knife |
| 04 | 以逸待劳 | Wait at ease for the weary enemy |
| 05 | 趁火打劫 | Loot a burning house |
| 06 | 声东击西 | Make a sound in the east, strike in the west |
-

敌战计 Enemy-dealing stratagems · DÍ Zhàn Jì

- | | | |
|----|------|--------------------------------------|
| 07 | 无中生有 | Create something from nothing |
| 08 | 暗渡陈仓 | Secretly cross at Chencang |
| 09 | 隔岸观火 | Watch the fire from across the river |
| 10 | 笑里藏刀 | Hide a knife behind a smile |
| 11 | 李代桃僵 | Sacrifice the plum for the peach |
| 12 | 顺手牵羊 | Take the goat in passing |
-

攻战计 Attacking stratagems · Gōng Zhàn Jì

- | | | |
|----|------|--------------------------------------|
| 13 | 打草惊蛇 | Beat the grass to startle the snake |
| 14 | 借尸还魂 | Borrow a corpse to return the soul |
| 15 | 调虎离山 | Lure the tiger from its mountain |
| 16 | 欲擒故纵 | To capture, first let it go |
| 17 | 抛砖引玉 | Toss out a brick to attract jade |
| 18 | 擒贼擒王 | To catch bandits, catch their leader |
-

混战计 Chaos stratagems · Hùn Zhàn Jì

- | | | |
|----|------|--|
| 19 | 釜底抽薪 | Remove the firewood from under the pot |
| 20 | 混水摸鱼 | Fish in troubled water |
| 21 | 金蝉脱壳 | The golden cicada sheds its shell |
| 22 | 关门捉贼 | Shut the door to catch the thief |
| 23 | 远交近攻 | Befriend the distant, attack the near |

24 假道伐虢 Borrow a road to conquer Guo

并战计 Proximate stratagems · BÌNGZHÀNJÌ

25	偷梁换柱	Steal the beams, swap the pillars
26	指桑骂槐	Point at the mulberry, curse the locust tree
27	假痴不癫	Feign stupidity, not madness
28	上屋抽梯	Lure them onto the roof, remove the ladder
29	树上开花	Deck the tree with false blossoms
30	反客为主	The guest becomes the host

败战计 Desperate stratagems · BÀIZHÀNJÌ

31	美人计	The beauty trap
32	空城计	The empty fort strategy
33	反间计	Turn the enemy's spies
34	苦肉计	Self-inflicted wound to win trust
35	连环计	Chained stratagems
36	走为上	If all else fails, retreat

瞒天过海

Deceive the heavens to cross the sea

mán tiān guò hǎi

Deceive heaven, cross the sea.

备周则意怠；常见则不疑。阴在阳之内，不在阳之对。太阳，太阴。

When preparation is complete, attention slackens. What is seen constantly is not suspected. The hidden lies inside the open, not opposite it. The greatest openness is the greatest concealment.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Deceive the heavens to cross the sea means carrying a real move inside something the other side already treats as normal. The cover is not a clever disguise added at the last moment. It is a pattern so familiar that nobody reopens the question.

THE STORY – THE CURTAINED FEAST, TAIZONG'S WAR

A later vernacular tale, the Xue Rengui zheng Liao shilüe, sets this stratagem on Emperor Taizong's expedition against Goguryeo. The histories date that war to 645. In the tale the emperor reaches the shore, sees the water, and will not cross. His generals have no answer.

USE IT TODAY

- Hide the sensitive step inside a routine they already ignore.
- Do not mistake darkness for secrecy. Darkness attracts a look.
- Reread the item that has stopped changing. That is where this hides.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/1-deceive-the-heavens-to-cross-the-sea>

围魏救赵

Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao

wéi Wèi jiù Zhào

Surround Wei, rescue Zhao.

共敌不如分敌，敌阳不如敌阴。

Better to divide the enemy than to face them whole. Better to strike their empty point than their full one.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao means refusing the battle your opponent has chosen, and threatening the place they cannot afford to lose. You do not march to the siege you were asked to break. You march on the attacker's own base, which their expedition has stripped.

THE STORY – SUN BIN AT GUILING, 354-353 BC

In 354 BC the state of Wei sent Pang Juan against Handan, the capital of Zhao. Zhao asked Qi for help. King Wei of Qi wanted Sun Bin as general. Sun Bin refused: a man who had suffered mutilation, he said, should not hold the command.

USE IT TODAY

- Do not reinforce a fight the other side has already chosen.
- Threaten the base their current effort has stripped.
- Fight them on the road back, when the split is already made.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/2-besiege-wei-to-rescue-zhao>

借刀杀人

Kill with a borrowed knife

jiè dāo shā rén

Borrow a knife, kill a person.

敌已明，友未定，引友杀敌，不自出力，以损推演。

The enemy is already clear, and the ally is not yet committed. Draw the ally on to kill the enemy. Do not spend your own strength. This is worked out from the hexagram Sun (Decrease).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Kill with a borrowed knife means removing an opponent through someone else's strength. The enemy has already shown themselves. A second power is in play and has not chosen a side, or has reasons of its own to strike. You supply the reason, the rumour, the permission or the alliance, and you do not do the killing.

THE STORY — DUKE HUAN OF ZHENG AND THE STATE OF KUAI

Han Feizi, writing in the third century BC, tells this of Duke Huan of Zheng, in the last years of the Western Zhou. Huan wanted the small state of Kuai. He did not begin with an army.

USE IT TODAY

- Identify who already has a reason to strike your opponent.
- Give them the occasion. Do not do the striking yourself.
- Assume the borrowed hand will not stop on your signal.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/3-kill-with-a-borrowed-knife>

以逸待劳

Wait at ease for the weary enemy

yǐ yì dài láo

With ease, await exhaustion.

困敌之势，不以战；损刚益柔。

Exhaust the enemy's situation without giving battle. Decrease the hard and increase the soft.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Wait at ease for the weary enemy means refusing battle until the other side has spent the strength you would otherwise have to fight. Ease is not idleness. It is a prepared stillness: positions held, troops fed, information coming in, and no prestige lost by not marching.

THE STORY – LI MU ON THE ZHAO FRONTIER

Li Mu was Zhao's general on the northern frontier, based in the Dai and Yanmen region against the Xiongnu. The Shiji gives no year. The command belongs to the Warring States, in the third century BC.

USE IT TODAY

- Prepare while you wait. Unprepared stillness is only delay.
- Let them spend the march, the anger and the supply.
- Strike once their contempt has replaced their caution.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/4-wait-at-ease-for-the-weary-enemy>

趁火打劫

Loot a burning house

chèn huǒ dǎ jié

Amid the fire, rob them.

敌之害大，就势取利，刚决柔也。

When the enemy's harm is great, take the profit the situation offers. The hard breaks the soft.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Loot a burning house means taking a gain from an opponent who is already badly damaged. The fire may be internal, a feud, a famine, a scandal or a broken alliance, or it may be an outside war that has emptied their home.

THE STORY – GOUJIAN STRIKES WU AT HUANGCHI, 482 BC

Goujian of Yue had been broken by Fuchai of Wu, traditionally in 494 BC, and forced to submit. He spent the years after that rebuilding, with Fan Li among his advisers, while Fuchai looked north and treated Yue as a finished problem.

USE IT TODAY

- Act when their damage is already severe. Do not start the fire.
- Take the specific thing their crisis has left unguarded.
- Check that the house is truly burning, and that you can leave it.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/5-loot-a-burning-house>

声东击西

Make a sound in the east, strike in the west

shēng dōng jī xī

Sound the east, strike the west.

敌志乱萃，不虞，坤下兑上之象。利其不自主而取之。

The enemy's will is confused and gathered in disorder, and they do not expect you. This is the image of the hexagram Cui (Gathering), Kun (Earth) below and Dui (Lake) above. Profit from their loss of self-command, and take them.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Make a sound in the east and strike in the west means a feint that moves the defence, followed by a blow at the place the feint has emptied. The sound has to be credible enough to pull men, money or attention. A gesture they can ignore is only noise.

THE STORY — ZHU JUN AT WAN, 184

In 184, during the Yellow Turban rising, Han Zhong held Wan, the seat of Nanyang, after earlier leaders of the local revolt had been killed. Zhu Jun, a Han general, had too few men for a plain assault on the wall.

USE IT TODAY

- Make the feint loud enough that they must answer it.
- Have the real blow already in place before you make the noise.
- Do not use it on an opponent calm enough to choose.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/6-make-a-sound-in-the-east-strike-in-the-west>

无中生有

Create something from nothing

wú zhōng shēng yǒu

From nothing, something is born.

诳也，非诳也，实其所诳也。少阴、太阴、太阳。

It is a deception. It is not a deception. The thing that was a deception is made real. Lesser yin, greater yin, greater yang.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Create something from nothing means turning a pure bluff into a real action by way of repetition. A single lie is seen through. The same lie, repeated until the other side has built a habit around it, stops being examined. Then the content changes and the habit does not.

THE STORY – ZHANG XUN'S STRAW MEN AT YONGQIU, 756

In 756, during the An Lushan rebellion, Zhang Xun held Yongqiu against Linghu Chao, a Tang officer who had gone over to the rebels. The New Book of Tang places the famous device in the middle of that siege, when the city was short of arrows.

USE IT TODAY

- Repeat the false show until it becomes their habit.
- Change the content, not the wrapping, on the night you act.
- Do not begin a bluff you cannot turn into a real move.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/7-create-something-from-nothing>

暗渡陈仓

Secretly cross at Chencang

àn dù Chén Cāng

Secretly cross at Chencang.

示之以动，利其静而有主，益动而巽。

Show them a movement. Profit from their staying still and fixed on one aim. As the hexagram Yi (Increase) has it: it moves, and it is gentle.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Secretly cross at Chencang means letting the enemy fix themselves on one route while you arrive by another. The visible movement is not optional decoration. The classical line says you show them action, and you profit because they stay still and committed. If nothing public is happening, a careful opponent watches every road.

THE STORY – HAN XIN COMES OUT BY CHENCANG, 206 BC

In 206 BC, after the fall of Qin, Xiang Yu made Liu Bang king of Han, over Ba, Shu and Hanzhong, and kept the Qin heartland for three kings of his own, of whom Zhang Han, the king of Yong, held the approaches.

USE IT TODAY

- Give them a visible route worth guarding before you take the other.
- Do not explain the second road by using it too early.
- Make sure the quiet road actually arrives somewhere you can hold.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/8-secretly-cross-at-chencang>

隔岸观火

Watch the fire from across the river

gé àn guān huǒ

From the far bank, watch the fire.

阳乖序乱，阴以待逆。暴戾恣睢，其势自毙。顺以动豫，豫顺以动。

When the yang side splits and order breaks, the yin waits on their revolt. Violent and unrestrained, their power dies of itself. Move in accord, and there is the hexagram Yu (Enthusiasm). Yu is moving in accord.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Watch the fire from across the river means staying out of a quarrel that is already destroying your opponents, because your intervention is the thing most likely to end the quarrel. People who are about to turn on each other will unite against an outsider. The river is that distance.

THE STORY – CAO CAO, THE YUAN BROTHERS AND LIAODONG, 207

In 207 Cao Cao broke the Wuhuan and their allies at White Wolf Mountain. Yuan Shang and Yuan Xi, sons of the dead warlord Yuan Shao and losers of the succession war in the north, fled on to Liaodong with several thousand cavalry. Gongsun Kang, the governor there, had long relied on distance and had not submitted to Cao Cao.

USE IT TODAY

- Do not step into a feud that your presence would heal.
- Stay close enough to see who is left when it ends.
- Cross when the fire has done its work, not while it still unites them.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/9-watch-the-fire-from-across-the-river>

笑里藏刀

Hide a knife behind a smile

xiào lǐ cáng dāo

Within the smile, a knife is hidden.

信而安之，阴以图之，备而后动，勿使有变。刚中柔外也。

Win their trust and put them at ease. Plot in the dark. Prepare, and only then move. Do not let the situation change. Hard within, soft without.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Hide a knife behind a smile means making an opponent feel safe with you until your preparations are finished. The smile is not a moment of charm at the point of the blow. It is a period of reassurance long enough for them to drop guards, move troops, sign, or talk freely.

THE STORY – CAO WEI AT THE CHESSBOARD

Cao Wei, a Northern Song general and a son of Cao Bin, spent much of his career on the northwestern frontier against the Tangut state of Western Xia. The Song History records a small, cold episode from his time in that command. Someone reported that garrison soldiers had defected to Xia. Cao Wei was playing chess with a guest.

USE IT TODAY

- Use reassurance only while a real preparation is under way.
- Move before some accident wakes the ease you created.
- Read sudden friendliness from a rival as a possible interval, not as peace.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/10-hide-a-knife-behind-a-smile>

李代桃僵

Sacrifice the plum for the peach

lǐ dài táo jiāng

The plum withers in the peach's place.

势必有所损，损阴以益阳。

When the situation forces a loss, damage the yin to benefit the yang.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Sacrifice the plum for the peach means giving up a lesser thing on purpose so that a greater thing survives. The loss is coming anyway. The skill is in assigning it. A commander who tries to save every unit loses the army. A negotiator who defends every clause loses the clause that mattered. The plum is not worthless.

THE STORY – SUN BIN'S HORSES FOR TIAN JI

Before the campaigns for which he is remembered, Sun Bin made his name in Qi with a horse race. Tian Ji, a noble of the Qi court, often wagered heavily against the king's sons and, the story implies, often lost.

USE IT TODAY

- Choose the loss you can bear before the contest forces one on you.
- Match your weakest piece against their strongest.
- Spend your strongest piece where it can actually win a counted result.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/11-sacrifice-the-plum-for-the-peach>

顺手牵羊

Take the goat in passing

shùn shǒu qiān yáng

In passing, lead the goat away.

微隙在所必乘；微利在所必得。少阴，少阳。

A small gap must be used. A small gain must be taken. Lesser yin, lesser yang.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Take the goat in passing means collecting a small, real advantage that appears beside your main effort, without turning aside to chase it. The goat is unguarded, close to the hand, and not the reason you set out.

THE STORY – QIN DESTROYS HUA, 627 BC

In 627 BC Duke Mu of Qin sent an army under Meng Mingshi, with Xiqi Shu and Baiyi Bing, on a long raid against Zheng. Zheng was not ready for them in the way Qin hoped. At Hua, a small state on the road, they met Xian Gao, a Zheng merchant travelling to sell cattle at the Zhou capital.

USE IT TODAY

- Take the small unguarded gain that lies beside the main effort.
- Do not let the small gain become a new main effort.
- Ask who will answer for it on the road home.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/12-take-the-goat-in-passing>

打草惊蛇

Beat the grass to startle the snake

dǎ cǎo jīng shé

Beat the grass, startle the snake.

疑以叩实，察而后动；复者，阴之媒也。

Use doubt to sound out the facts. Observe, and only then move. Return is the go-between of what is hidden.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Beat the grass to startle the snake means forcing a hidden opponent to reveal themselves, by a blow aimed at the cover rather than at the animal. You do not yet know where they are, how strong they are, or whether they are there at all. A direct advance is a guess.

THE STORY – WANG LU'S JUDGMENT AT DANGTU

The phrase is older than its military use. Zheng Wenbao, a Song writer, records it in his miscellany of Southern Tang affairs. Wang Lu was magistrate of Dangtu and, the anecdote says, much occupied with building his own wealth. The people of the county submitted a joint complaint against the registrar, accusing him of taking bribes.

USE IT TODAY

- Test what is hidden with a probe you can afford to waste.
- Do not commit the main force until the probe has answered.
- Assume a clumsy probe warns them. Have the next move ready.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/13-beat-the-grass-to-startle-the-snake>

借尸还魂

Borrow a corpse to return the soul

jiè shī huán hún

Borrow a corpse, bring back the soul.

有用者，不可借；不能用者，求借。借不能用者而用之，匪我求童蒙，童蒙求我。

What is still useful cannot be borrowed. What cannot be used, seek to borrow. Borrow the useless and make it serve. It is not I who seek the young fool. The young fool seeks me.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Borrow a corpse to return the soul means taking a dead cause, a fallen dynasty's heir, a disused brand, a vacant office, and making it walk again for your purposes. The supernatural picture is Daoist folklore: a wandering soul finds a fresh body and returns to life. The stratagem empties that picture of ghosts.

THE STORY – XIANG LIANG RESTORES A KING OF CHU, 208 BC

After Chen Sheng's revolt against Qin in 209 BC, the rising needed a banner wider than any one rebel general. In 208 BC Xiang Liang, then the leading Chu commander, heard the advice the Shiji attributes to Fan Zeng. The people of Chu still spoke of King Huai, the earlier king who had died in Qin captivity.

USE IT TODAY

- Borrow a name that people still trust and that can no longer act.
- Do not try this on a living power with a will of its own.
- Write down who decides, or the symbol will be discarded later.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/14-borrow-a-corpse-to-return-the-soul>

调虎离山

Lure the tiger from its mountain

diào hǔ lí shān

Lure the tiger off the mountain.

待天以困之，用人以诱之，往蹇来连。

Wait for circumstances to hamper them. Use men to lure them. Going meets obstruction; coming finds connection.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Lure the tiger from its mountain means refusing battle on the ground where the opponent is strongest, and inducing them to leave it. The mountain may be a pass, a fortress, a home market, a legal jurisdiction or a subject they know better than you. On that ground their numbers count double.

THE STORY – YU XU ON THE ROAD TO WUDU, 115

In 115, during the Eastern Han wars with the Qiang, Empress Dowager Deng appointed Yu Xu grand administrator of Wudu. The Book of the Later Han says several thousand Qiang blocked him in the gorge country between Chencang and the Yao valley. That pass was the mountain.

USE IT TODAY

- Do not attack a strong position on the ground that makes it strong.
- Give them a reason their own situation forces them to leave it.
- Once they scatter, move faster than their picture of you allows.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/15-lure-the-tiger-from-its-mountain>

欲擒故纵

To capture, first let it go

yù qín gù zòng

Wishing to capture, deliberately release.

逼则反兵；走则减势。紧随勿迫。累其气力，消其斗志，散而后擒，兵不血刃。需，有孚，光。

Press them and they turn and fight. Let them go and their force drains away. Follow closely. Do not crowd them. Wear down their strength, thin their will to fight, and capture them once they scatter, without bloodying the blades. This is the hexagram Xu (Waiting): with sincerity, there is brilliance.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

To capture, first let it go means loosening the pressure on a beaten opponent so that they break apart, while you stay near enough to gather them when they do. A cornered force fights harder than its numbers deserve, because every person in it is fighting for a way out.

THE STORY — ZHUGE LIANG'S SOUTHERN CAMPAIGN, 225

In 225, two years after Liu Bei's death, Zhuge Liang campaigned south into Nanzhong, where local leaders had risen as Shu struggled to settle the succession. Chen Shou's Records of the Three Kingdoms register the expedition and its result: the region was pacified, and Zhuge Liang returned to the business of the state.

USE IT TODAY

- Do not crowd a beaten opponent into a last stand.
- Follow closely while you loosen the pressure.
- Take them when they scatter. Do not call a pause a strategy.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/16-to-capture-first-let-it-go>

抛砖引玉

Toss out a brick to attract jade

pāo zhuān yǐn yù

Toss a brick, draw in jade.

类以诱之，击蒙也。

Lure them with something of the same kind. This is striking the fool, from the hexagram Meng (Youthful Folly).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Toss out a brick to attract jade means baiting an opponent with something small that resembles the prize they already desire, so that they come and bring the greater thing with them. The brick is real enough to be taken. The jade is their army, their attention, their best argument, pulled out of position by the taking.

THE STORY – QU XIA BAITS THE STATE OF JIAO, 700 BC

In 700 BC, the twelfth year of Duke Huan of Lu, Chu attacked the small state of Jiao and camped at its south gate. Qu Xia, the Mo'ao, told the command that Jiao was small and rash, and that rashness meant little planning. He asked that the men who went out to cut wood be left unguarded, as a lure. Chu agreed.

USE IT TODAY

- Bait them with something of the same kind as the prize they want.
- Let the first small success be real. That is what confirms the lure.
- Prepare the ground for their rush before you throw the bait.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/17-toss-out-a-brick-to-attract-jade>

擒贼擒王

To catch bandits, catch their leader

qín zéi qín wáng

Catch the bandits, catch their king.

摧其坚，夺其魁，以解其体。龙战于野，其道穷也。

Crush their strong point and take their chief, and their body comes apart.
Dragons fight in the wild. Their way is at an end.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

To catch bandits, catch their leader means aiming at the person, the node or the post that holds the opposing effort together, rather than at the mass of that effort. A band of fighters without a chief they obey is a crowd. A project without the one approval it cannot replace is a pile of work.

THE STORY – ZHANG XUN AND YIN ZIQI AT SUIYANG, 757

In 757 Zhang Xun and the prefect Xu Yuan were holding Suiyang against a large rebel army under Yin Ziqi. The city covered the approach to the south and the grain of the Huai. Zhang Xun's problem, in the episode the stratagem commentary chooses, was not finding the enemy. It was finding Yin Ziqi inside his own command.

USE IT TODAY

- Find who the others look to, not who carries the banner.
- Spend the decisive effort on that person or that post.
- Be ready for the structure that remains after they fall.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/18-to-catch-bandits-catch-their-leader>

釜底抽薪

Remove the firewood from under the pot

fǔ dǐ chōu xīn

Pull the firewood from under the cauldron.

不敌其力，而消其势，兑下乾上之象。

Do not match their strength; dissolve their momentum. This is the image of Dui below and Qian above, the hexagram Guai (Breakthrough).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Remove the firewood from under the pot means you stop trying to outfight a force at its hottest and you take away the thing that keeps it hot. Water boils because of the wood, not because the water has chosen to be dangerous.

THE STORY — CAO CAO AND THE GRAIN CONVOYS, 200

In the autumn and winter of 200, at Guandu, Yuan Shao had the larger army and meant to finish the war in one decision. Cao Cao was pinned, short of food, and writing to his advisers about pulling back. Chen Shou's annals show him choosing the wood twice.

USE IT TODAY

- Find the fuel before you answer the noise.
- Separate ringleaders from people who were swept along.
- Strike the supply, not the strongest unit.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/19-remove-the-firewood-from-under-the-pot>

混水摸鱼

Fish in troubled water

hún shuǐ mō yú

In muddy water, grope for fish.

乘其阴乱，利其弱而无主。随，以向晦入宴息。

Exploit their hidden disorder, and profit where they are weak and have no master. The hexagram Sui (Following): as evening comes, go in and rest.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Fish in troubled water means you take advantage of a side that is already disordered, weak, and without a real master. The mud is not something you have to stir. It is already there: factions, a frightened court, a host who cannot decide.

THE STORY – LIU BEI ENTERS YI PROVINCE, 211-214

In 211 Liu Zhang, governor of Yi province, was afraid of Zhang Lu to his north and listened to men who said Liu Bei would be a useful ally. He invited Liu Bei in, met him at Fu, feasted him for weeks, gave him troops and supplies, and pointed him at the northern front.

USE IT TODAY

- Enter only where no one is truly in charge.
- Read rival briefings as a map of the mud.
- Do not stir a pool that already has a master.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/20-fish-in-troubled-water>

金蝉脱壳

The golden cicada sheds its shell

jīn chán tuō qiào

The golden cicada sheds its shell.

存其形，完其势；友不疑，敌不动。巽而止，蛊。

Keep the outward form and leave the posture intact; then allies do not suspect and the enemy does not move. Yielding, and then stopping: the hexagram Gu (Decay).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

The golden cicada sheds its shell means you leave the visible form of your position standing, and you take the living part somewhere else. The shell is flags, drums, a routine, a lit window, a deputy who still answers the mail.

THE STORY – THE RETREAT FROM WUZHANGYUAN, 234

Zhuge Liang died in his camp at Wuzhangyuan in the autumn of 234, still facing Sima Yi across the Wei River. Chen Shou records that he had already settled the withdrawal with Yang Yi, Fei Yi and Jiang Wei: Wei Yan was to cover the rear, Jiang Wei to follow, and if Wei Yan refused, the army was to leave anyway.

USE IT TODAY

- Leave a shape that still answers.
- Move the best people only while that shape holds.
- Treat sudden silence as a failed shell.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/21-the-golden-cicada-sheds-its-shell>

关门捉贼

Shut the door to catch the thief

guān mén zhuō zéi

Shut the door and catch the thief.

小敌困之。剥，不利有攸往。

Hem a small enemy in. The hexagram Bo (Splitting Apart): it does not favour having somewhere to go.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Shut the door to catch the thief means a small opponent is to be enclosed, not hunted across open country. The commentary's fear is not only that they escape.

THE STORY – THE TRAP AT MA YI, 133 BC

In 133 BC, early in Emperor Wu's wars with the Xiongnu, Wang Hui proposed the door in its pure form. A trader of Ma Yi, in the north of what is now Shanxi, would pretend to betray the town. The chanyu would come inside to take it. A Han army hidden in the valleys would close behind him.

USE IT TODAY

- Close the exits before you start the chase.
- Let a small enemy go if you cannot trap them.
- Do not corner a force large enough to stand.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/22-shut-the-door-to-catch-the-thief>

远交近攻

Befriend the distant, attack the near

yuǎn jiāo jìn gōng

Befriend the distant, attack the near.

形禁势格，利从近取，害以远隔。上火下泽。

When ground and circumstance block you, the profit is in taking what is near, and the harm is in being cut off by distance. Fire above, lake below: the hexagram Kui (Opposition).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Befriend the distant and attack the near means distance is a cost, not a prestige. The commentary states it as a rule of ground in a messy, many-sided war. A far enemy is hard to strike and easy to rent with a benefit.

THE STORY – FAN JU ADVISES THE KING OF QIN

The phrase is a policy spoken to a king, not a proverb that later grew a moral. In the Shiji, Fan Ju, a man of Wei who had survived a beating at home, reached Qin in the middle of King Zhaoxiang's long reign and at last got a private hearing.

USE IT TODAY

- Fight for ground you can actually hold.
- Rent the distant rival; do not march across friends.
- Treat a near ally on your flank as unfinished business.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/23-befriend-the-distant-attack-the-near>

假道伐虢

Borrow a road to conquer Guo

jiǎ dào fá Guó

Borrow a road to attack Guo.

两大之间，敌胁以从，我假以势。困，有言不信。

Set between two great powers, they are coerced by the enemy into obedience; I lend them an appearance of support. The hexagram Kun (Oppression): there are words, but they are not believed.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Borrow a road to conquer Guo means you ask a weaker state that sits between you and your real target for passage, and you destroy the target, and then you destroy the state that lent the road. The commentary says pretty words will not do it.

THE STORY – JIN BORROWS THE ROAD, 658-655 BC

Guo and Yu were small states, each the other's outer wall. Duke Xian of Jin wanted Guo. In 658 BC his minister Xun Xi told him not to smash in. He sent Yu the horses of Qu and the jade disk of Chuiji, treasures the duke hated to lose, and he asked for a road.

USE IT TODAY

- Treat a request for passage as a request for you.
- Refuse the second loan even if the first one worked.
- Do not trade your outer wall for a gift.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/24-borrow-a-road-to-conquer-guo>

偷梁换柱

Steal the beams, swap the pillars

tōu liáng huàn zhù

Steal the beams and swap the pillars.

频更其阵，抽其劲旅，待其自败，而后乘之，曳其轮也。

Keep changing their formation, draw off their best troops, wait until they fail of themselves, and then exploit it. Drag the wheel.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Steal the beams and swap the pillars means a joint formation is held up by a few posts, and those posts are people. The commentary uses camp language. A formation has a length and a width. The crossbeam, it says, is the 'heavenly balance'; the pillar is the 'earth axis'; both are manned by elite troops.

THE STORY – XIANG YU DIVIDES THE KINGDOMS, 206 BC

The stratagem text describes that manoeuvre and names no battle. What it describes is a secret swap inside a shared camp: change the roster until the other commander's best troops no longer hold his beams, or until your officers stand where his beams were, and then inherit the army. The nearest famous act is coarser, and it was done in public.

USE IT TODAY

- Name the load-bearing posts before the joint work starts.
- Treat a reshuffle in mid-campaign as a hostile act.
- Keep your best people in posts you still control.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/25-steal-the-beams-swap-the-pillars>

指桑骂槐

Point at the mulberry, curse the locust tree

zhǐ sāng mà huái

Point at the mulberry and curse the locust tree.

大凌小者，警以诱之。刚中而应，行险而顺。

When the stronger overawes the weaker, warn them in order to lead them.

Firm at the centre and answered; he walks into danger and yet things accord.

This is the voice of the hexagram Shi (The Army).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Point at the mulberry and curse the locust tree means the rebuke the room needs to hear is aimed at someone, or something, just to the side. A direct order has already failed, and a bribe would only make suspicious people more suspicious.

THE STORY – ZOU JI AND THE FLATTERERS

The stratagem book names no case. The clean classical specimen of its method is older than the proverb. In the *Zhanguo ce*, Zou Ji of Qi, a tall and handsome minister, asks his wife, his concubine, and a guest whether he is better-looking than Lord Xu of the north city. All three say yes.

USE IT TODAY

- Aim the rebuke one step to the side.
- Use your own small fault as the example.
- Do not bribe people you have not yet led.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/26-point-at-the-mulberry-curse-the-locust-tree>

假痴不癫

Feign stupidity, not madness

jiǎ chī bù diān

Feign stupidity, not madness.

宁伪作不知不为，不伪作假知妄为。静不露机，云雷屯也。

Better to pretend ignorance and do nothing than to pretend knowledge and act rashly. Stay still, and do not reveal the spring of your action. Clouds and thunder: the hexagram Zhun (Difficulty at the Beginning).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Feign stupidity, not madness means you hide understanding and you refuse the theatre of a false frenzy. The common English title, 'feign madness', reverses the Chinese. Chi is dullness, the look of a person who does not follow. Dian is being overturned, a mind or a camp in spasm.

THE STORY — SIMA YI'S ILLNESS, 248-249

Two pictures of the same habit sit in the commentary, and both have a historical core. In 234, during the stalemate at Wuzhangyuan, Zhuge Liang sent Sima Yi a woman's headdress and clothes, a public insult meant to drag him into a battle he did not want. Sima Yi did not take the bait.

USE IT TODAY

- Look slow until the moment is actually yours.
- Refuse a taunt that exists to make you move.
- Never stage a frenzy; it shows the plan.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/27-feign-madness-keep-your-wits>

上屋抽梯

Lure them onto the roof, remove the ladder

shàng wū chōu tī

Go up onto the roof and pull away the ladder.

假之以便，唆之使前，断其援应，陷之死地。遇毒，位不当也。

Offer them a convenience, coax them to go forward, cut off their support, and drop them onto deadly ground. He meets with poison; his position is not the right one. This is the hexagram Shihe (Biting Through).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Lure them onto the roof and remove the ladder means you do not drag an enemy onto bad ground by force. You offer a convenience they already want, you encourage the step, and only then do you cut the supports: the reserves, the road home, the allies who could still pull them down.

THE STORY — MURONG CHUI AND THE ROAD TO FEI RIVER, 383

Fu Jian of Former Qin had spent years building the largest state in the north, and he wanted the Eastern Jin. Most of his own ministers, Fu Rong among them, told him the invasion was a roof he need not climb. Murong Chui did not.

USE IT TODAY

- Distrust a friend who loves your riskiest plan.
- Secure the way down before the way up.
- Ask who inherits your people if you fail.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/28-lure-them-onto-the-roof-remove-the-ladder>

树上开花

Deck the tree with false blossoms

shù shàng kāi huā

On the tree, blossoms open.

借局布势，力小势大。鸿渐于陆，其羽可用为仪也。

Borrow the setting to arrange your posture: the strength is small, the display is large. The wild goose gradually reaches the high ground; its feathers can serve as a ritual ornament. This is the hexagram Jian (Gradual Progress).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Deck the tree with false blossoms means the strength is small and the posture is made large by borrowing a setting. The commentary's image is domestic and exact. The tree has no flowers. Flowers can be cut from silk and tied on, and a person who does not come close will not see the threads.

THE STORY — TAN DAOJI MEASURES SAND, 431

In 431, on the retreat from Licheng, the Liu-Song general Tan Daoji ran out of food. Deserters told the pursuing Northern Wei that the Song army was finished. The columns were close to breaking.

USE IT TODAY

- Spend a little real substance on the display.
- Borrow a larger setting rather than inventing one.
- Expect the trick to die at close range.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/29-deck-the-tree-with-false-blossoms>

反客为主

The guest becomes the host

fǎn kè wéi zhǔ

Turn the guest into the host.

乘隙插足，扼其主机，渐之进也。

Seize a gap and plant a foot; grasp their vital mechanism. This is gradual advance, the hexagram Jian (Gradual Progress).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

The guest becomes the host means a newcomer ends up owning the decisions of the house he entered as a helper. The commentary ranks the stages with care. A person driven by others is a slave. A person received with courtesy is a guest. A guest with no foothold is temporary.

THE STORY – LI YUAN'S LETTER TO LI MI, 617

Li Mi's rebel army in the east was the prestigious one, and he wanted to be treated as the leader of the whole rising. Li Yuan, risen at Taiyuan in 617 and needing a free hand in the west, wrote to him.

USE IT TODAY

- Keep the control that makes the place move.
- Notice which favours have become indispensable.
- Do not confuse courtesy with a share of command.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/30-the-guest-becomes-the-host>

美人计

The beauty trap

měi rén jì

The beauty stratagem.

兵强者，攻其将；兵智者，伐其情。将弱兵颓，其势自萎。利用御寇，顺相保也。

If their army is strong, strike at the general; if the general is clever, sap his feelings. When the general weakens and the troops go slack, the momentum withers of itself. It pays to use this to hold off raiders; by staying in right relation the two sides protect each other. The line is from the hexagram Jian (Gradual Progress).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

The beauty trap means that a strong army is attacked through its general, and a clever general is attacked through his feelings. The classical line does not mention women. It mentions judgement, appetite, and the slackness that follows when a commander stops being a commander.

THE STORY – GOUJIAN, FUCHAI, AND XI SHI

After his defeat in 494 BC, Goujian of Yue submitted in person to Fuchai of Wu. The Shiji's account is political and harsh. He served in Wu, he came home, he nursed the grudge with the famous gall by his seat, and he listened to Fan Li and Wen Zhong. He sent gifts and attendants.

USE IT TODAY

- If you cannot break the force, study the commander.
- Do not pay a rival in land or exclusive rights.
- Keep vital decisions off one person's moods.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/31-the-beauty-trap>

空城计

The empty fort strategy

kōng chéng jì

The empty-city stratagem.

虚者虚之，疑中生疑；刚柔之际，奇而复奇。

Where you are empty, display the emptiness, so that doubt breeds more doubt. At the seam of hard and soft, pile surprise upon surprise.

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

The empty fort strategy means you are genuinely weak, and you show the weakness so plainly that a careful enemy cannot believe it. An open gate, a banquet on a half-built wall, a street with no soldiers and no dogs barking: each of these is an emptiness displayed, not an emptiness disguised.

THE STORY – THE EMPTY CITY, FROM NOVEL TO GUAZHOU

The scene everyone can picture is a novel scene. In chapter 95 of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, after Ma Su's real defeat at Jieting in 228, Zhuge Liang is at Xicheng with almost no troops. He opens the gates, has soldiers sweep them, and sits on the wall with a qin.

USE IT TODAY

- Show the emptiness only to a cautious opponent.
- Spend a reputation for caution; do not invent one.
- Do not try the open gate a second time.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/32-the-empty-fort-strategy>

反间计

Turn the enemy's spies

fǎn jiàn jì

The turned-spy stratagem.

疑中之疑。比之自内，不自失也。

Doubt within doubt. Alliance from within: one does not lose oneself. This is the hexagram Bi (Holding Together).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Turn the enemy's spies means you do not only catch an agent. You use the other side's own channels, and their own readiness to suspect each other, so that they wound themselves. The commentary's definition is short. A spy-plot makes the enemy doubt his own people. A turned plot uses the enemy's own spy-work to do it.

THE STORY — TIAN DAN AND THE RUMOUR ABOUT YUE YI, 279 BC

Yue Yi of Yan had done what a generation of generals failed to do. Under King Zhao he had broken Qi, from 284 BC, and taken more than seventy cities. Two held out, Ju and Jimo. Tian Dan was in Jimo. Then King Zhao died, in 279 BC, and King Hui came to the throne.

USE IT TODAY

- Feed a suspicion the other side already has.
- Aim the whisper at their indispensable person.
- Do not dismiss your own key people on one channel.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/33-turn-the-enemys-spies>

苦肉计

Self-inflicted wound to win trust

kǔ ròu jì

The bitter-flesh stratagem.

人不自害，受害必真；假真真假，间以得行。童蒙之吉，顺以巽也。

People do not injure themselves; if they are injured, it must be real. The false passes for true and the true for false, and so the spy-plot gets through. The good fortune of the youthful fool: he is docile and yielding. This is the hexagram Meng (Youthful Folly).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

The self-inflicted wound means you make a hurt look like a quarrel inside your own camp, so the enemy will trust the person who suffered it. The classical line states the bias it exploits. People do not injure themselves; therefore an injury is sincere.

THE STORY – DUKE WU OF ZHENG AND THE LORD OF HU

Han Feizi tells it as a warning about persuasion, not as a dispatch from a campaign. Duke Wu of Zheng wanted to attack Hu. He first married his daughter to the lord of Hu, so that the lord would feel pleased and safe. Then he asked his court, in public, whom he ought to attack.

USE IT TODAY

- Distrust a refugee whose wound helps the sender.
- Ask who benefits from the quarrel you just saw.
- Do not take a public falling-out as proof of a split.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/34-self-inflicted-wound-to-win-trust>

连环计

Chained stratagems

lián huán jì

The linked-rings stratagem.

将多兵众，不可以敌，使其自累，以杀其势。在师中吉，承天宠也。

When they have many generals and a great host, do not meet them head-on. Make them encumber themselves, and so cut down their momentum. Good fortune in the midst of the army: he receives heaven's favour. This is the hexagram Shi (The Army).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

Chained stratagems means two plans locked so that the first creates the condition the second needs. The classical line is about scale. Many generals and a great host are not to be met face to face. They are to be made a burden to themselves, until their momentum is smaller than their numbers.

THE STORY — RED CLIFFS IN THE NOVEL, BEANS IN THE FIELD

What most people picture is Pang Tong at Red Cliffs, persuading Cao Cao to chain his ships together so the northern soldiers will stop being seasick, and then Zhou Yu burning the chain so the fleet cannot scatter. That sequence is the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The historical battle, in the winter of 208, is real and different.

USE IT TODAY

- Pair a move that commits them with a move that traps the commitment.
- Do not reveal the second ring before the first has closed.
- Do not meet a many-headed force with one stroke.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/35-chained-stratagems>

走为上

If all else fails, retreat

zǒu wéi shàng

To retreat is the superior course.

全师避敌。左次无咎，未失常也。

Keep the army whole and avoid the enemy. He withdraws to the left. No blame. He has not left the constant way. This is the hexagram Shi (The Army).

三十六计 · CLASSICAL TEXT · ICONS WORKING TRANSLATION (DRAFT)

WHAT IT MEANS

If all else fails, retreat means leaving while the army still exists, and treating that leaving as the best of the remaining choices. The English title sounds like an apology. The Chinese, and the old saying it comes from, is firmer: flight is the superior plan. The commentary does the arithmetic.

THE STORY – BI ZAIYU'S GOATS, AND AN OLDER SAYING

The sentence is older than the book. In the Book of Southern Qi, in the biography of Wang Jingze, a cornered man throws it at a hostile court: Tan Gong's thirty-six schemes, and flight is the best of them. Tan Gong is Tan Daoji, the Liu-Song general later remembered for bringing an army home.

USE IT TODAY

- Leave while the team and the means still exist.
- Prefer a clean exit to a peace signed under pressure.
- Plan the rear guard before the announcement.

Sources, myths and FAQ: <https://icons.hectorobon.com/stratagems/36-if-all-else-fails-retreat>

Keep reading

Icons is a free project on the Eastern strategy canon — Sun Tzu, the 36 Stratagems, Han Feizi, Zhuge Liang, Chanakya, Musashi — read against the source. Every quote is checked; if it is not in the source, we do not publish it.

Try the quote verifier (did Sun Tzu really say that?) and the quiz: which Eastern strategist are you?

[HTTPS://ICONS.HECTOROBON.COM](https://icons.hectorobon.com)