

# The Research on the Stratagem of Feigning Madness Without Becoming Insane

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Feigning madness without becoming insane is a traditional Chinese stratagem recorded in *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, one of the most famous military works of ancient China. It can be seen in the military history and the political history of ancient China. It is a high-level psychological tactic, requiring the users to have extremely strong psychological resilience and great insight. Therefore, adopting the stratagem of feigning madness without becoming insane is the game of smart people. In brief, this stratagem is a kind of psychological defense tactic, helping the users protect themselves and gain enough time to prepare for the counterattack. About this stratagem, in ancient Chinese history, there were many successful examples. At the same time, failed cases are also worth studying. As a matter of fact, this traditional stratagem can be adopted in many different fields such as military, politics, and commerce. Thus, the research about this stratagem will be a good reference for the people of modern times.

**Keywords:** stratagem, psychological tactic, feigning madness without becoming insane

## Introduction

According to the theory of some modern military scientists, many stratagems recorded in *Thirty-Six Stratagems* such as using seductive women to corrupt the enemy and extracting the firewood from under the cauldron can be called strategic deception (Gao & Zhang, 2015). Can we call the stratagem of feigning madness without becoming insane as a kind of strategic deception? The answer is yes. According to *Thirty-Six Stratagems*, the basic usage of this stratagem is as follows. You need to hide behind the mask of a fool to create confusion about your intentions and motivation (Cheng, 1999). Here, madness and insane were just two concepts introduced by ancient Chinese strategists. As a matter of fact, they just wanted to describe that you need to adopt some behaviors to confuse your enemy so that they cannot discover your real purpose. In short, you need to show that you know nothing about the plot of your enemy (Cheng, 1999).

Feigning madness without becoming insane is a stratagem recorded in a military book. However, as an old saying goes, war is nothing but the continuation of politics (Clausewitz, 2022). Therefore, there is a phenomenon that this stratagem is more common in political history than in military history. In a few famous political struggles of ancient Chinese history, the ones who were in a weak position would adopt this psychological tactic to confuse the ones in an advantageous position so that they would get the chance to counterattack.

This paper is a summative research of this stratagem. In this paper, a few classic examples of this stratagem

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will be introduced. Then, I will analyze this stratagem in detail. After that, we will find the methods of adopting this stratagem when facing strategic deceptions.

### **The Classic Examples of Feigning Madness Without Becoming Insane**

As a matter of fact, in the military history and the political history of ancient China, there were many classic examples of this stratagem. For Chinese people, the example that they are most familiar with is the one that happened in the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280).

In the 240s, the political struggle between two chief ministers named Cao Shuang (?-249) and Sima Yi (179-251) was the most important event of the Wei Kingdom's (220-266) political circles. At the very beginning, the group of Cao occupied advantage. In order to gain enough time to prepare for the counter attack, Sima chose to malingering (Fang, 2014). Therefore, Cao and his henchmen would not pay much attention to him. At the same time, Sima Shi (208-255), the eldest son of Sima Yi, secretly built a private army consisting of three thousand elite warriors (Fang, 2014). In 248, Li Sheng (?-249), one of the henchmen of Cao, went to the home of Sima (Fang, 2014). He announced that he would like to say good-bye to Sima before going to his new position in Jingzhou (located in today's Hubei Province, China) (Fang, 2014). As a matter of fact, his aim was to make sure that whether Sima's serious disease was real or not. Sima successfully fooled him with a polished performance (Fang, 2014). Li believed that Sima was just an elderly man with little time left, having no chance to become the threat of Cao. After that, Cao and his henchmen totally ignored the Sima family. Finally, in 249, Cao and his henchmen were captured during the military coup of the Sima family (Fang, 2014).

Another famous example happened in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). In 1398, during the political struggle between Emperor Zhu Yunwen (1377-?) and his uncle Zhu Di (1360-1424), the emperor was cheated by his uncle's faking madness, choosing not to kill his uncle (Zhang, 2000). After escaping from being killed, Zhu Di finally gained an opportunity to rise in arms. After a series of fierce battles, Zhu Di became the new emperor of Ming Dynasty.

In the political history of ancient China, sometimes, the method of pretending to be avaricious, drunken, or lecherous was used by some ministers to protect themselves when facing the suspicion of the governors. In the political culture of ancient China, an official who was avaricious, drunken, or lecherous was usually seen as an unambitious one. Therefore, sometimes, some officials would choose to pretend to be avaricious, drunken, or lecherous when facing the suspicion of the governors. In Sui Dynasty (581-618), a general named Li Yuan (566-635) saved himself with the method of pretending to be drunken (Liu, 2000). After that, because of the chaos of the late Sui Dynasty, Li gained an opportunity to build his own regime, Tang Dynasty (618-907). After a series of wars, Tang Dynasty finally reunited the whole of China.

This stratagem could also be seen in the 20th century's China. In the 1910s, General Cai E (1882-1916) was overseen by the underlings of Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), the president of the Republic of China (1912-1949). Cai pretended that he had wallowed in wine and women, successfully letting Yuan believe that he was a man without great ambitions (Liu, 2016). The stratagem of Cai was of great use, helping him escape from the control of Yuan and go back to his base in Yunnan Province. After that, Cai finally gained an opportunity to rise in arms.

However, this method would not always be useful. For example, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589), a general named Gao Xiaoguan (541-573) was doubted by his cousin Emperor Gao Wei (556-577). Though he pretended to be avaricious, he was finally killed by the emperor (Li, 1972). As a matter of fact, before the death of him, one of his subordinates had reminded him that this method was useless (Li, 1972).

Another example happened during the Period of Warring States (475-221 B.C.). Wei Wuji (?-243 B.C.), a senior official of the State of Wei (403-225 B.C.), was doubted by his King. In order to eliminate this suspicion, Wei had to show that he was drunken and lecherous (Sima, 2006). Unfortunately, he finally died because of carnal excess before eliminating the suspicion (Sima, 2006).

### **The Analysis of the Stratagem**

From the examples happened in the history of ancient China, we can summarize that the core of this stratagem is guise. When facing the enemy, you need to pretend that you know nothing about his plan, eliminating the suspicion with your polished performance. After that, you will gain enough time to prepare for the counterattack. This is the basic logic of this stratagem.

This stratagem is a high-level psychological tactic. Sima Yi, the protagonist of the first example, was one of the most famous strategists during the Three Kingdoms Period. According to the research of some modern historians and military scientists, Sima always paid attention to the application of psychological tactics during his military career (The Editorial Team of the Military History of China, 2004). Before starting military actions, Sima would spend a lot of time researching the psychology of his adversaries, trying to find their weaknesses (The Editorial Team of the Military History of China, 2004). Thus, his style was striking only after the enemy had struck (The Editorial Team of the Military History of China, 2004). During the political struggle between him and Cao, his actions also followed this pattern. As a matter of fact, for ancient Chinese strategists, adopting psychological tactics was an important skill. In Chinese, this skill is called Gong Xin, translated as attacking the mind.

This stratagem is suitable for two situations. In the first situation, when having no ability to gain the best opportunity to counterattack temporarily, you need to hide your intention with this stratagem. In the second situation, sometimes, you clearly know that your enemy has designed a trap for you. However, you do not know much about the trap, having no chance to counterattack effectively. In this situation, you need to eliminate the suspicion with this stratagem, pretending that you have not discovered the trap. It will help you gain enough time to find a solution. It requires you to have great insight. Because if you want to find a solution, it will be necessary for you to identify the enemy's conspiracy accurately. Sometimes, you also need to be patient when waiting for the counterattack. We still take Sima Yi as an example. In order to wait for the opportunity of counterattack, he pretended to be sick for about two years (from 247 to early 249) (Fang, 2014).

At the same time, there is a phenomenon that is worth thinking about. As mentioned before, the stratagem of feigning madness without becoming insane can be divided into two parts: eliminating the suspicion and counterattacking. After reading the examples introduced before, we will find that in the political struggles of ancient China, many people who finished the whole two steps would gain the final victory. The ones who only did the first step would finally lose their lives because they still had a fluke mind, thinking that the political opponents would not kill them if they could prove that they were non-threatening. These examples show the cruelty of the political struggles. Sadly, for ancient Chinese politicians, it was the situation that they had to face.

### **Adopting the Stratagem of Feigning Madness Without Becoming Insane When Facing Strategic Deceptions**

As mentioned before, feigning madness without becoming insane is a kind of strategic deception. It can be adopted when facing other strategic deceptions.

No matter in history or in reality, strategic deceptions such as beauty trap and bluff are really common in diplomacy, political struggle, and commercial warfare, which are always used to confuse the other side. When facing these strategic deceptions, at the very beginning, you'd better make sure that the enemy will not doubt that you have discovered the conspiracy. This process needs the flexible application of the stratagem of feigning madness without becoming insane.

However, it is necessary to pay attention to an important phenomenon that the strategic deceptions will change because of the development of science and technology. For example, in the 20th century, because of the development of photography, there appeared a new type of beauty trap. In brief, the scandalous photos will be used to threaten the targeted people (Lewis, 2015). According to the theory of some modern military scientists, when facing the beauty trap, you can temporarily accept the beauty so that the enemy will not doubt that you have discovered the conspiracy (In Depth Military Editorial Board, 2019). However, when facing this special type of beauty trap, it is not a good choice to adopt the stratagem of feigning madness without becoming insane. In a word, whether adopting the stratagem of feigning madness without becoming insane, this matter needs careful consideration.

After eliminating the suspicion of the enemy, it will be a good time to prepare for the counterattack. Before the counterattack, you can take some actions to fluster your enemy. The best method is letting your enemy try everything to hide his intent. In this process, he will become really nervous, losing his judgement. In this situation, a psychological tactic named infection which is recorded in an ancient Japanese military book named *The Book of Five Rings* will be a good choice. When your adversaries are in a hurry to act, you'd better stay calm, pretending that you know nothing about it (Miyamoto, 2019). Your adversaries will be influenced by this mood, becoming less enthusiastic (Miyamoto, 2019). When they have been influenced by that mood, you need to defeat them as soon as possible (Miyamoto, 2019).

Besides, if your enemy is in a hurry to act, it will be a good opportunity for you to totally understand the conspiracy.

In a word, feigning madness without becoming insane is a psychological tactic at the strategic level, requiring meticulous plotting.

## Conclusion

Feigning madness without becoming insane is a traditional stratagem of ancient China. However, in the field of stratagem or psychological tactic, tradition is not equal to obsolescence. As a matter of fact, many classic stratagems will always be useful. If a person wants to be a master of feigning madness without becoming insane, a good psychological quality will be necessary. Besides, excellent acting skill is also of great importance. These skills need a long time to train. In a word, this stratagem is a kind of high-level psychological tactic. The research about this stratagem will be a good reference for today's strategists, politicians, and businessmen.

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