



HOME

WORLD

PEOPLE & POINTS

VIEWPOINT

NATION

BUSINESS

FORUM

SNAPSHOT

EXPAT'S EYE

ARCHIVES

## Harro von Senger and His 36 Stratagems

By Yang Jiaqing

Professor Harro von Senger, a leading Sinologist with the Swiss Institute of Comparative Law in Lausanne, recently held a press conference to announce the publication of the Chinese version of his book *The Book of Stratagems*. He is regarded as a leading Western expert on the subject having devoted several decades to the research of Chinese ancient military strategy. Uncertain of his readers' reactions, the professor only wrote about the first 18 'stratagems' in the first volume of his book published in German in Berne in 1992. But it became so popular that it has since been reprinted many times and translated into 12 languages, such as Dutch, Italian, Chinese, English and French. The total print run so far is 500,000.



In 2000, the second volume illustrating the remaining 18 stratagems came out. August 2006, meanwhile, witnessed the return of the ancient Chinese tactics to their home as the complete Chinese manuscript of two volumes was published in China.

At the press conference in Beijing, Professor von Senger impressed the audience with his refined Eastern manners and perfect Chinese. His speech had great sense of humanity and was sprinkled with many delightful idiomatic Chinese expressions.

### Love affair with "Chinese stratagems"

Born into an intellectual family in Switzerland, Harro Ven Senger saw Chinese characters for the first time at a family friend's home in 1963. The same year, he was admitted to the Department of Law of Zurich University and later chose the Chinese language as his minor. Although he passed the bar exam in 1971, he found the "China dream" too attractive to give up. So, he left Switzerland for Asia and studied Chinese in Japan, Chinese mainland and Taiwan.

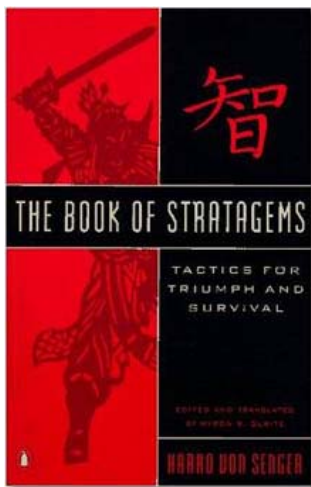
It was pure coincidence that led Harro von Senger to the "36 stratagems." One day, a professor from the Center for Chinese Language and Culture Studies of National Taiwan Normal University,

suddenly said to him that, of the 36 stratagems, running away was the best. When von Senger asked him what were the other 35 stratagems, the professor said he didn't know. At that time, von Senger was living in a students' dorm of Taiwan University and he questioned his Chinese roommates on the subject. Two or three days later, a Chinese student gave him a copy of all the names of the 36 stratagems. Several weeks later, when von Senger was at a book market and a Chinese student who was with him picked up one book and said: "This is a book on the 36 stratagems; are you interested?" Thus von Senger purchased his first book on this subject.

He studied in Japan for two years after his two-year stay in Taiwan. Then, between 1975 and 1977, he studied history and philosophy at Peking University. During this period, he gradually understood that the stratagems were not only relevant to ancient times but also formed a modern tactic for analyzing the adversary.

Upon returning to Switzerland, Harro von Senger started to examine the social phenomena in Western society in light of the 36 stratagems. "I noticed that the 36 stratagems are not unique to China; they have universal value and can help to better understand society and human relations. Therefore I selected a large number of Western cases in the first volume of Stratagems in order to globalize this branch of Chinese culture," he said.

## Eastern wisdom



The professor has divided consciousness of the stratagems into three levels. The first is zero level, in other words, total ignorance. He quoted the example of Adam and Eve, saying: "Of all the animals, the snake is the trickiest. Since Adam and Eve didn't have any consciousness of the trickery involved, they fell into the snake's trap. The outraged God drove them out of Paradise. A recent Western theory posed the question whether Adam and Eve could be Chinese. My answer is no. If they were Chinese, they would not have been trapped by the snake and they would be able to continue living in Paradise."

When he talked about the middle level, he cited an example from The Prince written by Niccolò Machiavelli, in which a politician concealed his real intentions through using plots and intrigues. Pretending to seek reconciliation, the politician took advantage of the trust of his enemy, who ended up being hanged for his sincerity. When Machiavelli wrote this history, he was aware of the stratagems used by the politician but he failed to define them.

According to Harro von Senger, the highest level of stratagems doesn't exist anywhere other than China and there were numerable examples from the classic novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms as manifestation, such as the linking stratagem. "Europeans could only know the stratagems, but would be unable to define them nor explain our full appreciation of them," he sighed.

## Victim of stratagems

As an expert on stratagems, Harro von Senger's practice of using them in life is nevertheless bumpy.

"After I returned to Switzerland, I wanted to change my specialty. I used to study law but at Beijing I studied history and philosophy. My horizon had been enlarged and I felt lucky that I wasn't admitted by Department of Law in China. To fulfill my personal dreams, I wanted to switch to Chinese studies. Thus I told a responsible professor that I wanted to teach at his department later. This professor was unhappy because he already had selected his successor and I would become a competitor to this person. One day, he sent me a letter with an attached copy to the dean; I responded also with an attached copy to the dean. I wrote my letter in a polite tone but his response was impolite. Thus I wrote a new letter from my side.

"In the beginning, the dean stood by my side. However, after my second letter, he said it would be difficult to work with me. After that, this important person no longer supported me. At that time, I was at level zero regarding the stratagems. It was too bad that I considered them as something confined to China in spite of my knowledge of the subject. When I started to write the first volume of Stratagems, I realized that I had fallen into the professor's trap as he had used the stratagem of sowing discord between the dean and me, namely, the 33rd of the 36 stratagems. If I was aware of that, I wouldn't have sent the second letter to the dean. Thus I have understood that it was very useful to learn these stratagems and very harmful to ignore them."

## God and 36 stratagems

God taught people "be then as wise as snakes, and as gentle as doves." Professor von Senger thinks by saying this, God was encouraging man to gain a consciousness of the stratagems. He said that many Europeans failed to understand this sentence. Last year, he had a reunion with his middle school English teacher, an aged priest. The latter had preached over 1,000 sermons but had never talked about this quotation. Von Senger cited this is an example of Westerners' total ignorance of the stratagems.

## Three methods of using the stratagems

According to the Swiss Sinologist, there are three ways of using the stratagems. The first is to take the initiative in resorting to them; the second is to analyze the potential stratagems of the adversary so as not to fall into any trap and the third one is to analyze the stratagems as spectators.

"Why do I recommend the discipline of stratagems? It's because it is real wisdom. As a Westerner, I have realized that my studies of the stratagems have greatly enriched my intelligence. It is a good instrument to understand politics, economics and human relations. I am particular interested in the second method of employing stratagems to avoid falling into traps and the third method of using stratagems as a spectator. In my opinion, enriching Western intelligence means importing and taking

advantage of the knowledge in this area. The difference between my book and those written by Chinese authors on the same subject is that my book systematically studies the 36 stratagems in a scientific manner and makes analysis from different angles. If we can use the knowledge with Chinese people, we will be able to build a better world of peace and mutual comprehension,” he concluded.

## China's 36 stratagems

According to the treatise 36 Stratagems: The Secret Book of the Art of War (Sanshiliu Ji: Miben Bingfa) from circa AD 1500

1. Deceiving the emperor [by inviting him to a house by the sea that is really a disguised ship] and [thus cause him to] cross the sea
2. Besieging [the undefended capital of the country of] Wei to rescue Zhao [the country that has been attacked by the Wei forces]
3. Killing with a borrowed knife
4. Awaiting at one's ease the exhausted enemy
5. Taking advantage of a fire to commit robbery
6. Clamor in the east, attack in the west
7. Creating something out of nothing
8. Openly repairing the [burned wooden] walkway, in secret [before completing the repairs] marching to Chencang [to attack the enemy]
9. Observing the fire burning on the opposite shore [seemingly uninvolved]
10. Hiding the dagger behind a smile
11. Letting the plum tree wither in place of the peach tree
12. [Quick-wittedly] leading away the sheep [that unexpectedly crosses one's path]
13. Beating the grass to startle the snakes
14. Borrowing a corpse for the soul's return
15. Luring the tiger down from the mountain [onto the plain]
16. If one wishes to catch something, one has first to let it go
17. Tossing out a brick to attract jade

- 18 Catching the bandits by first catching the ringleader
19. Removing the firewood from under the cauldron
20. Clouding the water to catch the fish [robbed of their clear sight]
21. The cicada casts off its skin of gleaming gold
22. Shutting the door to capture the thief
23. Befriending a distant enemy to attack an enemy nearby
24. Borrowing a route [through the country of Yu] for an attack against [its neighboring country of] Guo [in order to capture Yu after the conquest of Guo]
25. Stealing the beams and replacing the pillars [change on the inside, while leaving the façade of the house unchanged]
26. Cursing the acacia, [while] pointing at the mulberry tree
27. Feigning madness without losing the balance
28. Removing the ladder after [the opponent] has climbed onto the roof
29. Decorating a [barren] tree with [artificial] flowers
30. Turning [the role of] the guest into [that of] the host
31. The stratagem of the beautiful man/woman
32. The stratagem of opening the gates [of a city that is unprepared for self-defense]
33. The special agent stratagem /The stratagem of sowing discord
34. The stratagem of the suffering flesh
35. The linking stratagem/Stratagem-linking
36. [When the situation is growing hopeless] running away [in good time] is the best stratagem

Translated by Harro von Senger, in *The 36 Stratagems for Business*, London 2006, p.3-4