

5. Sūndž 8
The Nine Variables 九變
c0334

A collection of points to be exploited, dangers to be shunned, or weaknesses to be prevented. The emphasis is on avoidance of surprise and on judgement of specific situations, not on applying fixed rules of thumb.

This notably cautious chapter comes after the resurgence of Ngwèi, which Chí had defeated in 0343, but whose ruler had assumed the title King in 0335, proclaiming himself equal to the King of Chí. Chapter 8 retains the previous tactical focus, but moves toward general principles, chief of which is the idea of adjusting to circumstances. For later additions on the issue of civil versus military control of the army, see the Interpolations at the end of the chapter.

[A. Terrain]

8a1. [*Interpolation; see at end of chapter*]

8a2a. 圯地無舍，

On low ground, one does not encamp.

Don't give away the height advantage.

The first five of these nine maxims stress the advantages of (1) high ground, (2) communication with one's own forces, and (3) freedom of movement. They summarize the essence of the terrain advice in Sūndž 9-11.

8a2b. 衢地交合，

On connected ground, one maintains contact.

Between the segments of one's own army, which because of its size cannot march in a single column, or advance by a single road.

8a2c. 絕地無留，

On isolated ground, one does not remain.

Move as quickly as possible to ground where the preceding rule *can* be followed. Minimize your exposure to risk.

8a2d. 圍地則謀，

On surrounded ground, one makes plans.

To break out. The risk in the preceding situation has been realized. Tsáu Tsāu explains: "Come up with some unusual plan 奇謀." One must do *something*.

8a2e. 死地則戰。

On fatal ground, one gives battle.

The risk is realized. But if there is no choice but to fight, the army *will* fight.

The above are the "Five Advantages" of 8a3a. They point in fact to *disadvantages*, but by highlighting risks and giving solutions. To know when you have an advantage, and when you don't, is to know "advantage."

The next four sayings are different in form from the above five:

8a2f. 塗有所不由，

Some paths are not to be followed.

Don't attempt to overcome impracticable lines of march or advance.

8a2g. 軍有所不擊，

Some armies are not to be attacked.

There is no point in disputing things with a superior and well prepared force.

8a2h. 城有所不攻，

Some cities are not to be assaulted.

At this time, an art of defensive warfare was being practiced by a group under the leadership of Chín Gǔ-lí. MZ 25:8 (0335): "Some small states are not attacked because . . . food supplies are ample, inner and outer walls in repair, and superiors and inferiors in harmony." The Chín Gǔ-lí group was later absorbed by the Micians, who made improved defense more widely available. See the extract at the end of this chapter.

Some cities do not *need* to be taken. Tsáu Tsāu tells how on one campaign he bypassed a few strongly fortified cities to take several easier ones.¹

8a2i. 地有所不爭。

Some ground is not to be contested.

These maxims make up the needed nine. They are constraints for which there is no tactical solution. There is here no question of personal prowess. As with everything else in early military theory, it is cost/benefit analysis.

8a2j. [*Interpolation; see at end of chapter.*]

8a3a. 故將通於九變之利者，知用兵矣。

Thus, the general who understands the advantages of the Nine Variables will know how to use his troops.

This statement sums up the above as a list *with nine members*; it does not allow for 8a2j. Hence our conclusion that 8a2j was a later interpolation.

8a3b. 將不通九變之利，雖知地形，不能得地之利矣。

The general who does not understand the advantages of the Nine Variables, though he may know the *configuration* of the ground, will not be able to obtain the *advantage* of the ground.²

The point is not to recognize it, but to know what to do with it.

¹The Federal garrison at Harper's Ferry impeded a Confederate army moving north. Lee on one occasion took time to capture it, though it was subsequently retaken by the Federals. Notes Longstreet, "The next year on our way to Gettysburg, there was the same situation of affairs at Harper's Ferry, but we let it alone." [Fuller 168]

²The "Seven" text lacks the particles 於 and 者, which are found in the parallel line in 8a3a; the "Eleven" text restores them. In all such points we follow "Seven."

8a3c. 治兵不知九變之術，雖知五利，不能得人之用矣。

One who is in charge of troops but cannot exploit the Nine Variables may know the Five Advantages, but will not be able to make proper use of his men.

The “Five Advantages” are the first five items in the 8a2 list. We here learn that no rules of thumb are enough. The good general is flexible and empirical.

The text emphasizes correct risk assessment, as witness what follows:

8a3d. 是故智者之慮，必雜於利害。

For this reason, the reflections of the wise man must consider both potential advantage and potential harm.

8a3e. 雜於利而務可信也，雜於害而患可解也。

He considers possible advantages, and focuses on those that can be realized; he considers possible dangers, and worries about those that can be remedied.

Discern the salient features. Of them, pay attention to gains that are actually gettable and weaknesses that are actually fixable. Let the rest go.

Dù Mù: “In trying to understand how the enemy may be harmed, I cannot only consider what harm the enemy may do to me, but must first think how I can seize the advantage from the enemy.”

[B. Operations]

8b1a. 是故屈諸侯者以害，

Thus one deters others³ with threats of harm,

A basic threat is the outflanking maneuver which leads to the enemy’s retreat.

The 0656 intrusion of Chí and allies into Chǔ was less an attack than an intimidation ploy. Chí gained a peace agreement, but it was soon violated by Chǔ. Northern military pressure could not steadily be brought to bear.

8b1b. 役諸侯者以業，

One manipulates others with distractions.

Dù Mù advises keeping the enemy busy and allowing them no rest.⁴ The idea of distraction is familiar to any jūdô student. The “face” of an enemy is not the front side of his body, but the point on which his attention is focused. The attacker can shift the defender’s focus, with consequent tactical advantage.

8b1c. 雜於利而務可信也。

One tempts others with chances of benefit.

The classic ploy is pretended flight, which tempts the pursuing force to regard the fleeing enemy as already beaten. Failure to pursue a fleeing enemy is usually judged a fault, but one needs to be wary of a possible trap.

³Jū-hóu 諸侯 “the Lords” here and below are other states or their armies; the enemy.

⁴For Marines on Guadalcanal, “Sleep was banished by [Japanese] float planes . . . These . . . dropped impact-fuzed bombs, after “Louie the Louse” had illuminated with long-burning parachute flares.” [Griffith 100]

8b2. 故用兵之法，

So,⁵ the rule for handling troops is this:

8b2a. 無恃其不來，恃吾有以待之。

Never rely on their not coming; rely on having something to meet them with.

Preparation: Correct assessment of the ground; readiness of the troops.

8b2b. 無恃其不攻，恃吾有所不可攻也。

Never rely on their not attacking; rely on having an unattackable position.

Do not assume a negligent enemy. Caesar's armies were as much camp builders as fighters, and preparation of defenses should be routine work.

[C. Leadership]

8c1. 故將有五危。

With the general, there are five dangers:

Our general is intended, though some commentators understand the following as a list of faults to be exploited in an enemy general. It works that way too. Nearly all military wisdom is reversible in this sense.

8c1a. 必死可殺，

If he is determined to face death, he can be killed.

A warrior is ready to die to demonstrate his honor. But victory is important, and to convert bravery into victory takes more than bravery.⁶

8c1b. 必生可虜，

If he is determined to survive, he can be captured.

Officers as well as men must also be willing to risk death. Without that basic element, nothing of military consequence can be achieved.

8c1c. 忿速可侮，

If he is impetuous, he can be baited.

Dù Mù mentions Yáo Syāng 姚襄, who in 357 stayed behind his fortifications until baited by the attackers to come out; he was then easily killed.⁷

8c1d. 廉潔可辱，

If he is principled, he can be shamed.

Moral principles may influence military decisions in the wrong way.

⁵Gù 故 (often translated “therefore”) is here little more than a paragraphing mark.

⁶Commander Ohmae, analyzing the failure of a Japanese attempt to take Henderson Field on Guadalcanal, faulted a charge led by Major General Nasu against a well defended position. Said he, “Nasu knew nothing but charging.” [Frank 365]

⁷Several generals urged Lee to retire after the costly battle of Sharpsburg, but he refused: “Gentlemen, we will not cross the Potomac tonight . . . If McClellan wants to fight in the morning, I will give him battle again. Go!” [Fuller 169]

8c1e. 覆民可煩。

If he is solicitous of his men, he can be upset.⁸

An officer must himself be willing to die, and he must also be willing to lead his troops to death. Acceptance of casualties is the mark of the great general.

8c2a. 凡此五者，將之過也，用兵之災也。

These five are faults of the general; they are disasters for the troops he leads.

8c2b. 覆軍殺將，必以五危。不可不察也。

Whenever an army is defeated and its general killed, it will be because of one of these five dangers. They cannot be left unexamined.

Mental equilibrium is the most important quality in a leader. Departing from it, whether from valor or compassion, may doom the troops one commands. The most honorable policy, and ultimately the kindest policy, is just to win. The managerial side of war is here asserted against its emotional opposite.

Interpolations

These lines were later added to the original chapter.

8a2j. [君命有所不受]

[Some commands of the ruler are not to be accepted].

This idea had appeared in *Sūndž 10c1 (c0353)*. Here, it is an incongruous afterthought to the “Nine Variables,” by someone who wanted to intrude that idea into *Sūndž 8* (in several ways, *Sūndž 8* is modeled on *Sūndž 10*).

There was no question of the army not being generally subordinate to civil authority. That issue did later arise for those in charge of the *Sūndž* text, hence the still later addition of the next item, which somewhat overrides it:

8a1. [孫子曰，凡用兵之法，將受命於君，合軍聚衆]

[*Sūndž* said, The rule in war is that the general receives his orders from the ruler, and then gathers the army and assembles the masses].

This and similar headnotes (see also chapters 2-3 and 7) were probably added to counter the implication (8a2j, above) that a general may act independently of the ruler’s orders. This was probably done when the text was presented to the new ruler of *Chí (c0300)*. The ruler thus became the final authority.

What is the difference between the “army” and the “masses?” To maintain an army in being is very expensive, and we assume that the organization of camp – provisions, weapons, and officers (the “army”), the operational core – was prepared before the men (“masses”) were assembled.

⁸“There were commanders for whom every single casualty was a personal grief. One of them was our own CO, Thomas E Crowley. Except for this one fatal flaw, there wasn’t a finer leader in the regiment . . . He demanded a casualty report immediately after each battle or skirmish . . . It was only a question of time before Captain Crowley’s fatal compassion incapacitated him for command.” [Inouye 113f]

Reflections

This chapter is impatient with detail; it tends to summarize. It warns about unattainable objectives and leadership flaws. It seems that after an initial advantage, Chí's chief enemies were now approaching military parity with Chí. Both sides have learned the infantry basics. The chances of easy success are fewer. To achieve them requires correct judgement of terrain possibilities, and mental concentration in leading the troops. Fine points count more than they used to. Sūndž 8 is best read as a corrective to the earlier chapters.

The Five Principles, as noted above, are closely related to the terrain types of the earlier chapters; the elements of military maneuver. The additional Four are warnings: not all ground is favorable, not all opponents can be attacked. The Five are about making war; the Four are conditions unfavorable to war. The addition of the Four shows that the secrets of military success were now generally known, and the enemy was also likely to be aware of them. There was also an improvement in the technique of defending cities, a specialty at first practiced by teams of experts, and later adopted by the Mician movement. The idea was not to oppose war politically (which had been the first position), but to make it prohibitively costly for those making war. This was done by strengthening, and organizing, the civil population, the victims of war. The visiting defense expert, the Warden, became the effective ruler of the city.

Here is an extract from the Mician defensive writings (MZ 52:1), to be compared with the quotation from MZ 25 at 8a2h above. It shows the formerly independent Chín Gǔ-lí reimagined as a disciple of Mwòdž, who himself is the expert in defense: the Micicians by this time have absorbed the Chín Gǔ-lí group. The formula for successful defense is similar, but the differences from MZ 25:8 are nevertheless important.

MZ 52:1. Chín Gǔ-lí inquired of Master Mwòdž, . . . If I wished to defend a small state, how would I do it? . . .

Master Mwòdž said, . . . My walls and moats would be in repair, defensive weapons complete, fuel and grain sufficient, superiors and inferiors in amity. I would also seek to obtain help from the rulers on all four sides. This is how I would hold.

Further, if the Warden [shǒu jǔ 守者, to whom the direction of the defense is entrusted] is capable but the ruler does not make use of him, it is as though the city is indefensible. If the Warden is used, he must be capable in defensive matters; if he is not, and the ruler uses him, then it is as though the city is indefensible. If the Warden is capable, and the ruler respects and uses him, only then can there be a defense.

Defense of cities has now been outsourced to the Micicians. This raises the ante for all concerned. The issue is no longer between an army and a populace, but between an army and a militarily organized defense.