

Photo-Imagery for Strategy

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"Dispute" extracted from "Reflections in the Bamboo Grove: Suntzu"

STRATEGY PAST AND PRESENT

Western textbook contributions to strategic planning are mainly delineating schematically portrayed, rationally argued, logically set out processes. Concepts, steps, diagrams, flow-charts are recurring motifs. These works emerged at a time when order and linear thinking were in vogue.

Thus in Kenichi Ohmae's the Mind of the Strategist, there is nothing about

developing the deeper, intuitive, metaphorical thinking, say through use of imagery. Instead, rationality dominates with the mind of strategist explained through diagrams, boxes, squares, rectangles, arrows. In short, Western strategy taps on the explicit, rational, logical and not the implicit, metaphorical and intuitive.

NOW, WE ARE PERHAPS A LITTLE WISER.

As we realise Nature is more chaotic than merely linear. Here we argue that there is an art - not only science - to strategy. That creativity in strategy making as well as depth in thinking may be fostered through the use of imagery. Thus here we relate photo-imagery to

strategy. We illustrate with only two from the "Reflections in the Bamboo Grove" series of photo-imagery by Steven Yee¹. The most intriguing feature of his series is the lack of any motifs explicitly on war! Yet this is in keeping with the highest ideal of Sun Tzu: "Winning without fighting"

MASTERING STRATEGY

One may ask, "How else do you win?" Sun Tzu will reply, "Win by strategy." Now, where and how do you get insights

about strategy?

Many will reply by reading works on strategy. Yet strategy should never be reduced to a purely scholarly activity. For in the past, there are those who succeeded on large-scale (in the likes of Genghis Khan and Mogul Emperor Akbar) strategy yet could not even read! Mogul Emperor Akbar was a deep, reflective thinker who had mastered strategy. He, like Genghis Khan, could not read by himself and had scholars read books to him so that he could then reflect upon these works. Mr Oei Hong Leong (Sunday Times, 16th March) had himself said he was not scholarly inclined having not even passed his O levels yet there he is an excellent business strategist. The key to mastery of strategy lies more perhaps in deep, reflective thinking.

Mastery of strategy requires a lifetime of reflecting on experiences through which lessons are remembered. There may be one possible way to enhance one's skills in deep yet sharp, reflective, metaphorical thinking: it is to cultivate a habit of pondering upon photo-imagery so as to relate the image to insights about strategy. To illustrate, we begin with the study on imagery for strategy on the next page. We conclude this article with reference to Confucius.

CONFUCIUS AND PHOTO-IMAGERY

Perhaps one day PSS may organise a photography contest one that encourages photographers to render imagery relevant to the deeper, subtler concepts of art of war strategy. As illustrated here, the photographs if interpreted metaphorically may deepen thinking or trigger off intuitive, metaphorically rich insights to strategy.

Remember, it was Confucius, the Sage of Learning who was the first to moot the idea of life-long learning, He was even more famous

for saying, "A picture is worth no less than a thousand words". If he was teaching today, I am sure he will most likely teach through photographs. Who knows, he may even advocate for all those involved in teaching to learn the art of photography. Why? So as to master the skills of communicating through photographs! After all Chinese characters are originally pictographs.

(ENDNOTES)

1 For the complete series, see Steven Yee's Reflections in the Bamboo Grove, Sandven Image House, 2002.

2 p. 79, **3** p. 86, **4** p. 98, Steven Yee, Reflections in the Bamboo Grove., Sandven Image House, 2002

5 See for example, p 98 of Foo CT and Foo CT, 2002, Thinking around Stratagems, Horizon Books.

FIRST CASE STUDY

(1) Dispute 2

The image on the right has universal appeal. Everybody recognises the animals to be white tigers. The Chinese refer their best generals as Tiger-Generals. The power, ferocity, tenacity, and viciousness of tigers are part of the Chinese literary heritage. With this as a background, you may reflect on the photo-imagery. Use a pencil to scribble down your insights. Then compare with this list:

- From the author: "Solve disputes within your camp fast. Disputes unsolved will cause more chaos. Especially when it involves your tiger-generals." What is the most intriguing about the imagery?

- Internal strife: This expands on the author's point. At the King's level of deliberation on strategy, some rivalry among Tiger-Generals may not be a bad thing. Why? Then the King has the flexibility of using the might of one tiger to counter-balance the other. So whilst a country may be torn apart if battles broke out between Tiger-Generals, some rivalry may ensure the stability in the rule of the

King. This counter-balancing is even suggested in the imagery.

- Intrigue: The juxtaposing of the full moon hovering above the two tigers suggests a possible intrigue. To produce the imagery, shooting the picture is one aspect of the skills involved. More difficult is the art of composing the imagery for it to relate to strategy. Steven Yee's imagery is marvelous for implying an intrigue. On first glance, it appears the tigers are fighting. Yet if you study the shot, there may be something else. That the tigers are staging a fight alluding to the seasoned, strategically minded tiger-generals. Furthermore, the black-on-white stripes may be interpreted metaphorically to suggest these tiger-generals to wield both the sword and the brush. In other words, these are not just brute generals but are also deep thinking, Sun Tzu-type generals.

SECOND CASE STUDY

(2) Practice³

This imagery is chosen for its local appeal. One that Singaporeans are familiar with. Before you read any further, ask yourself, how does the photo-imagery remind you of the Art of War by Sun Tzu or strategy in general. Pause for a few moments to jot your ideas down. Now compare with the list:

- According to Steven Yee, it is "Training and practice are the secrets behind a mighty force. With practice comes perfection. With repetitive training comes consistency." [emphasis added]

- Timing: for the man to teh ta re (colloquialism, Singapore) flawlessly, he had to be timely in his actions. Metaphorically, this is just like the archer who continuously hit his targets.

- Effortlessness: Training never ends, but the question arises: "When may I be said to have attained perfection in learning the skills?" The answer: "When you do it so effortlessly". That it becomes second nature for you.

- Instantaneous concentration: Look at his eyes, the man is deeply concentrated at the instant of releasing tea (or teh). The archer too when firing his arrows had to concentrate on the target. Also, just as the archer had to



"Practice" extracted from "Reflections in the Bamboo Grove: Suntzu"

fire his arrows amidst the chaos of war, this man had to ta re in the midst of noisy customers. Both the archer and this man must never let themselves be distracted.

- Presence of mind: Besides this instantaneous concentration, this man as well as the archer had to have a presence of mind. Why? So as to respond in a timely fashion to an evolving, dynamic situation. So must the man who "pulls" or tarik the teh or tea. For in this art of "pulling" the tea, there is a rhythm to keep and as he is doing the ta-re he had to avoid a bypassing customer. Otherwise there may be a spill of teh. Just like the archer who must have a presence of mind to be spotting the target. The best archers hit moving targets serially, one after another in a series.

You may add more insights or venture to do more of the photo-imagery in the magnificent series by Steven Yee. Try for example, the most alluring Reflection⁴ and you will have more to think about the ancient Chinese stratagem of Beauty Trap.⁵ Ask yourself why the slant in the partial face? ■