

## CHAPTER 8

Nine<sup>1</sup> Varieties<sup>2</sup>

*This chapter addresses the question of responding deftly to contingencies and advises awareness of both the advantages and the disadvantages of any action that might be contemplated. The principle of preparedness is proposed as the surest way to avoid disaster.*

Master Sun said,

The method of waging war is ordinarily that the general receives a mandate from the ruler, then assembles the army and brings together the masses. He does not encamp on unfavorable terrain; he joins with allies at terrain having a crossroads; he does not linger on forsaken terrain; he devises plans to extricate his forces from surrounded terrain; if he finds himself on desperate terrain he does battle.

There are paths that he does not take; there are armies that he does not strike; there are cities that he does not attack; there are terrains that he does not contest; there are ruler's orders that he does not accept.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore,

the general who is versed in the advantages<sup>4</sup> of the nine varieties of terrain<sup>5</sup> knows how to wage war; the general who is not versed in the advantages of the nine varieties, although he may know the types of terrain, cannot gain the advantages of the terrain. If one prosecutes war without knowing the techniques of the nine varieties, although one may know the five advantages,<sup>6</sup> one will not be able to gain the use of one's men.

For this reason,

in his considerations, he who is wise must pay attention both to advantage and to disadvantage. By paying attention to advantage, his affairs will proceed with assurance; by paying attention to disadvantage, his troubles will be resolved.

For this reason,

that which causes the feudal lords to submit is disadvantage; that which causes the feudal lords to serve is encumbrance; that which causes the feudal lords to give allegiance is advantage.

Therefore,

the method of waging war is not to rely upon the enemy's not coming, but to rely upon my waiting in readiness for him; it is not to rely upon the enemy's not attacking, but to rely upon making myself invulnerable to attack.

Therefore,

there are five fatal flaws in a general: recklessness, for he may be killed by the enemy; timidity, for he may be captured by the enemy; irascibility, for he may be provoked by the enemy; incorruptibility, for he may be insulted by the enemy; solicitousness, for he may be made anxious by the enemy. In all of these respects, if a general overdoes them, it will be disastrous for waging war. The overthrow of an enemy and the killing of a general are the inevitable consequences of these five fatal flaws. They cannot be left unexamined.<sup>7</sup>

## 8. Nine Varieties

1. There is vast controversy among Chinese commentators over the significance of “nine” in the title. Some say that it only means “a large number of,” while others contend that it literally means “nine.” In either case, there have been many proposals put forward for which particular group of nine (or many) items is intended. After careful study, the reader is invited to suggest his or her own set of nine (or many) variations. A good place to begin might be to look at chapter 11, “Nine Types of Terrain,” with which the present chapter shares considerable overlap and resonance.

Wang Xi: “I claim that ‘nine’ is simply a very large number. The method of waging war requires infinite variations.”

Zhang Yu: “‘Variation’ is the method of not being constrained by constancy. This implies that, when one is confronting an evolving situation [i.e., something that is happening], one should follow what is appropriate and act accordingly. Whenever one is struggling

with someone else for advantage, it is necessary to know the nine varieties of terrain. Therefore, this chapter comes after ‘The Struggle of Armies.’”

2. The term *bian* may be more literally rendered as “transformations.” However, no single translation of *bian* is suitable for this chapter, since the term is applied to widely different phenomena, including “alternatives” and “contingencies,” aside from “varieties” and “transformations.”
3. The Yinque Shan bamboo strip manuscripts (pp. 98–99) include a commentary on these five exclusionary (“that he does not”) clauses. The commentary emphasizes and explains the specific conditions under which a general may choose not to carry out certain (viz., the first four) courses of action that he would normally be expected to take. The fifth exclusionary clause subsumes the preceding four clauses: “When the ruler’s orders contravene these four contingencies, they are not to be carried out.”
4. And disadvantages, of course.
5. This word is missing in the Song-period *Wu jing qi shu* (Seven military classics) and *Taiping yulan* (Imperial survey of the Great Peace [reign period]) editions of the text.
6. This probably refers to the advantages deriving from the exclusionary clauses iterated above and discussed in n. 3.
7. Since it appears so frequently at the conclusion of a passage, the injunction “they cannot be left unexamined” would appear to be a formulaic expression in the rhetoric of the period.