

Sūndǔ 12
Fire Attacks 火攻
c0306

The section on fire attacks proper is followed by a few remarks on water attacks. No fire attacks are recorded for Spring and Autumn times; the first mentions are in Mwòdǔ 20 (c0380) and 11 (c0370), and in stories in the Dzwǒ Jwàn (04c). Sūndǔ 12 completed a previous 11-chapter text (one in which 11A and 11B were still separate). Its numerical formulas suggest the style of Chí thought that was dominant in Chí after the creation of the Jì-syà establishment in 0313. The last section on war and the state echoes the ending of Sūndǔ 2, and together with that chapter, was presumably meant to provide a framing statement for what was then a 12-chapter Sūndǔ.

[A. Fire Attacks]

12a1. 孫子曰，凡火攻有五。

Sūndǔ said, There five types of fire attack:

“Fire” (hwǒ 火) is here a noun, but is a verb, “set fire to” in what follows.

12a1a. 一曰火人，

The first is: fire the men.

Men in their camps (compare 12a1e). Dù Mù explains that the attack is made on the palisades 柵 of the camp; those emerging from burning structures can easily be killed. Fire can be used against ships, as Jōu Yǒ did successfully against Tsáu Tsāu’s naval forces at the battle of Red Cliff in 208. Jōu Yǒ was fortunate in the winds, which helped the fireships reach their intended targets. If not, his two wives of the Chyáu family might have become concubines in Tsáu Tsāu’s “Bronze Bird” palace. Writes Dù Mù, gazing at a weapon found at the battle site:

*A broken halberd in the sand,
unruled even now:
The name of a former dynasty
can still be read somehow;
Had not the breezes from the east
favored Master Jōu,
The Bronze Bird might have held, all spring,
the two Princesses Chyáu*

12a1b. 二曰火積，

The second is: fire the supplies.

Dù Mù cites the stalemate between Syàng Yǒ and Lyóu Bāng, in the fighting that preceded the Hàn Dynasty, which was broken by a raid on Syàng Yǒ’s supply area. Logistics ranks next to the enemy himself in the priority list.

12a1c. 三曰火輜，

The third is: fire the vehicles.

Supply wagons were slow, and thus attractive targets. If they could be burned, the supplies might survive, but could no longer be transported.

12a1d. 四曰火庫，

The fourth is: fire the storehouses.

Supply dumps. We are still in the area of attacking the enemy's logistics.¹

12a1e. 五曰火隊。

The fifth is: fire the brigades.

Men in formation for battle (so Dù Mù; compare 12a1a).²

12a2. 行火必有因，煙火必素具。

The tactic of deploying fire must have a proper occasion; materials for kindling fire must be prepared in advance.

The “proper occasions” are given below; the materials are left unspecified.

12a2a. 發火有時，起火有日。

There are times for launching fire, and there are days for starting fire.

Note the studied metrical parallelism in this and the preceding lines.

12a2a1. 時者，天之燥。

The *times* are when the weather is dry.

This refers to seasons. October through April (most of solar winter and spring) are low rainfall times in the area of Chí and Lǚ (Cressey **Land** 273).

12a2a2. 日者，月在箕，壁，翼，軫也。凡此四宿者，風起之日也。

The *days* are when the moon is in Basket, Wall, Wing, or Crossbar; these four constellations define days when winds arise.

Of the 28 lunar mansions, Basket (whose chief star is γ Sagittarii) is 7th, last in the eastern group; Wall (γ Pegasi) is 14th, last in the northern group. We expect Triad (參, ζ Orionis), 21st, last of the western group, but get the 27th and 28th, the last *two* of the *southern* group, Wing (α Crateris) and Crossbar (γ Corvi). The list is thus not *entirely* schematic.

12a3. 凡火攻，必因五火之變而應之。

In making a fire attack,³ one must follow up according to the actual situation arising from one of the five types.

The enemy's response is not predictable; one must wait to see what develops.

¹The breakdown is helpful to the general, but there may also be an attempt to reach a total of five kinds of fire attack; five being a cosmically good number.

²Emending dwèi 隊 “brigades” to swéi 隧 “dropping fire” substitutes a *method* of attack for an *object* of attack, and violates the pattern of the passage. Jyǎ Lín emends to 隧 in the sense “roads; communications,” but this was already dealt with above.

³The introductory fán 凡 marks the transition from preparation to exploitation.

12a3a. 火發於內，則早應之於外。

If fire breaks out within, respond promptly from without.

Tsáu Tsāu is careful to remark that the “response” must be by troops. Dù Mù adds that “prompt” response is essential; the point of a fire attack is to disturb the enemy’s composure, and the attack Tsáu Tsāu envisions should be made before order has been restored; “one cannot defeat the enemy by fire alone.”

12a3b. 火發兵靜者，待而勿攻。

If fire breaks out but the soldiers remain calm, wait and don’t attack.

If the enemy are confused by the fire, one should attack them in that confused state. But if they maintain order at the outset, one should wait.

12a3d. 極其火力，可從而從之，不可從而止。

When the fire has reached its height, if you can follow up, then do so. If you can’t follow up, then desist.

The last chance. If it offers no opportunities, refrain. In the late layers of the Sūndǔ, surprise does not always succeed. The enemy has read the book too.

12a3e. 火可發於外，無待於內，以時發之。

Fires can also be set without, in which case don’t wait for what happens within. Set those fires in accordance with the time factor.

All fire attacks should be made under favorable conditions, as set forth in 12a2 and following.

12a3f. 火發上風，無攻下風。

If fire breaks out upwind, don’t attack from downwind.

Position your force so you don’t wind up suffering from your own fire attack. As Dù Mù says, attack *with* the wind, not *against* the wind.

12a3g. 晝風久，夜風止。

A day wind will last long; a night wind will soon stop.

This conflicts with other weather lore. Dù Mù cites DDJ 23 (c0325), which says that *no* wind lasts long. Méi Yáu-chín cites the rule that “a day wind stops at night; a night wind stops at day,” which is also not what the Sūndǔ says. In a given place, at a given season, such a rule might have some validity. Offered as a general maxim, it simply pushes the text, as does 12a2c, toward mumbo-jumbo. But at the time, it counted as scientific meteorology.

12a4. 凡軍必知有五火之變，以數守之。

The army must know about the varying possibilities with the five fire attacks, and how to defend against them according to the numbers.

This is the section summary. The “numbers” in 12a2c give the days on which an army should be alert for a fire attack by the enemy. Though not mentioned in the Sūndǔ, the 04c literature suggests that fire was also used against the civil population. For defense against fire attacks on towns, see the end of the chapter. For fire attacks in later Chinese history, see Sawyer **Fire**.

[B. Water Attack]

12b1a. 故以火佐攻者明，以水佐攻者強。

So he who aids an attack with fire is wise; he who aids an attack with water is strong.

The basic military use of water is as a moat around a city, but here both clauses envision attack, so Dù Yòu is wrong to take “strong” as “defensively strong.” For the solution to this riddle (the passage was probably composed with the “wise/good” antithesis of LY 6:23 in mind), see next.

12b1b. 水可以絕，不可以奪。

Water can isolate, but it cannot diminish.

This tells us that the water attack here envisioned consisted of diverting a river to reconfigure the battlefield. Such a tactic does not reduce the enemy’s power, it merely limits his ability to bring his power to bear on the situation. It is wiser to attack with fire, which reduces the enemy’s power permanently.

Another use of water mentioned in contemporary texts but not included in this chapter is the poisoning of rivers and other water supplies; see MZ 11 (c0370) and DJ 9/14:3 (c0350), where Chín poisoned a river, with the result that many of the invading Jìn soldiers, who were camped downstream, died.

[C. Following Up]

12c1a. 夫戰勝攻取，而不修其功者，凶。命曰費留。

So to sum up: being victorious in battle, or taking what you attack, but then not further developing that success, is ill-omened. We may call it “wasteful.”

If a favorable result is not followed up, it is wasted. Thus LY *13:22 (0317): The Master said, The men of the South have a saying: “A man without stability cannot be made into a diviner of a physician.” Good! “If he does not stabilize his virtue, he may incur shame.” The Master said, One does not simply inquire of the oracle, and nothing more.” You don’t bask in a good omen or a good result; you stabilize it by action. Luck is not something you *have*, it is something you can perhaps use.

12c1b. 故曰，明主慮之，良將修之。

Thus is it said, “The wise ruler plans for it, the able general develops it.”

The overall strategic goal, which must be clearly foreseen by the state and consecutively realized by the army; the logical thread which leads the general from one success to the next. The source of the quoted saying is unknown.

12c2a. 非利不動，

If a strategy looks unprofitable, don’t implement it;

12c2b. 非得不用，

if a plan looks unachievable, don’t use it.

12c2c. 非危不戰。

If the situation is not critical, don’t give battle.

The business of war is to profit the state, not to display heroics.

12c3a. 主不可以怒而興師，

A ruler must not raise a host in anger.

The text here adds sonority by using the archaic term shī 師 “host” for the modern jywn 軍 “army.” We have retained the archaic term, and merely note its rhetorical effect. The chapter is working up to its conclusion.

12c3b. 將不可以愠而致戰。

A general must not give battle from pique.

Emotions are emphasized in the chivalric tradition, but are out of place in modern war.

12c3c. [*Interpolation; see at end of chapter*]**12c3d.** 怒可以復喜，愠可以復悅，

For anger can turn again to joy, and pique again to pleasure,

12c3e. 亡國不可以復存，死者不可以復生。

but a lost state can never be restored to existence, and the dead can never be returned to life.

Emotions are fugitive, but the mistakes to which they lead are permanent. Dù Mù paraphrases this at an even higher pitch: “One who, without assessing his power or measuring his strength, raises a host out of anger, or joins battle out of pique, is one whose soldiers die by his own hand; whose state perishes through his own actions.”

12c4a. 故明君慎之，良將警之，

So let the wise ruler be mindful of it, and the good general be taught by it,

12c4b. 此安國全軍之道也。

for this is the Way to keep the state at peace, and its army in being.

With these words, the original Art of War was meant to conclude. The right outcome, even for the generals who make war, is peace.

Interpolations

These lines were later added to the original chapter.

[12c3c. 合於利而動，不合於利而止。]

[If it gives advantage, move. If it does not give advantage, stop].

This restates the point of 12c2a and 2b, but breaks the continuity of 12c3b and 3d. We take it as a gloss on the former, which has been interpolated at the wrong position; it should have followed 3d.

Reflections

The comments at the end of this chapter echo the message at the end of the most recent previous chapter, Sūndž 2, which was how the text at that point was meant to begin. Cost accounting, not courage, wins wars and preserves states. So also Analects LY *7:11 (c0310), where “Confucius” prefers a general who relies on brains rather than valor; on thinking rather than on slugging.

The level-headedness, the lack of emotionality, in the final section is most striking; it brings together many remarks written earlier, summing up the Sūndž tradition’s perception of why wars are fought in the first place, which provides a guide for when particular battles should be fought or avoided. Yes, force is needed, but not all applications of force are equally profitable.

The attempt to be scientific, in the sense of that time, is evident. So is the attempt to be literary, with devices such as parallelism. The military wisdom of the time is here being offered to the political authority of the time, in a form which is most likely to seem authoritative in terms of the literary culture of the time.

For the final comments of the original Sūndž tradition on war, see Chapter 1, which was added as a final framing device when the work (with 11A and 11B pushed into one chapter, so as to preserve the cosmic number of twelve chapters) was formally presented to the new King of Chí, in 0300.

As a counterpart to these rules on making a fire attack, here is an extract from the Mician defensive war writings on how to *resist* fire attack:

MZ 52:12 (c0300). 救車火，爲煙矢射城門上，